

# THE NEW ATHEISM



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## *How to Debate an Atheist—If You Must*

*William A. Dembski*  
*Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary*  
*Fort Worth, Texas*  
*wdembski@swbts.edu*

We live in an increasingly secular culture, and as followers of Christ we have little choice but to debate atheists.<sup>1</sup> Atheism is on the rise, and atheists cannot be avoided. Because we are, as Jude 3 urges, to contend earnestly for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, silence in the face of atheism is not a Christian option. Much of what I write about atheism in this paper will not be new to students of Christian apologetics. Yet, I hope here to tie together certain key strands in the present debate between Christians and the new atheists (Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens, etc.) as we seek to advance the truth of Christ to the wider culture.

Let me therefore begin with what the Bible says about atheism. Among the Bible's 150 psalms, only one is repeated: Psalm 14, which appears also as Psalm 53. Verse for verse, Psalms 14 and 53 match up, saying the same thing, only at places using slightly different wording. For those, like me, who see the Bible as God's inspired and unerring Word, this repetition cannot be accidental. Repetition stresses importance. It says, "Listen up, pay attention."

What, then, is so important about Psalm 14 that it bears repeating? This psalm gives the Bible's most penetrating insight into human corruption and wickedness. Indeed, when the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, needed to underscore the universality of human sin, the first Old Testament text that he quoted was this psalm. Thus, to prove that all, both Jews and Gentiles, are, as he puts it, "under sin," Paul writes, "There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." (Rom 3:10–12).

But what is this passage from Romans except an edited version of the first three verses of Psalm 14? Everything in Romans 3:10–12 is drawn from Psalm 14. And yet, not everything in the first three verses of Psalm 14 appears in Romans 3. In particular, Paul omits the very opening of this psalm. Not that Paul is quoting the psalm out of context. In chapter 3 of Romans,

<sup>1</sup>This paper closely follows the commencement talk that I gave at Southern Evangelical Seminary on 7 May 2011. An abridged version was presented in chapel at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary on 7 September 2011. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for extensive helpful comment.

Paul is intent on demonstrating the universality of human sinfulness; he is less concerned with analyzing its root. To get at the root of human sinfulness, we need to consider the opening of Psalm 14. The full first three verses of Psalm 14 read as follows:

The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good. The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Note the opening words, “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.” This start of Psalm 14 is remarkable for its brevity, simplicity, and profundity. “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.” All the wickedness of humanity described subsequently in Psalm 14 and expanded on by Paul in his letter to the Romans flows from this brief statement. I want in what follows to analyze this statement and show how it applies to twenty-first century western Christians as we engage an increasingly hostile secular culture.

Does it seem odd in our age for this psalm to refer to those who deny God’s existence as fools? Atheism, in our secular culture, is regarded as courageous and intelligent. Weak-kneed people who need God as a crutch, so we are told, are the fools. They believe in God against all evidence and hang on to that belief because they lack the courage to face the stark, bleak reality of an impersonal universe that is winding down and will ultimately consign all human aspirations to oblivion. Again, so we are told.<sup>2</sup>

The mother of a boy I grew up with, though not herself an atheist, remarked that her son was too intelligent to believe in God.<sup>3</sup> In Hollywood films, children who confidently doubt or, better yet, boldly deny God’s existence are portrayed as thoughtful, precocious, and admirable (take, for

<sup>2</sup>Consider, for instance, Bertrand Russell’s famous remark, “That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.” Quoted from Russell’s 1903 essay “A Free Man’s Worship,” <http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/russell1.htm> (Accessed 15 August 2011). Compare the attempt of Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett to rebrand atheism by referring to atheists as “brights,” see <http://www.the-brights.net> (Accessed 15 August 2011).

<sup>3</sup>Compare the title of the following piece, dated 11 June 2008, in *The Telegraph*: Graeme Paton, “Intelligent People ‘Less Likely to Believe in God’,” <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2111174/Intelligent-people-less-likely-to-believe-in-God.html> (Accessed 15 August 2011).

instance, the twelve-year old Christian Bale character in Steven Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun*). When I was applying for secular jobs in philosophy two decades ago, a prominent philosopher of science suggested I remove from my curriculum vitae all mention of my work on intelligent design because, as he remarked, "All the analytic philosophers are atheists and don't want to see that stuff." Please note, he meant this for my own good so that I could land a job—he was not trying to be unkind or disrespectful.

The evidence of science and history, we are told, shows that God probably does not exist and, in any case, need not exist. Polling numbers confirm that this is the conventional wisdom among our cultural elites. Among America's top scientists—those who belong to the National Academy of Sciences—only seven percent admit to any belief in God.<sup>4</sup> In a 2007 survey of 149 evolutionary biologists, only two admitted belief in God.<sup>5</sup> When Francis Collins, an evangelical, was appointed to head the National Institutes of Health, mainstream scientists cited his Christian belief as reason to deny his appointment because it would prevent him from being objective.<sup>6</sup> Most of the media thought this concern entirely legitimate.

It would seem, then, that all the smart people are atheists and that Psalm 14 got it wrong about only fools saying in their hearts there is no God. But in fact, the Bible got it right. These atheists may be smart, but they are smart fools. Nor is this to suggest that Christian believers are necessarily pious imbeciles. Up until the twentieth century, most prominent scientists were utterly convinced of God's existence and said so unapologetically. Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Boyle, Euler, Faraday, Maxwell, and Kelvin all spring readily to mind.

But that raises the question, Why has there been such a great falling away from belief in God by the "smart" people? Smart people who deny that God exists are fools because, as Phillip Johnson notes in *Reason in the Balance*, they are ignoring the most important aspect of reality.<sup>7</sup> Imagine going

<sup>4</sup>Edward J. Larson and Larry Witham, "Leading Scientists Still Reject God," *Nature* 394.6691 (23 July 1998): 313.

<sup>5</sup>See Gregory W. Graffin and William B. Provine, "Evolution, Religion and Free Will," *American Scientist* 95.4 (2007): 294. They found that out of 149 prominent evolutionists polled, 78 percent were pure naturalists (atheists) and only two were clearly theists (holding to a traditional conception of God). <http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/id.3747,y.0,no.,content.true,page.1,css.print/issue.aspx> (Accessed 15 August 2011).

<sup>6</sup>Consider this from the *New York Times* at the time of Collins' appointment: "There are two basic objections to Dr. Collins. The first is his very public embrace of religion. He wrote a book called 'The Language of God,' and he has given many talks and interviews in which he described his conversion to Christianity as a 27-year-old medical student. Religion and genetic research have long had a fraught relationship, and some in the field complain about what they see as Dr. Collins's evangelism." Quoted from Gardiner Harris, "Pick to Lead Health Agency Draws Praise and Some Concern," *New York Times* (8 July 2009), <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/09/health/policy/09nih.html> (Accessed 15 August 2011).

<sup>7</sup>See Phillip E. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995). In this book Johnson proposed his idea of "theistic realism," according to which precisely because God is the most important aspect of reality, any worldview that ignores God is shooting itself in the foot. To this day, Johnson regards this as his most important book, even though *Darwin*

to a football game and paying attention only to the concessions stand or to the pattern on the referees' uniforms. Imagine going to a play, ignoring the actors, and attending only to the furniture on stage. God is the main attraction. He is the lead actor, the primary agent in the world—a world that He has created. To miss God is to miss everything. As Maximus the Confessor, the great seventh century theologian, put it,

If all things have been made by God and for his sake, then God is better than what has been made by Him. The one who forsakes the better and is engrossed in inferior things shows that he prefers the things made by God to God himself. . . . If the soul is better than the body and God incomparably better than the world which He created, the one who prefers the body to the soul and the world to the God who created it is no different from idolaters.<sup>8</sup>

In short, the atheist is a fool because he is an idolater. It is not that he worships nothing. It is rather that he worships everything except the one true God.

In analyzing the opening of Psalm 14, let us consider next in exactly what sense the fool denies God's existence. Notice that this verse does not say that the fool "believes" in his heart there is no God. Rather, it says that the fool "says" in his heart there is no God. This is significant. In all my encounters with atheists—and I have had many—I am not convinced any of them truly disbelieve in God's existence. A fact about language is that words can be arranged in any order whatsoever and then given utterance. Most such arrangements are complete nonsense. Of those that remain, most are false. Aristotle could just as well have been referring to our speech acts when he wrote, "it is possible to fail in many ways, . . . while to succeed is possible only in one way."<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, just because people say something does not mean they believe it. In fact, there is good reason to think no real atheists exist (real atheists being those who believe deep down in their hearts that there is no God). Why do I think that atheism describes an empty set, something like married bachelors? For one, Paul in Romans 1:18–20 characterizes all human attempts to deny God as vain. To be sure, humans move their lips and utter words that deny God, but such speech acts, according to Paul, do not reflect what is really going on in their hearts. Paul writes in that passage:

*on Trial* is far and away his best-selling book.

<sup>8</sup>Maximus the Confessor, *The Four Hundred Chapters on Love*, I:5 and I:7, in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 36.

<sup>9</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1106.

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

This passage is so rich that whole books could be (and indeed have been)<sup>10</sup> written on it, but I call your attention to two points: (1) Humans have been given plenty of evidence to believe in God, notably from the world God has created, a world that reflects his glory. (2) When humans fail to acknowledge such evidence for God, their failure is not intellectual but moral in that they willfully suppress that evidence.

Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell, when asked what he would say if on dying and meeting God he were asked why he had not believed in God during his tenure on earth, is reputed to have replied, “Not enough evidence.”<sup>11</sup> But this reply, which contemporary atheists repeat endlessly, going even further by claiming that there is no evidence whatsoever for God, is a sham. To see this, we need to consider the nature of evidence.

The problem with evidence is that what constitutes evidence is not self-evident. Simply put, what counts as evidence is not, and indeed cannot be, decided by evidence. Evidence—that is, what makes a claim evident to us—depends on what we are predisposed to take as evidence.<sup>12</sup> I recall lecturing at the University of Kansas on intelligent design some years back, showing the marvelous intricacy and technological sophistication inside cellular life and being asked, during the Q&A, when I was finally going to present some real evidence for design. I thought the question was a joke—is not that

<sup>10</sup>The entire literature of natural theology, from Joseph Butler’s *Analogy of Religion* to William Paley’s *Natural Theology* to contemporary attempts to read the divine wisdom off of nature, as in the work of Hugh Ross, constitutes an extended footnote to this passage from Paul. Moreover, all the reactions by theologians against this passage, as when they argue that nature is a poor vehicle for any meaningful divine revelation, are nonetheless keying off of this passage from Paul. Cf. Karl Barth’s view, stated in the early parts of his *Church Dogmatics*, that natural theology is impious and that God is revealed through no intermediates but only by direct encounter with God.

<sup>11</sup>This quote is widely available on the Internet, and Richard Dawkins attributes it to Russell in *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 104. But neither Dawkins nor the Internet sources I have found that list the quote provide a reference to Russell’s actual writings. Still, we can well imagine Russell saying just this.

<sup>12</sup>As Michael Rea puts it, “True inquiry is a process in which we try to revise our beliefs on the basis of what we take to be evidence.” He continues, “But this means that, in order to inquire into anything, we must *already* be disposed to take some things as evidence. In order even to begin inquiry, we must already have various dispositions to trust at least some of our cognitive faculties as sources of evidence and to take certain kinds of experiences and arguments to be evidence. Such dispositions (let’s call them *methodological dispositions*) may be reflectively and deliberately acquired.” Michael C. Rea, *World without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.

what I had been doing the last hour and a half of my lecture? But the questioner was, apparently, serious. Suffice it to say that a human heart intent on turning away from God is ready to invalidate any evidence that might point to God.

The testimony of Scripture, especially Romans 1, argues convincingly against the existence of real atheists, that is, atheists who believe deep down in their hearts that there is no God. The irony here is worth underscoring: atheists argue that God does not exist; God's Word argues that no real atheists exist. But we need not stop with Scripture. If we look outside of Scripture, it seems that there is also good reason to doubt the existence of real atheists. I have had occasion to debate and interact with many atheists, the most prominent being Christopher Hitchens.<sup>13</sup> Invariably, I find their atheism to be a pose. The more virulent atheists might better be called "antitheists." They not only deny that God exists but also hate Him. Yet whence this hatred of a nonexistent entity? "There is no God and I hate Him" seems a strange position to take. Why get so bent out of shape about a being that does not exist?

When confronted with this charge, atheists reply that their hatred is directed not at a non-existent entity but at a false belief in such an entity and the horrific consequences of that belief. But this defense rings hollow. To be sure, so-called Christians have committed horrific acts in the name of God. But others have built orphanages, overturned slavery, and composed magnificent music, all in the name of God. Conversely, there is no shortage of atheists who, in the name of a godless universe, have felt no compunction about killing vast numbers of people to refashion society in their own image (the atrocities of Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, as committed Marxists, can hardly be attributed to belief in God).

Why are antitheists so selective in their use of evidence, focusing exclusively on the worst that is associated with belief in God and ignoring the worst that is associated with disbelief in God? And why does hatred of God invariably bleed through in their rhetoric? It would be one thing to argue, calmly, that belief in God has negative consequences that outweigh any positive effects.<sup>14</sup> But why do the present crop of atheists go out of his way to malign the Judeo-Christian God? For instance, Richard Dawkins writes not just as an atheist but as an antitheist when he describes the Judeo-Christian God as "arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction. Jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic-cleanser; a misogynistic homophobic racist, infanticidal,

<sup>13</sup>The debate took place at Prestonwood Christian Academy in Plano, Texas on 18 November 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIKLp1UnfG8> (Accessed 15 August 2011). For my prepared remarks in this debate, go to <http://www.uncommondescent.com/darwinism/prepared-comments-for-the-dembski-hitchens-debate> (Accessed 15 August 2011).

<sup>14</sup>In fact, the better argument can be made for belief in God having positive consequences that outweigh any negative effects. See, for instance, Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great about Christianity* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2007).

genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”<sup>15</sup> Dawkins and his fellow antitheists are protesting less an idea than a person—a person they claim is fictional and yet are treating as very real. That person is God.

The actual arguments such atheists use to deny God’s existence are less than convincing. Most tether their atheism to Darwinian evolution.<sup>16</sup> Richard Dawkins puts it this way: “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.”<sup>17</sup> It is no coincidence that Dawkins, the world’s best known atheist, is also an evolutionary biologist. Atheists, like everyone else, need a creation story. Without God in the picture, something like Darwinian evolution must be true.

But Darwinian evolution is in deep trouble. If you doubt this, look at my book *The Design of Life*, Stephen Meyer’s *Signature in the Cell*, or Susan Mazur’s *The Altenberg 16*.<sup>18</sup> The latter, subtitled *An Exposé of the Evolution Industry*, is by a secular journalist. It shows how secular biologists are finding Darwinian theory so full of unresolved conceptual difficulties that they are conceding that the field is in disarray and needs a new theoretical underpinning.

But what about milder atheists—those who do not go out of their way to deny God’s existence but find that they seem to get on quite well without him? God, to them, seems irrelevant. Ironically, such atheists might provide stronger evidence for real atheism than overly reactive antitheists like Dawkins or Hitchens, who protest too much against God. Notwithstanding, milder atheists are not real atheists either. Milder atheists do not so much disbelieve in God’s existence as ignore Him. But turning your back on something or ignoring it does not make it go away, and at some level milder atheists realize that they are merely sidestepping the God question. The world has presented them with many distractions, and they are happy, for the moment, to forget God.

I have described hard-bitten atheists, who are vitriolic or even violent in their denials of God and may appropriately be called antitheists. And I have just described milder atheists, who, if pressed, will deny God’s existence but prefer simply to sidestep the God question in their daily lives. But where does that leave more thoughtful atheists such as Bertrand Russell or David Hume or A.J. Ayer or J.L. Mackie, who provide sustained critiques of theism?

<sup>15</sup>Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 31.

<sup>16</sup>Christopher Hitchens, for instance, even goes so far as to devote a whole chapter to refuting design in biology, basing his argument on Darwin and evolution. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), ch. 6.

<sup>17</sup>Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1986), 6.

<sup>18</sup>William A. Dembski and Jonathan Wells, *The Design of Life: Discovering Signs of Intelligence in Biological Systems* (Dallas: Foundation for Thought and Ethics, 2008); Stephen C. Meyer, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009); Susan Mazur, *The Altenberg 16: An Exposé of the Evolution Industry* (Berkeley: North Atlantic, 2010).

Even here, reading between the lines, I never find a fully convinced atheist. I find in them a reactivity against theism, a desire for no afterlife, a lack of peace about their position. For such reasons, I am not inclined to take them at their word.

Go back far enough in time, and atheism was a term of abuse. Go back further, and those branded as atheists were burned at the stake. It is only in recent times that atheists, in the sense of those willing to be publicly identified as denying God's existence, have felt at liberty to come out of the closet. For much of the last 60 years, Gallup polling data have shown a steady rise in atheism in the United States, starting at around two percent in 1948 and rising gradually to thirteen percent in 2009.<sup>19</sup> Although this rise is significant, the vast majority of Americans continue to eschew the label "atheist." Most Americans remain, and are happy to be called, theists. Is that good news? Let me suggest that we not pat ourselves on the back.

Whenever Richard Dawkins is interviewed on radio or television, he attempts to soften atheism by suggesting that we are all atheists about most of the gods that humans have ever worshipped—Isis, Thor, Zeus, etc.—so all he is proposing is that we get rid of one more god, the God of Christianity. He is trying to be overly clever here, but in a mistaken way he has a point. All of us, at places in our lives, forget God. All of us have acted in ways that implicitly deny God, that pretend God is not watching and that no one will hold us to account. In other words, all of us have been atheists not just about Isis and Thor and Zeus but also about the one true God.

Christian atheism may seem like an oxymoron, but, as I am using it, it is not. I have argued that there are no real atheists in the sense of people who believe deep down that there is no God. But plenty of people are willing to say that there is no God. These are the people we typically identify as atheists. Yet plenty more are willing to say that there is a God, even the Christian God, but then act as though this affirmation meant nothing. Barna polling group has found that, in category after category of moral failure, born-again Christians do no better, and in some cases worse, than atheists and agnostics.

Paul speaks to this problem in Titus 1:16. Many, according to Paul, "profess that they know God. But in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate." In Mark 7:6, Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." The language that Paul and Jesus use here is very strong. Fortunately, we serve a God of grace who gives us space to repent and return from our backslidden ways. But many never do.

Christian atheism, in which we deny God in our actions even though our lips seem to affirm him, is widespread. Consider the Barna polling data on marriage. Those who call themselves atheists and agnostics actually have,

<sup>19</sup>See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124793/This-Christmas-78-Americans-Identify-Christian.aspx> (Accessed 15 August 2011).

percentage-wise, fewer divorces than born-again Christians.<sup>20</sup> Yet, if asked, born-again Christians would say that they not only believe in God but also regard marriage as sacred. To be sure, there are legitimate grounds for dissolving marriage, but the statistics here suggest that many Christian marriages dissolve for illegitimate reasons. For a popular account of how widespread moral failure is among Christians and how our secular counterparts, statistically speaking, often do no worse in this regard, see Ron Sider's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*.<sup>21</sup> Sider is not my favorite author, but he is right that we need to do better.

The difference, then, between Christian atheists and secular atheists is this: Christians who act as though God does not exist are hypocrites because, if asked whether God exists, they will affirm that He does. On the other hand, atheists who publicly identify themselves as atheists are liars because, deep down, they know that God exists. In denying God, we can be hypocrites or liars, but we can not be real. In Daniel 5:23, Daniel tells Belshazzar, "the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified." Our very life, moment by moment, depends on God. We are made in the divine image. God is closer to us than any created thing. Sometimes we miss something not because it is too far but because it is too near. Thus, we may forget that we are wearing glasses or a hat, or that we have a nose. God's very nearness is the atheists' excuse for denying Him.

To say that God is near is not to say that God can not also be far away. God is near to each of us in that He is the source of our being—every breath we take, we take in Him. Ontologically speaking, God is as close to us as close can be. But morally speaking, God can be quite distant. Thus, when it comes to our personal relationship with God, the distance between God and us can be great. Isaiah 59:1–2 reads, "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that He will not hear." In many of the psalms, the psalmist pleads that God not be far from him. Sin puts a moral or relational distance between us and God. But it leaves untouched our ontological closeness to God.

Our challenge in confronting atheism is therefore this: to bring those who deny God to repentance and faith, thereby closing the moral gap between them and God. In the end, such moral transformation will always be the work of the Holy Spirit, who imparts God's grace to our lives and thereby leads us to salvation. But note, every act of divine grace presupposes the means of grace by which God makes that grace real to us. And that

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, The Barna Group, "Born Again Christians Just As Likely to Divorce As Are Non-Christians," 8 September 2004, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/194-born-again-christians-just-as-likely-to-divorce-as-are-non-christians> (Accessed 15 August 2011).

<sup>21</sup>Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

brings us back to the title of this paper, “How to Debate an Atheist—If You Must.” Christian apologetics, in which we not only defend Christianity from the challenges of atheism but also challenge atheism with evidence of God’s existence, is one such means of grace.

Because it is a means of divine grace, apologetics must not be dismissed as something Christians can safely ignore. Indeed, throughout the New Testament, Christians are enjoined to defend the faith through rational argument. Thus, Peter urged, “Always be ready to make your defense [*apologia*] to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15). Likewise, Paul understood his own ministry as constituting a “defense [*apologia*] and confirmation [*bebaiosis*] of the gospel” (Phil 1:7). The Greek *apologia* denotes a legal defense, and the Greek *bebaiosis* means verification or proof.<sup>22</sup>

Rational argument used to be an ally of the Christian faith. It was thought that sound arguments and powerful evidence supported the key claims of the Christian faith. If people rejected the teachings of Christianity, it was because they were not thinking clearly, and not, as is now commonly supposed, because our heads are telling us one thing and our hearts another. It is worth remembering that until 200 years ago, most people in the West saw the resurrection of Jesus in historically the same light as the other events of antiquity, such as Julius Caesar’s crossing the Rubicon. Christ’s resurrection and Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon were both regarded as equally factual and historical.

Unfortunately, in the 200 years since the Enlightenment, Christians have steadily retreated from seeing their faith as rationally compelling. Instead of being apologists for the faith, we have become apologetic about it. We tend to think that the reasons for rejecting Christianity are at least as strong as those for accepting it. After all, so many “smart” people now reject the faith. Moreover, these “smart” people have developed a veritable arsenal for dismantling the Christian faith, everything from biblical criticism, which purports to show that the Bible cannot be trusted, to advances in modern science, which purport to show that God’s role in nature is dispensable.

The Roman statesman Seneca observed, “If you want a man to keep his head when crisis comes, you must give him some training before it comes.”<sup>23</sup> Our secular culture breeds many a crisis of faith. It is common for young people who are enthusiastic about serving God to leave home, attend college, get exposed to faulty teaching, lose their heads, and turn away from the truth of Christianity.<sup>24</sup> People need to be equipped to handle the assaults on heart

<sup>22</sup>For more in this vein, see the introduction of William A. Dembski and Jay Wesley Richards, *Unapologetic Apologetics: Meeting the Challenges of Theological Studies* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

<sup>23</sup>Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell (New York: Penguin, 1969), 67.

<sup>24</sup>Frank Turek, at [Crossexamined.org](http://Crossexamined.org), tracks the loss of faith among evangelical young people who are churched throughout high school and then go off to college, only to lose their faith. He puts the incidence of loss of faith at 75 percent. Others come up with similar

and mind that they encounter at school, in the workplace, on television, and just about everywhere they look. This is why seminaries must teach apologetics, and this is why I commend Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

All that has been said in this paper till now has been stage-setting, defining the problem of atheism and noting Christian apologetics' pivotal role in redressing it. But what does all this mean practically? How, in real life, are we to engage in the debate over atheism? Atheists speak to us and we must speak to them. They attempt to convince us that no God exists. Or, more precisely, since there is good reason to think no real atheists exist, they attempt to convince us to play their atheist language games, in which we are encouraged to talk as though no God exists even though deep down we all know that He does. Atheism thus attempts to undermine theology in its most fundamental sense. The very word "theology" comes from two Greek roots: *theos*, meaning God, and *logos*, meaning speech act or word. Theology is speaking about God—God talk. Apologetics keeps theology honest by insisting it speak rightly about God. This is the task of apologetics in confronting atheism, to preserve sound Christian theology.

I have debated many atheists over the years—one-on-one, in small groups, before large audiences, via radio and television, and on the Internet. Atheists raise four main challenges against Christian theism: the challenge of science, the challenge of history, the challenge of evil, and the challenge of divine presence. With regard to science, evolution is supposed to show that no intelligence was required to build biological organisms, thus rendering God unnecessary. With regard to history, biblical criticism is supposed to show that the Bible is replete with fanciful tales, thereby ruling out key events in salvation history such as the resurrection of Christ. With regard to evil, the existence of a good, all-powerful God is supposed to be incompatible with the existence of evil in the world. And finally, with regard to divine presence: Where is God? If God is the primary fact of reality, why is it so hard to see him? Why is it so hard to discern his presence?

The challenges of science, history, and evil, though serious, have in my view been answered successfully by Christian apologists. A good first place to look is a recent anthology entitled *Evidence for God*.<sup>25</sup> Anyone with a serious interest in Christian apologetics will have reflected at length on these three challenges in the course of their study. I want, therefore, to focus in what remains of this paper on the fourth challenge, which concerns divine presence. This, to me, is the greatest stumbling block for atheists, and the one that keeps them entrenched in their atheism. This challenge often fails to be

numbers (usually between 70 and 80 percent). See, for instance, Ken Ham, Britt Beemer, and Todd Hillard, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* (Green Forest, AR: Master, 2009).

<sup>25</sup>William A. Dembski and Michael R. Licona, *Evidence for God: 50 Arguments for Faith from the Bible, History, Philosophy, and Science* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010). For the problem of evil, see my *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009).

articulated, so it is worth exploring even with expert apologists (such as the presumed readers of this paper).

To understand the challenge of divine presence, consider some remarks by Richard Dawkins regarding his visit to Lourdes as seen in his 2006 BBC production *The Root of All Evil?* Lourdes is a Catholic shrine in France where many pilgrims claim to have received miraculous physical healing. Dawkins denies that any miracles of healing have in fact ever occurred at Lourdes. What is interesting is how he denies the miraculous at Lourdes. He finds at Lourdes many crutches left behind by people who claim to have been healed of infirmities in their legs. This, it would seem, ought to provide some evidence (even if inconclusive) of miraculous healing and thus of a divine (or at least supernatural) presence at Lourdes. But not for Dawkins. Following the nineteenth century French atheist Anatole France, Dawkins asks why only crutches were left behind but not wooden legs.

Many have asked this same question. Indeed, an entire website with domain name [whywontgodhealamputees.com](http://whywontgodhealamputees.com) is devoted to it. On this website, one reads,

Does god heal amputees? The Bible clearly promises that God answers prayers. For example, in Mark 11:24 Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." And billions of Christians believe these promises. You can find thousands of books, magazine articles and websites talking about the power of prayer. According to believers, God is answering millions of their prayers every day. So what should happen if we pray to God to restore amputated limbs? Clearly, if God is real, limbs should regenerate through prayer. In reality, they do not. Why not? Because God is imaginary.<sup>26</sup>

Though mistaken in its conclusion, this statement raises an interesting point about the obviousness of divine action in the world. Even in the ministry of Jesus, we find no persons with missing limbs or missing body parts who get them miraculously replaced. In every instance, however diseased or misshapen, what Jesus heals is there already.

Since all things are possible with God, why does He not make Himself more obvious, as in restoring limbs to amputees? And since He does not make Himself more obvious, is not [whywontgodhealamputees.com](http://whywontgodhealamputees.com) right in concluding that God does not exist at all? What are we to make of this challenge? The problem is that obviousness is not an adequate criterion of divine presence. We can see this by going back to France's original criticism of the miraculous at Lourdes. Many contemporary atheists, in citing France, suggest that if miracles at Lourdes were real, we would see not just crutches but

<sup>26</sup>See <http://whywontgodhealamputees.com/important.htm> (Accessed 15 August 2011).

also wooden legs. Yet France considered what would happen if we actually did find wooden legs at Lourdes. He wrote:

Happening to be at Lourdes, in August, I paid a visit to the grotto where innumerable crutches were hung up in token of a cure. My companion pointed to these trophies of the sick-room and hospital ward, and whispered in my ear: "One wooden leg would be more to the point." It was the word of a man of sense; but speaking philosophically, the wooden leg would be no whit more convincing than a crutch. If an observer of a genuinely scientific spirit were called upon to verify that a man's leg, after amputation, had suddenly grown again as before, whether in a miraculous pool or anywhere else, he would not cry: "Lo! a miracle." He would say this: "An observation, so far unique, points us to a presumption that under conditions still undetermined, the tissues of a human leg have the property of reorganizing themselves like a crab's or lobster's claws and a lizard's tail, but much more rapidly. Here we have a fact of nature in apparent contradiction with several other facts of the like sort. The contradiction arises from our ignorance, and clearly shows that the science of animal physiology must be reconstituted, or to speak more accurately, that it has never yet been properly constituted."<sup>27</sup>

This is an amazing statement and one that contemporary atheists rarely quote in full (I have not found it at [whywontgodhealamputees.com](http://whywontgodhealamputees.com)). It shows that no evidence could ever get a hardcore atheist to admit that God exists. In every case, atheists will cite the possibility of alternative naturalistic explanations. Indeed, even if no such explanation is on hand, they will rationalize that no actual miracle has occurred, simply asserting that we are ignorant of the underlying naturalistic causes. Their faith in the power of nature knows no bounds.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the miracles that atheists often claim would lead them to acknowledge God, if they were to happen, would still not engender faith.

<sup>27</sup>Anatole France, *The Garden of Epicurus*, trans. Alfred Allinson (New York: John Lane, 1908), 176–77.

<sup>28</sup>Note that France's appeal to naturalistic explanations in this passage is not methodological. He is not saying that the method of science requires naturalistic explanations, and thus if we should see an amputee with a restored limb, science would necessarily be required to continue seeking naturalistic explanations because that is just the nature of scientific inquiry. Such an approach would allow the possibility of miracles, simply removing them from the purview of science. France's appeal to naturalistic explanations is much stronger. He is saying that if we should see an amputee with a restored limb, there would have to exist an explanation consistent with a naturalistic understanding of science. He is thus committed to nature operating by unbroken natural causes even if he is ignorant of their precise character. Accordingly, France is endorsing a metaphysical and not merely a methodological naturalism. For more on this distinction and why even this weaker form of naturalism (i.e., methodological naturalism) is unwise, see Johnson, *Reason in the Balance*.

Indeed, how could such events engender faith? The atheist will constantly move the bar higher and higher. As soon as God renders his presence more obvious, it will not be obvious enough—a new level of obviousness will be required. Signs and wonders indicating the divine presence are addictive. Witness the children of Israel in the desert after leaving Egypt. They experienced all the obviousness of divine presence one could ever desire, and still they failed to trust God. That is why, when the Pharisees demanded of Jesus a sign from heaven, Jesus refused to give it (Mark 8:11).

In Luke 16, Jesus tells of a rich man who ends up in Hades and wants desperately to spare his brothers that same fate. If only someone will rise from the dead and appear to his brothers, urging them to repent, this rich man pleads, then they will get their acts together and escape the torments he is now experiencing. What is the response to the rich man's plea? Luke 16:31, the final verse of the story, reads: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." Perhaps that's why Jesus only appeared to 500 of his followers after his resurrection and not to the Pharisees, Sadducees, and mob that had him killed.

I've often mused why, in the wisdom of God, Jesus' resurrection occurred before the advent of video-recording technology. Would it not be great if we could have a video of Jesus' resurrection and his post-resurrection appearances? In fact, with Photoshop, animation software, and video-editing, anyone can be made to rise from the dead—at least so it could be made to appear. We may be on surer ground believing the Resurrection on the basis of eyewitness testimony by disciples who gave their lives for holding that testimony than on the basis of video-recording technology.

But surely, a flamboyant enough miracle would convince even the most hardened atheist of God's existence, would it not? Consider the miracle that would have convinced the atheist philosopher Norwood Russell Hanson to become a theist:

Suppose, however, next Tuesday morning, just after breakfast, all of us in this one world are knocked to our knees by a percussive and ear-shattering thunderclap. Snow swirls, leaves drop from trees, the earth heaves and buckles, buildings topple and towers tumble. The sky is ablaze with an eerie silvery light, and just then, as all of the people of this world look up, the heavens open, and the clouds pull apart, revealing an unbelievably radiant and immense Zeus-like figure towering over us like a hundred Everests. He frowns darkly as lightning plays over the features of his Michelangeloid face, and then he points down, *at me*, and explains for every man, woman and child to hear: "I've had quite enough of your too-clever logic chopping and word-watching in matters

of theology. Be assured N.R. Hanson, that I do most certainly exist!"<sup>29</sup>

Would that do it? Could God, if He fulfilled requests like Hanson's, turn all of us into compulsory theists? Hanson is asking God to prove Himself by becoming a special-effects artist. But special effects can never purchase theism. Fallen humanity is insatiable. Give us one special effect and we will need another even more dazzling to maintain our interest. We imagine that we would believe if only we could see something dazzling enough. What sort of God would this be who uses spectacle to convince us that He exists?

Certainly, a being who could perform Hanson's miracle would be smarter and stronger than we are. But would such a being be the transcendent God of Christian theism? Occam's razor, that principle of parsimony in science that advises us to go with the simplest explanation that adequately accounts for some phenomenon, would suggest that we explain Hanson's miracle by looking not to the Christian God but to technologically advanced aliens who enjoy subjecting lesser civilizations to cosmic freak shows. As with Anatole France, who would not be convinced of God even if amputees had their limbs restored, even Hanson would, I submit, backpedal and deny the Christian God if he witnessed a flamboyant miracle.

In this vein, consider Jesus' response to the Pharisees when asked about the coming of the Kingdom of God. In Luke 17:20–21 we read: "And when he [Jesus] was demanded of the Pharisees when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." Because we are made in the image of God, God is closer than close to each of us. We commune with God not through created intermediaries but through the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who is God himself, who woos and admonishes the unbeliever, and who is the most precious gift of every follower of Christ. All miracles involve manipulations of created material things. To the unregenerate heart, these can never, by themselves, lead to God. Only God can lead to God.

That said, a key means of grace by which God leads to God is apologetics. Thus, in debating atheists, we must learn as much as we can about the challenges atheists raise against Christian theism and learn what are the best

<sup>29</sup>N.R. Hanson, *What I Do Not Believe and Other Essays*, ed. S. Toulmin and H. Woolf (New York: Springer, 1971), 313–14. Hanson apparently drew inspiration for this challenge from David Hume, in whose *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1989), 37, he has Cleanthes remark: "Suppose, therefore, that an articulate voice were heard in the clouds, much louder and more melodious than any which human art could ever reach: Suppose, that this voice were extended in the same instant over all nations, and spoke to each nation in its own language and dialect: Suppose, that the words delivered not only contain a just sense and meaning, but convey some instruction altogether worthy of a benevolent Being, superior to mankind: Could you possibly hesitate a moment concerning the cause of this voice? and must you not instantly ascribe it to some design or purpose?"

apologetic arguments in reply.<sup>30</sup> We also need to sharpen our critical thinking and rhetorical skills, using all legitimate means at our disposal to advance the truth of God's Kingdom. But we must do so in love. It is vital ever to bear in mind that the problem with atheism is not the head but the heart. "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God."

God has already given atheists all that they need to believe in Him—if only their hearts did not lead them astray. God therefore refuses to indulge in flamboyant displays—signs and wonders—to convince atheists of his existence. It is a truism of counseling psychology that the presenting problem is never the real problem. The various challenges that atheists raise against Christian theism are, in the end, not the real problem. Instead, the real problem is that atheists have, for whatever reason, chosen to deny God and, short of God's grace acting on their lives, are looking for excuses to continue to deny God.

Our attitude as Christian apologists in debating atheists needs, therefore, to follow Paul's example in 2 Timothy 2:24–26:

The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.

May God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, grant us the grace to take these words to heart so that as we engage atheists with the truth of God's Word, they encounter not only the wisdom of God but also the love of God. Amen.

<sup>30</sup>For a thorough account of key apologetic arguments supporting Christian theism, I recommend Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011).