

I'm Glad You Asked!

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Preface

In *Why I Believe*, I presented a personal and positive case for my Christian faith. This essay is a sequel to that one, for here I field the major objections to Christian faith—some traditional, others of more modern vintage. But as before, I'm confining myself to the answers I favor, even though that does not exhaust all the good answers. Interested readers are still encouraged to check out the bibliographies in the complementary essay.

I. Epistemology

1. God-Talk

Both inside and outside the Church there is often felt to be a peculiar difficulty with religious language. This apparent problem has both an epistemic and ontological dimension. At the epistemic level, it is felt that if our knowledge derives from experience in general, and sensory perception in particular, and if God is not a sensible object, then whatever we may say or think or believe about God is a figurative extension of mundane concepts.

At the ontological level, it is felt that if God is in a class by himself and apart from the creative order, then all our statements about God are vitiated by a systematic equivocation inasmuch as there is no longer any common ground between the human subject and divine object of knowledge.

What are we to say to these considerations? Regarding the epistemic issue, the first thing to be said is that this assumes a particular theory of knowledge. So if this is a problem, it is not a problem peculiar to religious epistemology, but goes back to the ancient debates between empiricism and rationalism, nominalism and realism. If you are a Thomist, then this is a problem generated by your chosen theory of knowledge. But if, say, you are an Augustinian, then you don't believe that all knowledge derives from the senses. Abstract objects are objects of knowledge without being perceived by the senses—at least on an Augustinian theory of knowledge.

This does not, therefore, constitute a direct objection to God-talk. If such an objection is to be raised, it necessitates a preliminary and independent argument for radical empiricism. And this debate has been going on for 2500 years. So it seems unlikely that the critic of God-talk will be successful in mounting a compelling case on epistemic grounds alone.

In addition, a good case can be made for the view that human discourse is pervasively and incurably metaphorical.¹ So even if God-talk were figurative, that would not be distinctive to religious discourse, but would, rather, apply with equal force to ordinary language—as well as scientific nomenclature, which is refined from concrete usage.

Our knowledge of the sensible world is analogical, for the human mind does not enjoy direct access to the sensible world. Sense-data are a highly processed form of information that has undergone repeated encoding in order to reach our consciousness.

So, if anything, the venerable *via negativa* has the relation exactly backwards. The natural world is a material manifestation, in finite form, of God's impalpable attributes (cf. Ps 19:1-7; Acts 14:17; Rom 1:18ff.; Eph 3:9-10). Metaphor is deeply embedded in human language inasmuch as nature is figural of God. So God-talk is the only kind of talk there is. Strictly speaking, God is the only object of literal predication whereas all mundane

¹ Cf. G. Lakoff & M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, 2003).

phenomena, as property-instances of divine properties, are objects of analogical predication.²

But even if we waive the epistemic objection, it may be felt that the ontological issue is, in any event, more fundamental. The real nub of the problem, it would be said, lies with the ontological wall separating subject and object. If God is wholly *sui generis*, then what is our shared frame of reference for knowing or saying anything about him? Aren't we reduced, not only to analogy, but the utter negation of our mental and mundane categories?

One of the problems with this objection is it equivocates over the conditions of equivocation. What, exactly, is the relevant point of similarity to form a sound analogy? A fork and fingers can both be used to consume food, yet they don't have a lot in common in terms of their constitution or configuration. The same thing could be said about doing math in your head, counting on your fingers, using an abacus or a computer. The same thing could also be said about telling time by a sundial, hourglass, atomic clock, analogue or digital watch. So the ontological objection has pretty fuzzy boundaries.

And this points up another issue. It is a category mistake to equate analogy and metaphor. All metaphors are analogies, but all analogies are not metaphors. Forks and fingers are analogous, but their relation is not figurative. Even if God were only known by his effects, an effect need not resemble its cause. What a Turner painting resembles is not the painter, but a Venetian sunset. Yet a Turner painting reveals a great deal about the painter.

A deeper issue is the relation between divine and mundane properties. According to the Augustinian tradition, to which Calvinism is heir, God is not merely the Maker of the world, but the exemplar of the world. On this view, time and space are limits which instance the illimitable being of God. Finite reason and natural design instance infinite reason. Natural examples of the one-over-many instance the supernatural symmetry of God's Trinitarian being. So such a position posits an internal relation between our knowledge of God and our knowledge of the world.³

Let us apply these considerations to a couple of classic attacks on religious epistemology. Kant erected a phenomenal/noumenal wall and proceeded to put God on the noumenal side of the barrier. But Kant confounds a general theory of knowledge with a special theory of perception. Even if there were a radical hiatus between appearance and reality, that would be irrelevant to the status of God as an object of knowledge, for God is not a sensible object to begin with— just as you can know what the number five is without having

² "All virtues pertain first to God, then to the creature: God possesses these virtues 'in essence,' the creature 'through participation'...He allows us to speak of him in creaturely language because he himself has manifested his virtues and revealed them to us through the creature," H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Banner of Trust, 1979), 94-95.

³ Cf. Calvin, *Inst.* 1.1.1-2.

a mental picture of the number five. Numbers are not that sort of object. You know by knowing the definition.⁴

Again, even if you bought into Kantian assumptions, the narrative history of God's creative, redemptive and retributive deeds tracks at the phenomenal rather than noumenal level. The Exodus, Crucifixion, Resurrection and great assize are public, sensible events; their historicity and significance doesn't turn on the topology of space, hyperfine structure of matter, Copernican Revolution, ontological status of phenomenal qualia or such-like. You don't need to be a direct realist to fully affirm whatever the Bible says about God, man and history.

Turning to Hume, his basic objection is that if we only know God by his effects, then we must proportion cause and effect and not overdraw the evidence. He also assumes that an argument from design is an argument from analogy, which is, in turn, an argument from experience.

But it is hard to take this objection seriously. A poet is greater than the poem, a painter than the painting. The *Last Supper* does not exhaust the imagination of Da Vinci. For one thing, the creative act is as much an act of omission as commission, of choosing what to put in and what to leave out, of not doing as well as doing. The range of possible variations is, in principle, nothing short of infinite.

Hume's objection is directed against a Paley-style watchmaker argument. In Paley's classic illustration,

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there; I might possibly answer, that, for all I knew to the contrary it had lain there forever. But suppose I found a watch on the ground. I should hardly think of the answer I gave before.

Now Hume would say that this inference is fallacious because it is an argument from analogy, and the analogy derives from our prior knowledge of man-made artifacts. But is that a fair criticism?

To begin with, Paley's distinction between a rock and a watch is somewhat artificial, for the same object can be both a natural object and a human artifact. A rock can be turned into a timepiece. For example, a rock, with suitable markings, can be converted into a starchart. Let's rewrite Paley's illustration with this in mind,

In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone. The stone bore a pitted surface. I made a rubbing and took it home. Although the distribution pattern was apparently random, and I couldn't tell if the indentations were man-made or owing to erosion, yet I found, on further comparison, that they charted the first magnitude stars of the northern hemisphere.

⁴ An internal tension lies in the fact that Kantian epistemology must initially assume an objective standpoint in order to draw the phenomenal/noumenal hiatus that, in turn, denies such a standpoint.

Now we would all attribute this correspondence to design, even though the markings were indistinguishable from the effects of natural weathering. And yet this is not an argument from analogy or experience. The evidence of design is not inferred from other rocks, or the tooling, or the position of the stars or pattern of dots, both of which are asymmetrical, but in their studied relation.

But if Hume has misrepresented the teleological argument, then that invalidates his efforts to discredit the argument by invoking invidious analogies and disanalogies, as well as appealing to the limits of induction. It should be further noted that Christian apologetics was never prized on general revelation alone, but on the coordination of general and special revelation—like the aforesaid match between the stars and the starchart.

Hume, however, has a fallback, for he parades a whole host of fantastic variations on the faith. Unless a Christian chases down every decoy, he's failed to rout out the competition. But one of the problems with this stalling tactic is that it cuts both ways. It cuts against Hume as well as a Christian. For every belief held by Hume, a Christian could just as well propose a host of hypothetical alternatives. It keeps you from checkmating me and vice versa. The price for never losing is never winning. But if there's no closing move, why bother with the opening gambit?

A believer is under no obligation to run down every rabbit trail and bag every hypothetical hare. Why rebut objections that the unbeliever doesn't believe in himself, but only trots out to delay defeat? There is, as William James would say, a distinction between bare possibilities and live possibilities. In honest dialogue, both sides should confine themselves to what they really believe or believe to be realistic options.

2. Divine Silence

The objection here is that if God existed, he would make his existence more evident so that everyone would believe in him. This objection has been kicking around for some time, but there is now a burgeoning literature on the subject. By way of reply:

i) At one level, this is an argument from experience. It amounts to saying that many folks are unbelievers because they have had no experience of God's presence. But this argument cuts both ways. What about all the folks who believe in God because they have felt the grace of God in their lives?

Now, the argument from religious experience has been widely criticized by unbelieving philosophers. But by the same token, believing philosophers could attack the argument from religious inexperience or irreligious experience. So this whole line of objection seems at least to be a wash.

Moreover, experience and inexperience do not enjoy epistemic parity. Experience is a positive form of evidence whereas inexperience is neutral on the existence of the object in question.

This objection also makes certain assumptions about what it would mean for God to be evident. Is the unbeliever saying that if there were a God, he should be as evident to me as a tree I see outside my kitchen window?

On this assumption, to be evident is to be evident to the senses. And it is true that, as a rule, God is inevident in that respect—leaving theophanies to one side. But is that a reasonable criterion? If God were a sensible object, then perhaps he ought to be evident to the senses. But seeing as that is not the doctrine of God, it is hardly inconsistent with the existence of God that he should be inevident to the senses.

Let us take a different comparison. How do I know that you are a person? Your body is evident to the senses, yet personality and corporeality are rather different things, for a corpse is not a person. What makes you a person—call it what you will, your mind, soul, consciousness—is inevident to the senses. So my knowledge of other persons is indirect, being mediated by words and gestures, sign language and facial expressions. Person-to-person communication may be at several removes from the immediacy of the personal subject—by books and letters, phone calls and email, art and music. If the existence of God is inevident in this intermediate sense, then that is not distinctive to God as an object of knowledge, but is a general feature of our knowledge of other persons.

The Bible itself speaks of a hidden aspect of God (Deut 29:29, especially in relation to sin, to life-crises, and unanswered prayer (Job 13:24; Ps 10:1,11; 13:1; 27:9; 30:7; 44:24; 55:1; 88:14; 89:46; 102:2; 104:29; 143:7; Isa 45:15; 58:7). So one reason the Bible gives for the apparent absence of God in our experience is that God withdraws his presence as a chastisement or judgment on sin.

The objection assumes that if there were a God, he would be generally evident. But the Bible regards that as a false expectation. For one consequence of the Fall is the general silence of God.

Now an unbeliever may object that this reply is question-begging. If we already knew that God were real, then this explanation would have its proper place; but when the very question of his existence is at issue, it is tendentious to offer a religious explanation.

But whether or not that is a valid criticism depends on both the nature of the initial objection and the purpose of the explanation. If the initial objection is that the inevidence of God is inconsistent with the existence of God, then it is valid to point out that the alleged inconsistency rests on a tendentious assumption. So the critic needs to justify his assumption. Again, the purpose of the explanation is not to offer positive evidence for the existence of God, or warrant our faith in God, but merely to counter the claim of an inconsistent relation between the existence and evidence of God.

The Bible would attribute unbelief, not to inevidence, but ill-will. The reprobate and unregenerate fear the judgment of God, and therefore suppress and supplant their knowledge of God.

An unbeliever would, of course, regard this claim as question-begging. Again, though, it is a valid reply to the charge of inconsistency. Moreover, it is a commonplace of the human experience that men will often resist an unwelcome truth. This applies in many walks of life. So it is not as though the Christian apologist were trumping up a special condition to justify his faith. And it must be said that the way in which many unbelievers have tried to squelch Christian expression and dissent confirms the charge.

In addition, the allegation of a *Deus absconditus* is, itself, a question-begging assumption, for many Christians would say that God has, in fact, left his fingerprints all over the natural world. And that is more than bare assertion, for Christian philosophers and theologians have turned this raw data into a broad range of theistic arguments. To be sure, the cogency of the theistic proofs is a bone of contention, both inside and outside the church. But the immediate point is that, in the face of philosophical theology and apologetics, the thesis of a *Deus absconditus* cannot be posited as an unquestioned datum—on which to hoist further conclusions.

What is more, God has broken his silence in the canon of Scripture. For the Christian, the allegation of divine silence is question-begging because it disregards the witness of Scripture. To be sure, this appeal assumes the revelatory status of Scripture, but Christians have advanced various arguments for that proposition as well. So the allegation of a hidden God must come to terms with Scripture and arguments for its inspiration.

It may be objected that God has not made himself known to everyone in his word, for his word is not accessible to everyone. Yet this assumes that if there were a God, he would make himself equally evident to everyone under the sun. But why assume such a thing?

Certainly, there is no inconsistency at this point for the Calvinist. Special revelation parallels special election and special redemption. Although the public nature of special revelation will incidentally take in a wider audience, its primary target is the elect. The uneven evidence of God is not an issue of divine existence, but divine intent.

3. Coherence of Theism:

i) Trinity

It is commonplace for unbelievers to attack the Trinity as incoherent. And even many believers treat the Trinity as a grand paradox. And perhaps that is so. But remember that the Bible never presents the Trinity as a paradox. Paradox does not figure in the revealed datum or orthodox definition of the Trinity. Although the Trinity is an object of faith, believing it to be a paradox is not an object of faith and dogma.

Rather, that is a subjective impression on the part of some readers. And their impression is formed on the basis of preconceptions that they bring to the teaching of Scripture. They come to the Biblical witness with a preconception of the one-over-many relation. And the paradox is generated by a particular preconception. It is often rather simplistic, and takes the form of one or another of two opposing level-confusions.

On the one hand, it may operate with an overly abstract model of the one-over-many by reducing numbered objects ($1x; 3y$) or numerical relations ($1x=3y$) to sheer numbers ($1=3$). But the Trinitarian “equation” doesn’t operate at that level of generality. “One God in three persons” is not reducible to “the number one equals the number three.” Rather, the relation is more like saying that A and B are the same with respect to C.

On the other hand, it may operate with an overly-concrete model of the one-over-many relation by reducing numbered objects to concrete particulars. We use numbers to count discrete units. One unit of x doesn’t equal three units of x. And this is true enough when dealing with spatially discrete objects, like a loaf of bread. But the members of the Trinity have no physical boundaries. They cannot be divided and subdivided into parts less than the whole.

In addition, it is a mistake to press adjectives like "same" and "different" into relations of strict identity and absolute alterity. We use these words more loosely. Am I the same man I was ten years ago? In some respects, yes; in others—no. But it is possible for two objects to sustain a point-by-point correspondence without reducing one to the other. For example, a symmetry sustains an internal one-over-many relation. Of particular interest are enatiomorphic symmetries, such as we find in tessellation, strict counterpoint and crystallography. This type of symmetry sets up a relation that is both equipollent and irreducible. Although A sustains a closed, one-one correspondence to B, A is not reducible to B. One-*to*-one is not the same thing as one-*of*-one.

ii) Divine Attributes

Unbelievers not only allege that the Trinity is incoherent, but that the divine attributes are incoherent, either in isolation or conjunction. They’ll parade paradoxes of omnipotence. They’ll say that omniscience is incompatible with an aspatiotemporal mode of existence. Or they’ll say that benevolence and omnipotence are incompatible with evil.

(a) Omniscience

Before we delve into divine omniscience, it is useful to begin with a definition. The Christian is not interested in defending some abstract attribute or definition, but only in defending the revealed perfections of God in Scripture. As a working definition, I would submit that for God to know everything is for God to know everything that is true, and to believe no falsehoods. The ontological identity of God and truth is a fixture of Johannine theology.

For example, it is sometimes said that God cannot be omniscient because he cannot know what it feels like to taste an ice cream cone or break out in a cold sweat. But bare sensation has no truth-value. To be hot or cold or feel fearful is without truth-value. It is either true or false to predicate fear *of* something, to say *that* something is fearful or induces fear in the subject, but fear itself is neither true nor false, and so is not a proper object of knowledge.

Another objection to divine omniscience is that God cannot know what a free agent will do. If we define freedom in libertarian terms, then I would concede the point. But, from a Reformed standpoint, this objection does not pose an impediment to God's knowledge seeing as a Calvinist would deny that sort of freedom to finite agents.

Still another objection is that if God exists outside of time and space, then there are things a spatiotemporal agent can know to which God is not privy. How can God know the color red? How can God know what time it is?

Now these objections rest on some unexamined assumptions. Take a red apple. When I perceive a red apple, do I perceive the red property as it inheres in the apple, or do I perceive the red property-instance in my mind? The apple is a material object, but is my mental impression a material object? The apple occupies space, but my mental image does not. So the way in which I sense a red apple is indirect and immaterial. Although there is a physical and external object, as well as a physical process by which that stimulus is presented to the mind, the universal is not necessarily, or of itself, a physical object, but rather, a symbol or simulation or optical illusion. The process is roughly as follows:

sensible>sensation>perception>conception.

Now, if even in the case of sensory processing, the immediate object of knowledge is a concept of the object, then I don't see why, in the case of God, a sensible object cannot be an object of knowledge. There are differences, to be sure. God knows the object without recourse to any sensory input. Indeed, the object only exists in time and space because God instantiated the object according to his prior concept.

Now, not everyone would agree with this epistemology. But, if so, the issue is not distinctive to religious epistemology, but turns on your general theory of knowledge. And it is incumbent on a critic of omniscience to make a separate case for his epistemic assumptions before he is in any position to launch an attack on omniscience from that front.

With regard to time, it is felt that a timeless God doesn't know what time it is. He may know the sequence, but cannot know how far we are into the sequence of unfolding events. However, this way of framing the question conceals a certain bias. For by casting the question in terms of now and then, past, present and future, we already assume the A-theory of time. So before we can adequately discuss God's relation to time, we need to settle on a theory of time.

Is time like an ever-rolling stream? That's the popular, common-sense view. But what is commonsensical can turn nonsensical in a flash as soon as we ask a few simple questions. Remember Augustine's famous digression on the subject of time in the *Confessions*? If you don't ask, I know; if you ask, I don't know. What is the present? Is it only a common surface between an unreal past and unrealized future? A wall without depth or duration? That's the A-theory.

Or is time more like a motion picture? We talk of *timeframes*, as if time were a series of snapshots on a strip of film. Is the timeline a sequence without succession? Is the passage of time an illusion, like flickering images on a silver screen? Is all of time already in the can? Is all the footage on the reel—from the opening shot to the closing shot? That's the B-theory.

We seem to be faced with a paradox. If tense is real, then that seems to render time illusory by reducing the momentary present to a vanishing borderline between what was and what will be—in which case nothing ever *is*, but only was or will be. But if time is real, then that seems to render tense illusory, for a future moment or past instant is just as real as the present—but within its own timeframe.

Unless you subscribe to naïve realism, every side must admit an element of illusion into its theory of perception. Just as we don't directly perceive space, we don't directly perceive time. Our sense of time's "passage" is partly inferred from space (i.e., locomotion). But whether the movement is actual or only apparent, like a motion picture or stroboscopic effect, is not a direct datum of experience. And even the awareness of our own "successive" mental states owes more to memory and anticipation than a direct deliverance or immediate presentation of time and tense—like the difference between direct perception or introspection and visual persistence. We enjoy immediate access to our own mental states, but not to the passage of time, for even on the A-theory, consciousness is bounded by the specious present.

Now, if we assume the B-theory of time, then knowing the sequence is all there is to know, for time and tense are a given totality. So, on such a view, asking if God knows the time is misplaced.

But which theory is true? It is arguable that the Biblical doctrine of creation throws some weight behind the B-theory. For Gen 1 tells us that the timeline began with God's creative fiat, in which case the Creator falls outside the timeline. And if that is so, then creation is a temporal effect of a timeless act. And in that event, the effect is fully enfolded and unfolded in this singular and indivisible fiat—like a short story or novel or reel of film. The writer or filmmaker exists outside the timeline of the writing or film footage, and the writing or film is finished from first to last.

Incidentally, this is the best way of construing the relation between divine immanence and transcendence. God is "present" or "active" within the world, not by acting in or on the world, but by enacting the world. He not only sets the ball in motion but brings everything into being.

More generally, the Bible has some things to say about the priority of the eternal to the temporal (Ps 90:2,4; 102:25-27; 1 Cor 2:7; 2 Tim 1:9; Tit 1:2; Jas 1:17; Jude 25). It may be objected that words like "before" imply an antemundane timeline. But this overlooks the fact that such words are literally spatial-markers, and only applied to the divisions of time by figurative extension. We're back on the river. The future lies ahead, the past lies

behind, and I paddle my way through time, like a rowboat or riverboat on the current of the stream. But this is poetry and picture-language.

The fact that we apply a spatial grid to our common conception of time raises the question of what would be left of the sequence were we to strip away this picturesque metaphor. Is last month really more *distant* in time than last week? Or am I allowing myself to be bewitched by a spatial simile? The real sequence would be teleological rather than strictly linear or causal—more akin to a storybook sequence or film footage.

It is often said that our concept of eternity is privative and negative. But I would turn this around. If time and space are limits, then eternity implies an indivisible, unsurpassable plenitude of being. To say that God preexisted the world literally means that there is never a time when God did not exist, for time was given in creation, and God subsists apart from the world.

The notion of a negation carries an unduly prejudicial connotation. Even a photographic negative, although lacking the depth, color, scale and orientation of the original, is descriptive of the original; while the developed footage, although a double negation, being at two removes from the original, is even more descriptive of the original.

(b) Omnipotence

In fielding the paradoxes of omnipotence it is, again, important to keep in mind that what we're concerned with defending is not some test-tube definition, cooked up in a philosophy lab, but the revealed attributes of God.

The textbook case is the stone paradox, viz., "Can God make a rock so big that he can't lift it?" But it is hard to know how seriously to take this question. For it conjures up the anthropomorphic image of a sweaty, muscle-bound Atlas having to huff and puff and heave a boulder uphill. Since this is not the Biblical view of God, the question is as silly as it is irrelevant—on par with asking if God can turn green with envy. To the extent that the question can even be retranslated into a coherent proposition, the answer is that God doesn't make things happen by *acting on* a medium, but by *enacting* a medium. And it is not God, but the finite medium, which is subject to spatiotemporal limits.

A further problem with the question is that it conceals a contradiction. The basic form of the question is: Can God do something God can't to? If God is omnipotent, then is he able to do something he is unable to do? Stripped down to the bare essentials, the question does not amount to a coherent proposition. And as such, it poses a pseudo-task. All we have here is a verbal trick: If God can do anything, then he can even do something he can't do; but, if not, then he can't to everything. This is just a game with words, pushing words around—like moving blocks on a scrabble board. But words are not the same as concepts.

A final question is whether the existence of evil is compatible with divine omnipotence and benevolence. I'll address that issue under the section on ethics.

iii) Incarnation

It is often alleged that the Incarnation is incoherent. How is a divine mode of subsistence compatible with a human mode of subsistence? How can Christ be mortal and immortal, omniscient and ignorant, omnipotent and impotent, &c.?

Before we broach this question, we need to lay down a few markers. If the critic is alleging a contradiction, then the critic shoulders the burden of proof. In addition, most harmonizations will be underdetermined by Scripture inasmuch as the Bible does not spell out the nature of the relation. It says that Christ enjoys a full complement of divine and human attributes, but does not reveal a detailed model of how they interface. Hence, the main thing is to avoid reductive harmonies (e.g., the docetic, Kenotic, Arian, Apollonarian, Nestorian, Monophysite, & monothelite heresies).⁵

The Bible employs a literary metaphor to depict God's economic relations (Gen 1:3; Ps 33:6; 139:16). And a divine Incarnation would be a special case and limiting case of God's economic relations. Indeed, the Logos—yet another literary metaphor—is an economic title for the Incarnate Son (Jn 1:1-4).

So let us explore the explanatory power of this metaphor. It is often said that all creative writing is autobiographical inasmuch as the author projects something of himself into the characters. And there are cases in which the author writes himself into his own story as the main character, and tells the story from the first person point of view. Dante is a classic case in point.

Now, the writer exists outside his storybook world, outside its spatiotemporal framework. He has his own set of attributes, his own mode of subsistence. Likewise, his literary alter-ego has all the attributes proper to a storybook character situated in a storybook world. And yet there's a sense in which the author reincarnates himself in his autobiographical character. This figure has the same mental traits and character traits as the author, the same memories, the same know-how. The author can even vest his literary alter-ego with the power to rewrite the story from within.

This is a metaphor, but more than a metaphor. For just as a storybook character was once a figment of the writer's imagination, we were fictions in the mind of God. And just as a creative writer objectifies his idea in time and space, our Creator objectified his idea in time and space.

There is, of course, a point at which the analogy would seem to break down. For the storybook character is unreal. He is not alive. He knows nothing, feels nothing. But suppose, for the sake of argument, that the dream of artificial intelligence were to come true. Suppose that a writer could, in fact, invest his characters with consciousness—like the old myth of Pygmalion. And even if this is humanly unattainable, the analogy holds at the divine level, for God does invest his imaginary characters with consciousness.

⁵ The same holds true of the Trinity.

4. Freudian Faith

Freud and Feuerbach attributed faith in God to a mental projection of our inner feelings. By way of reply:

i) This analysis is a half-truth. The Bible treats idolatry as a mental projection. The fallen imagination is an idol-making factory. Because the sinner is apprehensive about the judgment of God, he substitutes surrogate gods whom he can buy off by human sacrifice and other petty bribes.

ii) This analysis can backfire by explaining unbelief as well as belief. Perhaps the atheist is projecting his negative father-fixation. Indeed, a good many infidels fit this psychological profile.

iii) This analysis is too indiscriminate. On the one hand, it assigns faith to a variety of different and divergent motives. Faith is the result of hope or fear or guilt or pride or vengeance, &c. On the other hand, believers come from a broad range of social backgrounds. Believers represent a wide variety of temperamental types, with varying intellectual aptitudes. Some believers were raised in the faith while others came to the faith from an irreligious upbringing. Some switch from one church to another. Some drifted from the faith and returned while others leave and never look back. Some family members remain in the faith while others turn from the faith. Some lose their faith in college while others find their faith in college. Some lose their faith after a personal tragedy while others find their faith after a personal tragedy. Converts give different reasons for their pilgrimage. When a theory is so flexible that it can accommodate contrary lines of evidence, it amounts to a disguised description under the guise of an efficient explanation.

iv) Projective theories have an armchair quality to them. They don't seem to be based on a wide sampling of case-studies or personal acquaintance with Christians from various walks of life. How many churches did Freud attend? How many devout believers did he know? How many did he interview? How many did he observe up close over the course of a lifetime—from the sandbox and the lecture hall to the dinner table and the deathbed?

The reason an atheist finds a projective theory plausible is because he comes to the subject of faith as an outsider rather than an insider. And by the same token, the theory has an air of unreality to the believer because it does not comport with his own experience. It is a theory of faith that is wholly out-of-touch with faith. It reads like a love poem by a poet who had never fallen in love.

The only field theory that accounts for the diversity of data is not one based on nature or nurture, but sin and grace. That factor is the only common denominator and differential dynamic that can cut across so many parallel, convergent and divergent lines of evidence.

II. Bible Criticism

1. Miracles

Hume's objection to miracles shares a criterion in common with his objection to natural theology—namely, the principle of proportionality. An extraordinary report demands extraordinary evidence.

By defining a miracle as a “violation” or “transgression” of natural law, Hume makes it sound as if God were a squatter or house-burgler, whereas, from the Scriptural standpoint, God is the homeowner. The Creator doesn't “break into” his own house. Rather, the world was designed as a divine billboard. For a Christian, every “natural” event is an act of God.

This is also why the definition of a miracle as an “improbable” event is question-begging. A miracle would be a work of personal agency. It is not a random event. It is not a throw of the dice. There are no odds either for or against the occurrence of a miracle. And even on statistical grounds, the evidentiary value of a word (prophecy) and sign (miracle) in tandem (Isa 35:5-6; Mt 11:4-5) is far higher than either in separation.

But to judge Scripture on Scriptural grounds, the reason why folks don't ordinarily rise from the dead is the same reason they die in the first place. It is not owing to natural causes, but God's judgment on Adam's sin. The impediment is not *natural* law, but *moral* law. So the claim that the Second Adam rose from the dead is perfectly consistent with the ordinary state of affairs inasmuch Christ reverses the curse and begins to restore the primordial norm.

And this brings us to another problem. Why assume that we must begin with a definition of the event rather than the very event itself? Definitions are ordinarily descriptive, not prescriptive. We begin with the phenomena and then set about to classify them. But Hume is using his grid to as a fine-mesh filter to screen out miracles in advance of observation. Yet you could establish a miraculous event qua *event* before you establish a miraculous event qua *miraculous*. While a miracle assumes the prior *existence* of God, it doesn't assume a prior *belief* in God. That confounds the orders of being and knowing. If Hume were an Egyptian, would he say to himself, “I won't believe my own eyes unless I can attribute the plague of hail to freak atmospheric conditions!” Methinks he would stuff his scruples and dive for cover or run for dear life!

It is also illogical to say that I need an unusual amount of evidence for an unusual event. How could there be *more* evidence for a *rare* event than for a commonplace event? One reason we believe that snow leopards are rare is the rarity of their sightings. It is unclear how Hume would establish any out-of-the ordinary event. Moreover, how many inductive instances to I need? The only evidence I need of a four-leaf clover is a four-leaf clover. One will do—no more, no less.

Hume discounts the testimony to miraculous incidents on the grounds that the witness pool is recruited from the backward and barbarous peoples. One can't help but sense a suppressed circularity in this objection: Why don't you believe in miraculous reports? Because the reporters are ignorant and barbarous! How do you know they are ignorant and barbarous? Because they believe in miracles! At most, all Hume's argument amounts to is that dumb people believe dumb things. But that is hardly argument for the proposition that any particular witness is dumb.

In addition, the general character of a witness is not only irrelevant to a specific claim, but may be all the more impressive when out-of-character. Even liars only lie when they have a motive to lie, and not when it runs counter to their own interests. And it is not as if the Apostles and prophets were rewarded for their testimony with a tickertape parade.

Hume tries to play off the miracles of one sect against another. However, most major religions don't stake their dogma on miraculous attestation. But even if they did, the Bible doesn't deny the power of witchcraft (e.g. Exod 7-8). And there is no reason why a living faith should have to duel a forgotten faith. Killing it once is quite sufficient. One hardly needs to disinter the remains and have another go at them. For if the "gods" of a long dead faith were unable to defend or resuscitate it (Judges 6:31; 2 Kgs 18:27), then does that not expose them as false gods?

2. *Mythology*

Critics of the Bible discredit the claims of Scripture on the basis of comparative mythology. The unargued assumption is if mythology is false, and if there are parallels between the Bible and mythology, then that falsifies the Bible.

To say that pagan mythology is false is an ambiguous charge. Does it mean that *that* never happened, or that nothing *like* that ever happens? There is quite a difference. In a novel, none of the incidents may be historical, and yet they are true to life. So even if mythology were wholly fictitious, it might still be lifelike in certain key respects.

Indeed, one of the problems with this dismissive approach is that it fails to explain anything. For it fails to explain why pagans believed in magic and evil spirits and paranormal events. Was there something in their experience which gave rise and substance to these beliefs?

There is, of course, a stock explanation, or what purports to be an explanation, which attributes such credulity to ignorance. But even if this enjoys a measure of truth, it suffers from the circular limitation of any tautology: it's true when it's true, and not when it's not. Even if it holds true for the uneducated masses, it doesn't apply to the educated classes. And the fact is that illiterate peasants don't write mythology, for they don't know how to read and write. So, by definition, the record of mythology comes down to us by the hand of the educated classes.

Another problem with this elitist criterion is that there's a sense in which a man of letters is at least as gullible and superstitious as a peasant, for a man of letters gets his information second-hand whereas a peasant is an amateur scientist who lives off the land, relies on his eyes and ears, survives and prospers by dint of his direct and accurate observation of the natural world.

Actually, the real correlation is not between ignorance and belief but quite the reverse, between ignorance and unbelief. What I find credible or incredible has a whole lot to do with the measure of my personal experience. If nothing out of the ordinary has ever happened to me, then I find the report of an extraordinary event less believable than if I've had some brush with the paranormal. For a psychologist, the abnormal is normal, and for an exorcist, the paranormal is normal. So some men don't believe the Bible because the world of the Bible doesn't resemble the world they see out the window, whereas other men do believe the Bible because the world of the Bible does resemble the world they see out the window. It's like the old saying about the face at the bottom of the well.

In fact, this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. I don't pray because I don't believe in prayer, and I don't believe in prayer because I don't pray!

For some, the objection takes a more philosophical form. Especially for those approaching every truth-claim from a scientific standpoint, you often get the argument that they don't believe in the supernatural because nature is all there is. But that's a rather prejudicial stance to strike, even on its own grounds. Science is supposed to be a descriptive rather than prescriptive discipline, based on observation rather than stipulation, discovery rather than definition. To insist, in advance of the facts, that every event must be confinable to naturalistic parameters is not knowledge, but secular superstition. From the assumptions of empirical science, the only way of knowing what is knowable is by investigation.

The Bible has its own analysis of mythology. It identifies mythology with idolatry. Fallen man is a mythmaker. His strategy is to suppress and supplant the knowledge of God with surrogate deities and proxy pieties (e.g., Jn 3:20-21; Rom 1:18ff.). And lying in the background is the Devil, who has many front-organizations and aliases (Rev 12-13).

So what we read in Genesis is not a myth of origins, but the origins of myth. Genesis can account alike for piety and idolatry, miracle and magic. For the account of creation unveils the origin of all our cultural universals, as God ordains the social institutions that recur in art and literature, religion and drama; while the account of the Fall unveils the origin of their debasement, as apostate men and angels bow before the creature rather than the Creator of all.

The popularity of the occult, ufology and the SF genre go to show that science does not extinguish the mythic impulse. Indeed, evolution repristinates a number of stock mythical motifs, viz., Everyman, the quest, rites of passage. In the Darwinian creation myth, the "hero" comes down from the safe-haven of the trees (fall from innocence). By passing through various ordeals (survival of the fittest) he attains enlightenment (higher brain

functions) and achieves apotheosis (monkey to man). The popularity of evolution owes much its popularity to this folkloric appeal. It's just variation on Puss-n-Boots and the domestication of Enkidu.⁶

Sometimes the parallel is said to be more precise, in terms of genealogical dependence. But the only case I've seen where there's a persuasive parallel is the Flood account. Yet since, according to Scripture, both the Babylonians and the Jews were descendents of Noah (Gen 10), the fact that Mesopotamian literature possesses a parallel account of the Flood is hardly prejudicial to the historicity or independence of the Biblical account, for their synoptic outlook is easily attributable to factual rather than literary dependence. They share a common source in a shared historical event.⁷

Since real life has a cyclical character, the stereotypical pattern of many literary themes needs no special explanation. Art imitates life. Cultural universals derive from the universality of human nature and experience in the natural world. God made mankind a racial unit with natural needs and a normal life-cycle. There are patterns in biography as well as history. Great men often exemplify the trials and traits of the epic hero (e.g. quest, ordeal, rites of passage). To classify common literary themes as mythical only pushes the question back a step, for it fails to account for the origin of the "mythic" category itself. So there's a danger of substituting a disguised description for an efficient explanation.

Since Genesis records the historic origin of our archetypal institutions, mythical and literary parallels, such as they are, cast no prejudice on the veracity of Scripture. In the nature of the case, certain formative events in Genesis and Exodus acquire a thematic status. And the cultural diffusion of such themes makes all the more sense if the human race radiated out from a common point of origin—as the sons of Noah repopulate the earth, both by land and sea (Gen 10-11).

Because some giant animals have become extinct in historic times (e.g., Irish Elk), we should not exclude the possibility that "mythical" animals in Scripture (e.g., Rahab? Leviathan?) are stylized versions of once living beasts. For example, the dragon-motif is quite widespread in world mythology. Sometimes mythopoetic imagery is used for decorative, polemical or ironic effect. In Ps 104, Yahweh is pictured in the regalia of a storm-God, yet this is no more descriptive than the personification of the waters (v7).

At the same time, there are disanalogies as well as analogies. For there is a subversive element in Biblical typology that breaks with conventional associations. Images of descent carry a classically negative connotation, yet Yahweh's descent on Mt. Sinai, the Spirit's descent at Pentecost and the baptism of Christ, as well as the descent of the New

⁶ In the Epic of Gilgamesh

⁷ Another case is the alleged parallel between Gen 1 and the Enuma Elish. Cf. A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago, 1963), 129. But all Heidel has done is to use the narrative framework of Gen 1 as an interpretive grid, and then map that back onto the Enuma Elish. But if Heidel had begun in the opposite direction, without using Gen 1 as his point of reference, the alleged parallels would have sunk back into the cluttered plain of events, for there are no *structural* parallels between the two.

Jerusalem, reverse the ordinary expectations. In addition, a number of stock themes in world mythology are missing in Scripture.⁸

The history of Scripture is remarkably restrained in comparison with pagan mythology. If the Bible writers felt free to make up fantastic incidents, it is odd that they passed up so many tempting opportunities to indulge their over-heated imagination. For example, Mark records the empty tomb, and the other Gospels record some Easter appearances of Christ, but none of the canonical Gospels record the actual moment of the Resurrection, or have Christ appearing to Pilate or Caiaphas and saying, "I told you so!"

Moreover, the miracles of Scripture have always some moral or meaningful purpose to them, in manifesting the mercy and judgment of God, or advancing his redemptive designs. This is quite different from the frivolous entertainment value of magical or supernatural incidents in so much mythology.

And beyond their historic origin is their prehistoric origin. We live in a sacramental universe. In the Fourth Gospel, sensible events are a form of heavenly sign-language—a visible pointer to the invisible God. The reason why so many natural metaphors are religious metaphors around the world is that God has established a code language linking the inward and outward, moral and material, visible and invisible, sensible and spiritual realms.⁹

We must also make allowance for the role of dead metaphors. Based on bare etymology, one could conclude that Holy Week (Ash Wednesday, Maundy-Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday) was a pagan rather than Christian festival; but allusions to Wodin, Thor, Freya and Saturn are purely conventional. Likewise, I can identify a chemical substance as “spirits of turpentine” without endorsing its alchemical background, just as I can “fumigate” a house without trading on necromantic associations.

Folklorists tend to read a lot of symbolism into mythology (e.g., Sisyphus, Prometheus, Midas, Narcissus, Psyche, Phaeton, Pygmalion, Tantalus). But is that the way an old bard and his audience took the tale, or was it just a great campfire story? Hard to tell at a distance.

3. *Contradictions*

It is commonplace for unbelievers to say that Scripture is riddled with contradictions. But this assumes that you know a contradiction when you see one. Yet when you study a writing from the past, you need to know something about the conventions and compositional methods of that time and place, viz., idioms, round numbers, hyperbole, editorial asides, paraphrastic citations, narrative compression, thematic sequencing, calendrical variants,, audience adaptation, eye-level descriptions, &c. We can't just jump from the

⁸ E.g., apocatastasis, apotheosis, primordial chaos, primeval caverns, ritual masquerades, magic circles (labyrinth, mandala, wheel of karma), transmigration, a *descensus ad infernos* (Acts 2:27, Eph 4:8-9 and 1 Pet 3:18-20 have been widely misconstrued. See commentaries by Grudem, Marshall and O'Brien).

⁹ E.g., Ascent/descent; bondage/release; light/dark, death/rebirth; straight/crooked; lost/found.

21C to the 1C or the 2nd Millennium BC—using our own literary models as the assumed standard of comparison.

The best way of recovering the reportorial techniques of the Bible is to study the way in which the *same* writer records the *same* event:

- (a) Oath of Abraham's servant (Gen 24:3-8; par. 37-41).
- (b) Prayer of Abraham's servant (Gen 24:12-24; par. 42-49).
- (c) Pharaoh's dream (Gen 41:1-7,18-24)
- (d) Résumé of the wilderness wandering (Num 33:1-49; Deut 8-10:11; 29:1-8).
- (e) Decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-4; par. 6:1-5).
- (f) Resurrection/Ascension (Lk 23:13-53; par. Acts 1:1-11).
- (g) Conversion of Paul (Acts 9:1-30; par. 22:3-21; par. 26:4-20).
- (h) Conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10; par. 11:1-18; par. 15:7-9).

If we study our parallel accounts with a modicum of critical sympathy, we can see that the historians of Scripture were dutifully pedantic in all they say and summarize. They stick with a rigid outline, sometimes saying more, sometimes less, but pedantically faithful to the sense and substance of the speeches and events—with precious little stylistic variance. The whole thing has the formulaic quality of a well-rehearsed memory, using much the same words in much the same place, over and over again—like a workhorse doing the rounds. What comes across is the incurious absence of imagination, the utter lack of originality, the stubborn stenographic tenacity, the dull disinclination to break with routine. The Bible writers are only too happy to repeat themselves. They would be perfect in the witness box, ideal as court reporters—dreadful as screenwriters, awful as novelists. This must all be terribly disappointing to the critic who had hoped to find in Scripture a creative license untrammelled by the facts.

Another popular target of the charge are the Passion and Easter narratives. but this objection overlooks the technical challenge of presenting simultaneous events in a sequential narrative. In the Passion and Easter narratives you have a number of different people in different places doing things at more or less the same time. Yet a narrative is a linear medium, and so it is not possible, as a practical matter, to position all these players in their real time relations.

This is a choice that every historian must face. Does his block his material by time or space? Usually, a historian jumps back and forth, tracing out the timeline of one place for a little ways, then going back and tracing out another, then returning to pick up where he left off. He can either be continuous in time or space: if he's continuous in time, he's discontinuous in space and vice versa. To equate a narrative sequence with a historical sequence confuses a medium of communication with a series of events. In reporting parallel action, some dislocation is inevitable—for the presentation must be broken down into separate scenes. To treat this as a contradiction commits a category mistake. The blunders belong to the critic and not the Evangelist.

Most of the other discrepancies in Scripture involve names and numbers. I suspect that most all of these attributable to transcriptional errors. Numbers are especially susceptible

to miscopying. In addition, written Hebrew, with its unpointed script, invites the interchange or transposition (metathesis) of consonants. Imagine how much damage a dyslexic scribe might do! And once a mistake is made, a later scribe may further compound the error by emending the text. Let us also recall that a scribe might have to copy a faded MS in bad lighting—this was pre-Edison, remember!. And this was, as well, in the days before corrective lenses! Textual criticism has also shown that the differences between Samuel-Kings and Chronicles are largely owing to a variant *Vorlage*.

III. Science

Before we can properly review the scientific evidence, we need to review our philosophy of science, and that, in turn, goes back to our underlying epistemology. Does my perception of the world resemble the world?

A dog or cat is a consummate realist. Fido believes that furry face staring back at him in the mirror is the real deal. But I don't regard canine or feline epistemology as the best available theory of knowledge—unless you're planning to catch rats or hunt chipmunks.

Like man's best friend, many people treat the percipient as though he were a *camera obscura*—with a pair of holes bored into the front-end of the box to admit images, another pair drilled on either side to admit sounds, and so on. On this view, there is no filtering process. The light that passes through the opening and casts a shadow on the backside is a scaled down replica of the image that bounced off the sensible object. So there is a close, family resemblance between the input and readout.

But on a more scientific analysis, the observer or observable world is more like an enigma machine. Light bouncing off the sensible object encodes the secondary properties in the form of electromagnetic information, and when that strikes the eye, the data stream is reencoded as electrochemical information. What reaches consciousness is not a miniature image of the sensible object, but a cryptogram. It bears no more resemblance to the original than a music score is a facsimile of sound. A music score is code language. The relation between notes and tones is conventional.

But even our scientific analysis is more than a little illusory. When we try to break down the various steps involved sensory processing, we are having to describe the input in terms of the readout, as if we could retrace the process. We talk about the tree, and the light from the tree, and the eye, and the optic nerve, and neural pathways and synapses and so on. And this is described as if we were on the outside, seeing the info feed in, when—in fact—our mind is on the receiving end, and the readout is more like a little film projector. Our perception of the external world is an optical illusion, like the silver screen.

That doesn't mean that the external world is an illusion. But it lies at several removes from immediate awareness. At an ontological level, there is a public world; but at an epistemic level, there is only a private world of my mind and your mind.

At this point, someone might ask, then how do you know that there even is an external world? Maybe it's just that projector running in your head! And, at a philosophical level, there is no knock down argument against this objection.

But, at a theological level, there is. For the Creator of the world enjoys an intersubjectual knowledge of the world. And by virtue of revelation, we may tap into a God's-eye view of the world. For propositions, as abstract information, are identical at either end of the transmission process—unless they come out as gibberish (garbage in/garbage out). If you

understand what you read, then it was not garbled in transmission. It still must be encoded in a sensible medium, but the readout is the same as the input. Otherwise, it would be unintelligible.

At the level of basic epistemology, science can never disprove the Bible because divine revelation is our only clear window onto the world. Otherwise, we perceive the world through the stained-glass solipsism of our inescapable subjectivity.

I will go on to discuss some scientific objections to the Bible, but always with this caveat in my back pocket. For even if we were unable to field specific objections, the world of the naked eye, of the microscope and telescope and other such like, is a hall of mirrors, and left to our own devices, may as well be a trick mirror.

1. Creation

For some professing believers, there is no conflict between science and Scripture because they constantly revise their reading of Scripture with a view to the latest scientific theory. For a couple of reasons, I won't go that route. To begin with, if the Bible is divine revelation, then it enjoys an independent and superior source of information. That being so, why would we try to square it with another and lesser source of information? Isn't the Creator of the world the world authority on how the world was made? Isn't that the natural point of departure?

Of course, there are even people in the church who deny the inspiration of Scripture on factual matters. But in that event, there is nothing to harmonize—for, on their view, Darwin was right and Moses was wrong, period.

As to my second reason, when we interpret a document from the past, we need to turn back the clock and clear our minds of all modern assumptions. The very last thing we want is to be up-to-date. Rather, the objective is to be out-of-date—to assume the viewpoint of the original writer and his implied audience—to see how the world would look through his eyes. No one reads Dante with the *Commedia* in one hand and a textbook on modern astronomy in the other.

Incidentally, this brings us back to an earlier point. When professing believers partition the Bible into inspired and uninspired portions, this does not reflect the viewpoint of the Bible, but is an insulating strategy on the part of modern readers with divided commitments. The creation account is of a piece with the Fall, the flood, the patriarchal narratives, the Exodus, and so forth. To set up a buffer zone between the parts of the Bible we accept and the parts we reject is a self-defensive and self-deceptive exercise that betrays modern anxieties of which the original was innocent.

To take another example, we're often told that the Copernican revolution either falsifies the Bible or falsifies a literal reading of Scripture. But the danger here is to import extraneous debates into our reading of Scripture. Joshua never read Ptolemy, so why assume

that Joshua was operating within a Ptolemaic framework? Both the Ptolemaic and the Copernican systems assume an extra-terrestrial viewpoint.

When Bible writers talk about the earth, the “earth” in view is not a stationary globe in relation to the other planets, but the surface of the earth. The “earth” is the land—seen at eye-level. An observation is not a theory of the solar system. The Bible lacks the theoretical interest of Greek astronomy.

The Galileo affair is often introduced as a bluff. We dare you to take sides. If, on the one hand, you say that Galileo was wrong, then you preserve a consistent position, but only at the cost of consigning yourself to the dustbin of lost causes. If, on the other hand, you say that Galileo was right, then you either admit that the Bible was wrong, or admit that exegesis is silly putty; if we can reinterpret the geocentric verses, why not Gen 1?

To this I'd say two things. If the Bible did teach geocentrism, then that would commit the Christian to geocentrism. Let God be true and every man a liar (Rom 3:4)! If Galileo finds himself on the wrong side of Scripture, then to hell with Galileo! Sure, we would pay a price for this. But that's the cost of discipleship. You take your lumps like a man.

However, I think the bluff tries to bully us into an artificial dilemma. For it casts the debate in extra-Scriptural categories. Exegesis need not choose between either frame of reference, for both fall outside the purview of Scripture.

When I read Genesis, I should put myself in the sandals of an ancient Israelite, emancipated from Egypt, living in the Sinai, and listening to Moses read aloud the law. When, for example, the first man and woman are told that the stars serve a calendrical function, does this imply the ordinary rate of propagation? Did Adam and Eve have to wait millions and billions of years before beams of starlight struck the earth? Is that how our Israelite would have construed the account? And if I'm not prepared to assume that historical horizon and make it my own—not merely as a matter of critical sympathy, but as an act of faith—then I should admit to myself that the game is up and stopping kidding myself with sophistries and half-measures.

However, such anachronisms are not limited to nominal believers. A quite common and unconscious misstep made by scientific critics of the creation and flood accounts is first to build in extra-Biblical assumptions, and then convict the narrative of inconsistency because it conflicts with the various consequences of these extraneous assumptions.

What is lost sight of is that a critic is supposed to exercise critical sympathy. In other words, a reviewer or philosopher or historian is supposed to exercise enough detachment that he can separate his own views from the viewpoint of the text, in order to grasp what is meant, make sense of it on its own terms, and see how well it hangs together given the assumptions of the author. Even if you're reading a writer in order to attack him, you need to be a good listener. The difference between believer and unbeliever is that the latter will put a temporary distance between his views and the author's, whereas a believer will detach his views in order to make room for the inspired viewpoint of Scripture.

As an example of this confusion, we're told that, when measured in light-years, the scale of the universe entails its multi-billion year age. But this inference rests on a number of assumptions, viz., the initial size of the universe, the speed of light as a cosmic constant, the relative rate of expansion, the ordinary emission and transmission of starlight from its point of origin to the earth, and so on.

Now, it should be clear that the creation account is silent on most of these assumptions. That doesn't mean that it necessarily negates them. But it is, at best, neutral on such assumptions. To point out, then, that Biblical cosmology is at odds with modern cosmology only goes to show that the Biblical account is inconsistent with certain extra-Biblical assumptions. So what? An inconsistency can be relieved in either of two directions, so the unbeliever hasn't gone any distance in proving his view to be true and the view of Scripture to be false. Running in place may create the illusion of progress, but the motion is circular.

What the unbeliever needs to do is to ask how the world would look assuming, if only for the sake of argument, the editorial viewpoint of the narrative. Suppose that the world was made at an accelerated pace—say, in six straight days. Would it look old or new? Would it appear different than if it happened in the normal amount of time it takes to run through the life-cycle of a star or galaxy or mountain chain?

Unbelievers often dismiss this approach as sleight-of-hand. Yet it is no different than trying to read Dante through Medieval eyes. In fact, it is the unbeliever who is dealing off the bottom of the deck. On the one hand, he wants us to interpret the Bible as literally as possible because that puts the Bible on a collision course with science. On the other hand, when the believer begins to ask what sort of world a literal interpretation predicts for, what a literal reading logically entails, then the unbeliever cries foul!

Others dismiss this explanation as implicating God in a web of deception. But such an objection is so hidebound as to be unintentionally comic. They think it's perfectly okay to say that a star is older than it looks, due to time lag, but to say that it's younger than it looks is downright deceptive!

Yet the objection also commits the naturalistic fallacy. The universe is not a cosmic clock with a pair of hands sweeping out the hours and minutes. The fact that we coopt a natural process to clock absolute time is a secondary, man-made application of a process that serves another purpose altogether. I can also uncap beer bottles with my teeth, but if I split a molar in the process, that is hardly a design flaw. The fact is that things don't look any particular age. That's a comparative judgment based on experience, and past experience is hardly germane to creation *ex nihilo*. The proper subject-matter of science is ordinary providence, not extraordinary providence (creation, the miraculous). If I'd never see a Redwood before, I'd never guess it's age from its appearance. Yes, I could count the rings, but that presupposes the prior existence of seed-bearing trees.

2. Flood

Another objection is that even if we grant the implications of creation *ex nihilo*, that would only explain the cyclical appearance of nature, but not the appearance of a linear progression from simple to complex—such as we find in the fossil record.

To begin with, permit me to question the premise. I may be wrong about this, but it isn't clear to me that the fossil record presents such a pattern. What I'm treated to is a bait-and-switch scam. I'm *told* that the fossil record presents such a pattern, but I'm never *shown* such a pattern as *given* in the fossil record. Rather, I'm shown artistic diagrams and computer animations that *reconstruct* an evolutionary trajectory. These are pasted together from scattered remains gleaned from different digs. What the Darwinist does is to cobble together fossil remains from a variety of sites, and then line them up according to an assumed phylogeny. But is that evidence of evolution, or is the theory arranging the evidence?

Now this is shrewd salesmanship. Ray Bradbury once attributed his success as a SF writer to his picturesque prose. As he explained, you can make people believe in anything as long as you reach them through their senses.

In fact, in my reading of evolutionary literature, there seems to be tremendous flexibility built into the way the theory is positioned in relation to the evidence. Different Darwinian writers make allowance for graduated, punctuated or even quantum evolution; for convergent or divergent evolution; for progressive or regressive evolution, or coevolution or sequential evolution; for biotic or organic adaptation, preadaptation, coadaptation, nonadaptive traits and spandrels; for specialization and despecialization; for analogies, homologies and homoplasies; for ancestral or derived homologies; for primitive or acquired traits; for diversification or downsizing, &c. Yet a theory consistent with everything is a theory of nothing.

Land animals are supposed to chart an evolutionary trend, but if some land animals revert to water (e.g., whales), then that also supports evolution. Increased cranial capacity is supposed to chart an evolutionary trend, but deencephalization (e.g., the downsizing from Cro-Magnon to modern man) also supports evolution. Pedal locomotion is supposed to chart an evolutionary trend, but if some quadrupeds lose their limbs (e.g., snakes), then that also supports evolution. The cone of diversity is supposed to chart an evolutionary trend, but upending the cone ((e.g., the Burgess Shale) also supports evolution. This either looks like a disguised description masquerading as a scientific theory, or else a theory that has been armored against falsification by being made so pliant and compliant with every opposing line of evidence.

However, I'd be the first to admit that I'm only a layman, so I'll waive these reservations and move on to the next point. The creation account should not be read in isolation from the flood account. It is not merely a question of how the world would look as it left its Maker's hand, but how such a world would look after having been run through the blender of the Flood. Given that a global deluge would lay down a lot of fossils, it is

rather perverse to hold the fossil record against the record of Scripture when it is the very record of Scripture that presents a mechanism for the mass production of fossils.

Another imponderable is that you cannot reproduce a global flood under laboratory conditions. So it is difficult, at best, to say what the effects would be. We don't even know what variables to plug in for purposes of computer modeling.

However, a critic would object that this appeal props up one incredible event by invoking yet another incredible event. Where did all the water come from and where did it all go? Where did all the animals come from, and where did they all go?

Now it is only natural to pose these logistical questions. But, as before, they often betray extra-Biblical assumptions, and then convict the Bible of inconsistency. For example, questions about how animals could cross mountains and oceans, fit into the ark, eat the same food, how fresh water fish could survive in brackish water, and so on, all make gratuitous assumptions about the identity of pre- and post diluvian conditions, biogeography and biodiversity before and after the flood, the relative salinity of prediluvian seas, the gene pool, dietary restrictions and climatic adaptation, ecological zones, distribution of land masses and natural barriers, and so on. But I don't own a map of the prediluvian earth. Since the Bible says next to nothing about these issues, it amounts to a massive straw man argument to make the text of Scripture sink under the dead weight of so many extrinsic assumptions. Nothing has been proven one way or the other. Indeed, the argument hasn't budged an inch.

If we confine ourselves to the narrative assumptions, Genesis says that the earth began in a submerged state, and rose out of the primeval deep (1:2-10); so in order to flood the earth I imagine that God merely reversed the creative process (7:11; 8:2)—as Isaiah says: every valley shall be uplifted and every mountain and hill laid low (40:4). This is no great feat for a God who measures the seas in the hollow of his hand and numbers the mountains as fine dust in the balance (40:12).

As to how the animals migrated to the far corners of the earth, and what they ate, one can only speculate. But the narrative invites a number of suggestions. The flood would leave an abundance of carrion and vegetable matter for animals to feed on. Because the descendants of Noah tarried in Mesopotamia until the confusion of tongues, many animals had a head-start, which may be why we find some animal remains buried beneath human remains. The descendants of Noah knew about shipbuilding, and where sailors go, animals go—as livestock, vermin and game.

But when Bible-believers reply to their critics, their critics then do an about-face and accuse them of indulging in unbridled speculation and profligate appeal to miracles. Well, what can you say? When they pose questions the text was not designed to answer, they thereby invite conjecture.

3. Physicalism

Many unbelievers argue that mind is reducible to matter. If so, then this undermines belief in the soul, and other discarnate minds, whether God, angels or demons.

Popular prejudice notwithstanding, idealism enjoys a *prima facie* advantage over materialism inasmuch as we know our mind better than our body or the external world, for whatever we know about our body or the outside world is filtered through the mind. I don't say this to negate either the body or the outside world, but merely to make the point that the burden of proof sits squarely on the shoulders of the materialist. And it is unclear to me how he can ever dislodge that burden. It is like a room with a one-way door.

There is a presumption in favor of the immaterial mind. As Dr. Johnson puts it in popular terms,

Matter can differ from matter only in form, density, bulk, motion, and direction of motion: to which of these, however, varied or combined, can consciousness be annexed. To be round or square, to be solid or fluid, to be great or little, to be moved slowly or swiftly one way or another, are modes of material existence, all equally alien to the nature of cogitation...Consider your own conceptions...You will find substance without extension...What space does the idea of a pyramid occupy?¹⁰

Now a materialist may say that these mental properties, although apparently immaterial, are an emergent or supervenient or epiphenomenal property of matter, like the sound coming out of a radio. But there are several impediments to this claim:

- i) Experience presents us with a seeming or real dualism. Unless we have some overriding reason to deny dualism, why should we question this primitive datum? Why insist on a reductive analysis? If we already knew that dualism was illusory, then there would be reason to do so, but it looks as if materialism begins with a baseless assumption—all the subsequent argumentation is trucked in to fill in the hole of that otherwise unfounded assumption.
- ii) If a materialist could indeed map mental properties back onto material properties in the same way we can draw a one-to-one correspondence between the sound coming out of the speaker and the circuit board, then he would at least have a working model of the relation between mental and material properties; but, to my knowledge, neuroscience, after decades of research, has yet to advance beyond rosy promises and picturesque metaphors. Designing a machine (e.g., robot, computer) that can simulate certain aspects of human behavior doesn't go any distance towards reducing the human mind to a physical system. To begin with, we already know that a machine is a material device; therefore, to treat this as properly parallel to the mind assumes what needs to be proven. Moreover, a parallel phenomenon doesn't explain the original phenomenon, any more than I can explain how sound comes out of a speaker by turning on another radio. It may explain a robot or computer, but it doesn't explain the brain and map mental events back onto brain events. Unless a materialist can chart a causal, one-to-one correspondence, then words like

¹⁰ Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose* (Rinehart, 1971), 706-07.

“emergent” or “supervenient” or “epiphenomenal” are checks drawn on an empty bank account.

iii) And even if we could set up a one-to-one correspondence, what would that prove? Savages hear weird voices issuing from a ham radio. They infer that there must be little people inside the box. They test their hypothesis by impaling the box with a spear. And the voices stop. Yet the explorer tries to explain that the signal does not originate from the box, but comes from spooky radio waves broadcast by a remote radio station. The savages seem more scientific, and the explorer more superstitious.

iv) Not only does experience present us with a seeming or real dualism, but it subordinates one to the other. We must begin with the mind—with our own thoughts, concepts, images, ideas and intentions. Everything we receive from the outside world must take the form of pure thought to be thought of at all. The object of thought is thought. At this level, subject and object are one and the same thing. This is not to deny that many or most of our ideas have their ultimate origin outside the mind, but in the order of knowing, mental properties are prior to material properties, and material properties are only accessible via mental properties; that being so, why assume, and how would you prove, that the order of being is in the reverse?

It is as though I were locked inside a room with closed-circuit TV. I can receive information from the outside world, information about the outside world. But from within my studio I cannot retrace the process of transmission. What is presented to consciousness is encrypted information and virtual imagery—like a closed-circuit TV. I cannot retrieve the plaintext from the ciphertext and reconstruct the real constitution and configuration of the outside world.

v) Our perception of the material world is indirect, whereas we enjoy immediate access to our own mental states. Therefore, the notion of an immaterial substance is a primary and primitive datum, whereas the external world lies at the end of an inference. So the materialist has inverted the standard of comparison.

Much of our mental life is spent in a dream state. Dreams are immaterial, although they simulate sensory awareness. Far from being a vague philosophical abstraction, the notion of an immaterial substance is a universal of human experience.

vi) If computers have already reproduced certain feats of human cognition (e.g. speech/pattern recognition; game-playing; problem-solving), and if they have pulled off that feat without benefit of consciousness, then consciousness or spooky mind-stuff is not a defining property of reason, human or otherwise. Computers are smart without having recourse to beliefs, intentions, and so on. Already, computers vastly surpass our capacity to store information and perform numerical calculations—not to mention chess. While many people in AI research seem to find this line of reasoning persuasive, it is fallacious:

- (a) Computers process electronic signals. There is no understanding involved. The signals have a symbolic meaning for the computer programmer or user, but not for the machine.
- (b) A clock tells time better than I can in my head. Does that mean that a clock is smarter than I am? Although the purpose of a clock is to keep track of time, and it can tick off the seconds, minutes, and hours more accurately than I can, this is not a purposeful action from the viewpoint of the clock, since the clock doesn't have a viewpoint.
- (c) That brings us to a related point. Automation tempts us to personify objects. No one would attribute intelligence to a sundial. Why then for a digital timepiece? Again, a library can store more data more accurately than I can re-member. No one would attribute intelligence to a library. How does computer "memory" differ in principle? Somehow computers acquire this specious mystique.
- (d) The fact that certain tasks can be broken down into algorithmic steps doesn't imply that our reasoning process is algorithmic. A recipe is an algorithm, but that doesn't mean that the order in which the ingredients are added mirrors the process of reason. Are we hard-wired to add the ingredients in just that order? No, it's a matter of culinary chemistry rather than brain chemistry.
- (e) The fact that machines can simulate aspects of human reason and even perform those tasks more efficiently may foster the illusion of artificial intelligence, but the analogous fact that very primitive devices can simulate this effect (e.g. abacus; sundial) shows that the inference is fallacious. Again, we noted that breaking a task down into a stepwise order doesn't parallel our thought process, but is simply a practical adaptation to the physical constraints of the task.

vii) Another argument for materialism is that head trauma results in mental impairment. And this implies the identity between mind and brain, or so goes the argument. The effect of mood- and mind-altering drugs confirms that identity.

- (a) It should go without saying that this isn't a scientific observation. People have known for millennia that a bump on the head or puff of weed can impair or alter mental function. That isn't an argument against monism, but opponents of dualism often act as if neuroscience has introduced a new line of evidence which forces us to reexamine old assumptions.
- (b) If you damage a telephone, that will impair or destroy its capacity to send and receive signals. Yet it's the person at the end of the receiver who initiates the signal. The telephone is just a medium. It's easy to propose more sophisticated examples. I would say the same thing about the brain. It coordinates body functions and sets up an interface between the mind and the external world, processing sensory input.

To claim that the human mind is analogous to a computer ignores the introspective deliverance of consciousness. Our thought process is not formalizable. Much of our knowledge is tacit. Even at the conscious level our reasoning is largely non-propositional. That is to say, consciousness rarely engages in an extended interior dialogue or visualizes its operations. Sentence fragments and scattered images from memory punctuate our self-awareness. Even if an observer could tap into our consciousness, what he saw and

heard would be unintelligible to him since its significance is private and privileged. Our mental contents aren't filed like a library; rather, their organization is more fluid and fleeting— patchy impressions, intense memories, free associations. It's more akin to the oblique logic of a dream. What lies on the surface is already a broken syntax—while the semantics of thought—the meaning, moods, and tenses—are hidden from inspection and must be supplied. It's a code language of analogy and allusion, context-dependent on the uniquely individual response of the original subject.

IV. Ethics

1. Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is easily stated. If God is both omnipotent and benevolent, why is there evil in the world? It would seem that he is either unable to prevent it, in which case he is not omnipotent; or else he is unwilling, in which case he is not benevolent.

Now, in principle, this dilemma, even if stringent, is not a disproof of the Deity, but only the existence of a rather robust conception of God. Yet it would seem, from the standpoint of the atheist, that the traditional view of God is the only kind of God worth disbelieving! So both the conservative Christian and the atheist think that the only God worthy of the name is a full-strength God.

The most popular theodicy is the freewill defense. But aside from the question of whether the FWD is even Scriptural, it suffers from some internal difficulties. Why should freewill be defined in terms of the freedom to do otherwise? After all, even on a libertarian account we can only make one choice at a time, and one choice cancels out another. So why should God not limit the freedom of opportunity to one or another natural goods?

If, as some liberals would have it, God cannot know which way we'll choose, then that concedes the dilemma and relieves it by sacrificing the sovereignty of God. Speaking for myself, I'd just say that I'm more than happy to waive all claims to every little godling in the liberal pantheon as long as I'm allowed to keep the only and only God of the Bible.

And if you insist that a free agent must have unfettered freedom, then this means that Jim can use his freedom to gain power over John and thereby limit or deprive John of his freedom. Indeed, this happens all the time. How much significant freedom does John enjoy as a political prisoner in his 5x5 cell or before the firing squad?¹¹

The Bible takes a different tack. History is theodicy. Knowing God is the highest good, for God is the highest good. God foreordained the Fall of Adam (Rom 11:32; Gal 3:22) so that his chosen people should glory in the wisdom of his ever just and most merciful designs (Jn 9-12; 1 Jn 4:9-10; Rom 9:17,22-23; Eph 3:9-10). Although God's greatness shone forth in the primavernal glory of Eden, it burns more brightly in the autumnal glory of the cross.

The common good and the greater good are incompatible. There is no greatest good for the greatest number. Rather, there is a lesser good for a greater number, or a greater good for a lesser number. A world without sin is the best possible world for the common good. But it is not the best possible world for the greatest good. An unfallen world is a lesser good for every creature; but redemption is a greater good for the elect.

In the nature of the case, a theodicy pivots on a theological value-system. An unbeliever will find a theodicy that takes the knowledge of God as a second-order good to be unper-

¹¹ Another criticism is that self-determination is a viciously circular notion. The classic attack comes from Edwards in his *Freedom of the Will*.

suasive, for he is unpersuaded of God's very existence, much less in his role as the exemplar of good and chief end of man. At this level, there is no common ground.

For their own part, many believers try to put an extra layer of latex between God and the fallen world order. Now there are no doubt models of divine and human agency that would have the effect of inculcating God in evil. The "gods" of Canaan were guilty of sin.

But the danger doesn't only issue from too much involvement. Too little detachment may also be blameworthy, as in the case of an absentee landlord who fails to maintain the sewer system, so that his tenants die of cholera. What I respect about the God of Calvinism, who, by the way, bears an uncanny resemblance to the God of the Bible, is that he doesn't relate to the world through a pair of latex gloves. The God of the Exodus, the God of Job, the God of Isaiah, is not an absentee landlord.

Rather, it's like the relation between an officer and a foot soldier. A foot soldier doesn't resent having to follow orders, even if the orders induce personal pain and hardship, as long as he respects his commanding officer and thinks that this is all for a good cause. He even takes a filial pride in being treated like a grown man who can be trusted to tough it out under duress. He only becomes resentful if, after having carried out his orders and suffered for the cause, he finds his commanding officer beginning to put distance between himself and the mission.

Now our God is the Lord of hosts and Captain of the host. And the Lord God of Sabaoth never says he's sorry for the mission or the orders—or denies that he was the one issuing the orders. He keeps his word and keeps his own counsel.

To speak of evil as "the problem of evil" assumes that evil is nothing but a problem. Yet that is rather shortsighted. Although it is only natural to think of goodness as a check on evil, we also need to appreciate the ways in which evil can serve as a check on evil—for one evildoer will often block the malicious designs of another evildoer. Ambition counters ambition, incompetence gums up the totalitarian apparatus, and petty corruption impedes more heinous schemes. "Tyrants could do much more harm in the world if all their servants were flawlessly efficient, untiringly industrious, and financially incorruptible."¹² So even vice, in moderation, has its fringe benefits. Remember that the next time you must deal with a blundering bureaucrat and pencil pusher. His plodding ineptitude is every bit as galling to the ruthless depot as it is to the man in line.

The problem of evil takes for granted a distinction between good and evil. But when deployed against the existence of God, this distinction is deeply problematic. For, from a secular standpoint, what is the source and standard of right and wrong? Evil assumes a deviation from an ideal. But if we inhabit an accidental universe, if intelligent life is a fortuitous turn of events, then nothing was supposed to be one way or another. And if, when I die, it's as though I never lived; and if nice guys and mean men suffer a common fate, then what does it matter how you and I conduct our affairs?

¹² P. Geach, *Truth & Hope* (Notre Dame, 2001), 37.

2. Hell

How can a loving Lord send anyone to hell? A common question. Let's pose another question. How can a loving husband divorce one of his wives? Now some readers might find that question peculiar. How can a truly loving husband have more than one wife?

Ah, but that's the point! There is a difference between marital love and alley cat affection. The intensity of a man's love for a woman is in inverse relation to the extent of his love for other women. And, in Scripture, the love of God is akin to marital love (Isa 54:5; Eph 5:25,32; Rev 19:6-10; 21:2). God is not a Tomcat. The Lord loves the elect, not the reprobate. He tethers the reprobate for the sake of the sheep. Remember the parable of the wheat and the tares? Because they share a common field, God sends sun and rain on the tares in order to warm and water the wheat (Mt 5:45; 13:29). Remember the remnant of grace? God fells the terebinth and tithes on the stump for the sake of the holy seed within (Isa 6:13). "I gave Egypt as a ransom, for you were precious in my sight" (Isa 43:3-4)!

How can you believe in a God who presides over a perpetual torture chamber? Another common question. But this picture owes more to Dante than Scripture. I see hell as less a torture chamber than fantasy island, but with a twist. If you strip away the figurative imagery of fire and outer darkness, what you're left with is that hell is Arminian heaven, for there is where sinners have utter license to sin, to sin to their heart's content, to sin without inhibition or intermission. So God punishes sin with sin by adding iniquity end-to-end without end—which strikes me not as a miscarriage of justice, but justice perfected.

What I find offensive is not the belief in everlasting damnation, but the breezy way in which a universalist presumes to speak for everyone, the victim included, and takes it upon himself to extend forgiveness on the victim's behalf without the victim's consent.

3. Holy War

Many men, both inside and outside the church, have a problem with OT holy war. Now this is not a case in which a Christian apologist has to try and supply a rationale for a Biblical doctrine or practice, for the Bible already gives us a reason for holy war (Deut 9:4; 20:18). So the problem is not so much that critics don't know the reason, but that they don't like the reason.

So, at a certain level, we may be faced with incommensurable standards. OT morality is prized on a theological value-system. If you don't subscribe to the theology of Scripture, then you don't share its moral priorities. As long as that is the case, further debate will not change many minds.

Many men and women are especially disturbed by the wholesale slaughter of children. This is understandable and even commendable up to a point. The love of children is ordinarily a natural and theological virtue. Much of human mercy is based on fellow feel-

ing. Because we are men of like-passions, we have a sympathetic capacity for the plight of our fellow man.

But we need to guard against an anthropomorphic model of God. God has no fellow feeling. Divine mercy is not grounded in literal empathy or the bowels of compassion.¹³

And our visceral revulsion to this aspect of holy war may be so strong that critics will have no patience with patient explanations. But I'd point out that if you lack intellectual patience, then you forfeit the right to raise intellectual objections. And I'd also add that unreasoning moral outrage is immoral. Unless indignation has a basis in truth, it doesn't deserve a respectful hearing.

In a fallen world, you have three options: (a) you can side with evil. You can do wrong; (b) you can oppose evil and make the best of a bad situation, choosing the lesser of two evils; (c) you can passively acquiesce to the status quo, not taking sides, and letting others make the tough choices and do the dirty work on your behalf.

If you go with ©, then that will save you a lot of wear-and-tear on your delicate conscience, but contracting out the hard questions to second parties and mercenaries does not absolve you complicity for their actions. It may make you feel better and sleep better, but it doesn't make you a better person. And it disqualifies you from waxing indignant over the choices which, by your moral abdication, you have delegated to second parties.

If you are a morally serious individual, you will go with (b). One of the things that makes evil so evil is that it forces good men to do hateful and horrendous things they'd ordinarily avoid. A physician may have to inflict terrible pain and suffering on a patient in order to save him, but he is hardly in the wrong to do so.

With regard to children, several things need to be said:

i) It isn't possible in this life to be just and merciful to everyone alike. Everyone is related to someone. You cannot punish a parent without causing the child to suffer. Does that mean that we should never punish a parent? Is that just or merciful to the victims of the parent? If a soldier or policeman shoots a father, he leaves his wife a widow and single mom. If he shoots the father and mother, he leaves the child an orphan. So there is sometimes no way of exacting justice or defending the innocent without hurting some other innocents.

ii) Moreover, we need to consider the quality of life of a boy or girl or woman raised in pure paganism, what with infanticide, child sacrifice, cult prostitution, sodomy, bestiality and the like. The whole culture is an assembly line of inhuman depravity. Sometimes you must burn down the factory and start from the ground up.

¹³ "There is only one living and true God, infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions" (WCF 2:1).

iii) Furthermore, that sweet, cherubic little boy may grow up to be Pharaoh or Ashurbanipal or a soldier in the armies of Pharaoh or Ashurbanipal— who will one day be responsible for the mass murder of cherubic little Jewish boys and the gang rape of their godly mothers and grandmothers. I don't know, but God knows. The tares would choke out the wheat unless God engaged in a periodic program of weeding.¹⁴ And he saved the nation of Israel to save the Savior of Israel and the nations—for Israel was the medium of the Messianic line. Whatever children are saved, are saved in Christ. So holy war was a redemptive instrument.

4. *Original Sin*

I suppose most folks have an intuitive resistance to original sin. It seems unfair. Yet what, exactly, is it that prompts this instinctive reaction? There is a difference between being blamed for *doing* some I didn't do, and being blamed for something I didn't do. The former is unjust because it is untrue. But the latter is subtler. When men rankle under the dogma of original sin, I doubt that they draw this distinction.

Certainly there are many cases in which I'm blameworthy for something I didn't do—precisely because it was something I was supposed to have done. And there are cases in which I'm blameworthy, or share the blame, for something done by another. A father is largely responsible for the behavior of a young child.

The reprobate and unregenerate cannot believe the Gospel in much the same way as a bad man cannot stand to be in the same room as a good man. The mere presence of a good man makes him feel unclean. Having you ever noticed, in this regard, how the most indignant men are the most evil men? They fly into a rage at the slightest breath of criticism, whereas a saint is characteristically contrite.

The ubiquitous appeal of art, drama and literature is prized on our capacity for imaginative identification with another. We project ourselves into the situation of the character—even to the point of moral complicity (e.g. voyeurism). Hence, the idea of our vicarious solidarity with Adam, so far from being counterintuitive, is more in the nature of a cultural universal.

It is amusing to see how quickly folks will forfeit their grandiose claims on freewill. A liberal preacher goes to the movies Saturday night. There, in the darkened movie theater, his attention is glued to a patch of dancing light. He sees everything through the lens of the cameraman. His perspective is skewed by the director's viewpoint. He identifies with a sympathetic character. He relates to his sticky situation. He resonates with the pathos of a powerful actor. His moods mirror the color scheme. His emotions are massaged by the sound track. His feelings synchronize with the moviegoer behind him, beside him, and ahead of him. Having marinated himself in polite mob psychology and vicarious virtual reality for two or three hours, he mounts the pulpit Sunday morning to denounce the dogma of original sin as a tyrannical infringement on our impregnable freedom.

¹⁴ It is sometimes said that OT holy war was racist. But God was just as unsparing with Jewish apostates (e.g., Exod 32; Num 16; 25; Deut 28:15-68).

5. Predestination

A lot of folks seem to find the idea of predestination claustrophobic. How do we account for their existential panic? The reasoning seems to be as follows: If I were just a dumb animal, then it wouldn't matter to me; but to be conscious of my own fate feels as though I'm being shadowed by a doppelganger. I peer over my shoulder only to catch myself fulfilling my own fate.

But this dualism is illusory, for there is a wide difference between knowing *that* my choices are foreordained, and knowing *what* they are. If I knew in advance, and could do nothing to alter the fact, then that would induce this paranoid feeling of a spectral self trapped in the body of an automaton. But the decree is a hidden decree.

Suppose we compare predestination to a game of seven-card stud. God is the dealer. One of the players is a believer, the other an unbeliever who tries to cheat the believer at every turn. However, God has stacked the deck so that his chosen people will win over the long haul.

Now, God is securing the outcome by securing the deal. Yet he isn't forcing the hand of a crooked player. Since a crooked player doesn't know that the dealer is a cardsharp, he bets and bluffs just the same as if the deck were randomly shuffled. He can only play the hand he's dealt, but that's true in any poker game, and he enjoys the very same choices he'd have if the cards just happened to play out in that order.

God allows the unbeliever to cheat the believer, but feeds the believer enough winning cards to keep him in the game. God then lets the crooked player become overconfident and bet the whole jackpot on a weak hand, at which point the Christian calls his bluff and rakes in all the chips.

To me, there's a delicious irony in this arrangement, for a crooked player constantly tries to cheat his fellow player, but all the while he's being cheated by the dealer. That's more than bare permission, but less than overt coercion—just as Assyria was a rod of wrath in the hands of the Almighty, levied by providence to crush a hypocritical nation (Isa 10:5-19). Assyria meant it for evil, but God meant it for good (Gen 50:20); for God tips the scales here-and-now to right the scales hereafter.¹⁵

Man has more freedom of choice than does a dog. Unlike the merely instinctual or Pavlovian behavior of the animal kingdom, man has been endowed with a capacity for moral and rational deliberation. But God chooses our choices.

There are many men who, for whatever reason, find this deeply unpalatable. And, for them, dislike and disbelief are one and the same thing. Yet there are certain drab advantages to believing unlovely truths over lovely lies. A lunatic is free to believe whatever he

¹⁵ Some readers may feel that it is irreverent to take an illustration from professional gambling; but, in fact, the Bible uses a gaming metaphor to describe God's providence (Prov 16:33).

pleases, but as that renders him a danger to himself and others, he is confined to a padded cell. Although the truth may crimp our style, a clear-headed man is fundamentally freer than a madman, for he knows what will work and what will not. A medium is both a door and a wall. If you respect the medium, it empowers you; if you disrespect the medium, it overpowers you. A ship on water is liberating; a car on water is a coffin. Jumping off a cliff will get you to the bottom of the hill quicker than keeping close to the trail, but the benefits of speed are off-set by the hard landing. The only free man is a man who lives by the promises and admonitions of the Lord. By respecting reality, he avoids the dangers and enjoys the dividends that only a reverence for the truth can repay.

The popular appeal of freewill stands for a state of arrested adolescence. Now it may be natural and normal for teenagers to be a bit rebellious. But God is not the sort of father we will ever outgrow, so the itch for independence is out of place where our religious relations are concerned. Indeed, one purpose of parenting is to model our dependence on God. Nothing is more laughable than the spectacle of an emancipated five-year-old. His best efforts to run away from home take him no further than the tree-house in his own back yard. And even then he must come down for dinner and a dry place to sleep.

Freewill is the oldest heresy in the book, having a diabolical origin (Gen 3:1-5). It was the tempter himself who insinuated that our primal parents were free to defy God and go their own way. But while they were at liberty to disobey the law of God, they were never free of the will of God, for their very downfall was decreed of God (Rom 11:32; Gal 3:22).

In a fallen world, freedom is like a jailbreak. Would we really wish to empty the prisons and have marauding bands roaming the streets? If evil is foreordained, then there is hope—for evil is restrained by a higher reason for a higher good; but if evil is freely willed, then there is only despair—for it has no boundaries in time and space.

6. Euthyphro Dilemma

It is often thought that the Euthyphro dilemma cancels out the appeal to God as the ground of morality. I've already addressed this objection in my essay on Bertrand Russell.¹⁶

7. Crimes of Christianity

One of the most popular objections to the faith is the charge that various atrocities have been committed in the name of Christ, viz., Inquisition, Crusades, pogroms, witch-hunting, wars of religion, &c.

i) One of the revealing things about this charge is the way it betrays the lack of a self-critical sense on the part of unbelievers. For even if the charge were altogether true, isn't the time past due for the secular humanist to account for all the atrocities committed on his watch, viz., Baathism, Maoism, Nazism, Stalinism?

¹⁶ "Why I am not a Russellite."

ii) Although various sins are inconsistent with Christian ethics, then are not inconsistent with Christian theology for the obvious reason that Christian theology includes a theology of sin. Sin does not disprove the Gospel, for the gospel is predicated on sin. Unbelievers were hardly the first to find hypocrites inside the church (Mt 23). But what about all the hypocrites outside the church?

iii) Freedom of dissent is a modern idea. The Medieval Church was intolerant of dissent because the Medieval Church was an autocratic institution. But the same could be said of the Medieval State, or the pre-Christian state, or the post-Christian state—with its speech codes and the like. To single out the Church for special censure is anachronistic and blinkered.

iv) At the same time, freedom dissent has its logical corollary in freedom of assembly. The Church, like any voluntary association, has the right to lay down the terms of membership—just like political parties and professional associations.

v) There is a rote way in which unbelievers tick off the crimes of Christianity. They always cite the same, shopworn examples, viz., the Crusades, the Inquisition, &c. To this a couple of things need to be said. To begin with, since I am not Roman Catholic, I'm no more blamable for Catholic church history than Jews are blamable for the Nazis. After all, the Spanish Inquisition targeted Evangelicals—among other victims, and the pogroms slaughtered Armenian believers as well as Jews.

However, we need to make some allowance the situation facing the Latin Church. Islam was the mortal enemy of the Church. And it still is. The Crusades were a counteroffensive to push back a rising Jihad. Just read Urban's speech to the Council of Constance. And the Spanish Inquisition was a mopping up operation to round up collaborators after the Moors were driven from of the Iberian Peninsula. Both the Inquisition and the Crusades got out of hand, but it is easy for us to jeer from the cheap seats, and I'm prepared to cut the Catholic Church a little slack on this matter.

Witch-hunting peaked, not during the Middle Ages, but the Enlightenment. Likewise, the wars of religion took place during the Enlightenment. Guilt-by-association has a long reach, and infidels may find themselves mired in the same tar pit if they resort to such tactics.

I'd add that the wars of religion did not a represent a popular movement, but were instigated and prosecuted by European monarchs. The Christian conscript is not to blame for following orders at gunpoint. And the Irish problem is owing to the legacy of English colonialism.

Let us also recall that it was theologians like Augustine and Aquinas who tried to lay down the rules of war in order to minimize atrocities. Just war doctrine is a Christian creation. Before then it was a free-for-all.

8. *Christian Chauvinism*

Many people take great offense, or at least feign offense, at the exclusive claims of the Christian faith. What are we to make of this?

i) It is a commonplace of human experience that people disagree with one another. If I disagree with you, I must think that I'm right and you're wrong. So unless the critics of Christian chauvinism are going to resign the right to ever disagree with anyone about anything, it is unclear why they reserve one standard for themselves, and a contrary standard for the Christian.

ii) The alternative to believing that only one religion is right and every opposing faith is false is believing that every faith is false bar none. So it is hard to see how this is more tolerant than Christian chauvinism.

iii) Christian chauvinism would only be morally wrong if it were factually wrong. The pluralist assumes that Christian chauvinism is false. And he is only tolerant in the demeaning sense that if all religious creeds are false, then one creed is no better or worse than another, and it matters not which one you believe in as long as your equally insincere.

iv) However, the objection may take a more moderate form. The issue is not that all religions are wholly false, but that no one religion is wholly true; hence, the proper attitude is to revere the glimmers of truth in each religious tradition.

But even if this were so, the question is how a pluralist happens to pry to knowing where the truth lies in each religious tradition. What is his benchmark? Under the guise of tolerant magnanimity, isn't he assuming a God's eye view? For how can he say that this or that faith is relatively true or false unless he is gazing down from his Olympian throne?

v) Many of those opposing Christian mission are supporting sociopolitical activism. They feel that some political beliefs are right, but others wrong. They deem it terribly important to convert people from the wrong political party to the right political party. They deem it terribly important for educational institutions to indoctrinate the young in liberal values. They write books and articles to convince us of their superior views. They even support coercive legislation to penalize dissent.

But why the double standard? Why is religious persuasion immoral, but political persuasion is a moral imperative? Why religious relativism, but sociopolitical absolutism?

vi) However, some would say that the problem is not with believing that I am right, but in failing to make allowance for the possibility that I may be wrong. By way of reply,

(a) The abstract possibility that I may be wrong about something is no reason to question my convictions. It may be that if I get out of bed, I'll be run over by a car, but that is not sensible reason to stay in bed all day.

(b) Why is the pluralist more worried about being wrong than being right? To be sure, there are dangers in being wrong when you supposed you were right. But there are equal dangers of moral paralysis, of refusing to act on what you deem to be right for fear of being wrong.

(c) A Christian is quite willing to admit that *he* may be wrong about almost anything—excepting, that is, his Christian faith ; what he is unwilling to admit is that *God* may ever be wrong. The Christian does not lean on his own fallible wisdom, but on the infallible wisdom of God.

(d) It may be objected that (c) only pushes the problem back a step. At issue is the question of whether the Christian may be wrong about God. But if that is, indeed, a serious question, then the answer cannot be short-circuited by preemptive finger-wagging about the arrogance of religious intolerance.

vii) It is sometimes said that oriental religions are more tolerant than occidental religions. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that that is true, they have more reason to be tolerant, for eastern religions are not prized on the principle of divine revelation. And so they have no theoretical basis for religious certainty.

But to fault occidental religions for being less tolerant than oriental religions ignores their varying truth-conditions. A revealed religion has different truth-conditions, and for that same reason, a claim to religious certainty. The primary question is the authenticity of its revelatory status.

But are oriental religions more tolerant? They have vicious fights over succession within a given school or sect, and vicious fights between hostile schools and sects. They are fanatically inflexible over fine points of ritual. They persecute Christian missionaries and converts. The tolerant image of oriental religions seems to be the image exported for Western consumption, and not an impression formed by those who have had to live in the orient.

viii) Critics of Christian chauvinism are fond of tossing around the charge of intellectual arrogance. But what, exactly, is intellectual arrogance? Is it merely the conviction that I am right and you are wrong?

I define intellectual arrogance as anti-intellectual arrogance. I am guilty of intellectual arrogance if and when I do not hold myself accountable for my beliefs—when I insist that I am right, and you are wrong, but I refuse to offer a rational defense of my convictions, when I have no intellectual standards. To be intellectually arrogant is to be both dogmatic and irresponsible inasmuch as I don't have the arguments to back up my dogmatism. On the one hand I assume an air of intellectual superiority while, at the same time, withdrawing into a shell an unreasoning obstinacy when my vaunted beliefs come under fire. But the Christian faith has always had a strong apologetic component. We make a reasoned case for what we believe.