

Suggestions For Christians Debating With Atheists

In this post I want to consider ten subjects that are relevant for discussions between Christians and atheists (and including some suggestions for the Christians involved in such discussions), namely:

1. The Need for God with respect to morality.
2. Empirical evidence for the existence of God.
3. The Christian's moral status and the New Birth.
4. The thinking of a consistent atheist regarding morality.
5. God and the fact of evil.
6. The Atonement.
7. Complaints against the "unfairness" of the Christians' God regarding people who died having never heard of Jesus.
8. Creationism via Evolution.
9. The Holy Trinity.
10. Encouraging the atheist to convert to Christianity.

1. The Need For God With Respect To Morality

Occasionally the Christian will call upon the atheist to prove there is no God. Very commonly, and quite rightly, the atheist retort is to remind everyone that a negative cannot be proven, and so just as it is impossible to prove the non-existence of fairies and goblins, etc., even so is it with God. But, the atheist will continue, that certainly does not give you any more reason to think that God exists than fairies do. However here the Christian can reply in this manner: it is true that we cannot prove the existence or non-existence of fairies, but there is also *no reason* to even try to prove any existence of such creatures, i.e., there is no need. And indeed it would be the same with God except for this: there is a need for God, the moral need.

First of all, and as a sort of analogy, we will consider here two cases in current science which justify the use of "need" to posit an existence even though there is no visible evidence, namely: the need in astrophysics for dark matter and energy to account for the present state of the universe, and also the need for a multiverse to rationalize the Big Bang as a possibility. We will now consider these two needs.

Dark matter and energy.

The universe is not only expanding, but is even [accelerating in its expansion](#), and yet there is no evidence to account for and explain this acceleration (nor for the [excessive speed of spin](#) discovered with the galaxies). Due to a need for an explanation astrophysics has come up with a hypothesis of a [dark matter](#) and a dark energy which are invisible to us. By means of these hypotheses the expansion of the universe and the spin of the galaxies can be explained and understood, and the mathematical models can hold.

Multiverse.

If the Big Bang were slowing down and expected to collapse back on itself in order to produce another Big Bang, then Big Bangs would be going on forever (in a yo-yo fashion) and there would be no problem with regard to expectations regarding intelligent life, for, even though almost impossibly rare, it would still be bound to happen now and then. But since the universe is expanding and even *accelerating* in that expansion, our Big Bang is singular and thus there is a need in astrophysics for a *multiverse* to provide an expected outcome such as our own universe.

According to this hypothesis there are countless Big Bangs taking place in different universes such that in some of them (and ours happens to be one of those) intelligent life would be expected. Again: no evidence, but still a *need*, and to satisfy that need astrophysics asserts the existence of multiple Big Bangs.*

* See [Our Big Bang--Fixed Or Fair](#).

The Need for God.

Now, as we indicated briefly above, there is also a need for the existence of God, namely the *moral* need; for as Immanuel Kant has definitively shown in his [Critique of Practical Reason](#),* without God there is no meaning to the Highest Good and, accordingly, no meaning to the moral law as a component of that. Thus without God the term “moral” would have no more meaning than the “uh” that we so commonly sprinkle our speech with. And so unless we want to live in a world where there is no objective meaning to the moral law and thus no objective way to make judgements about good and evil, it is necessary to accept the existence of God and to live according to a meaningful and objective moral law, a law which alone provides dignity to all rational creatures including all humans. Thus just as astrophysics has a need for dark energy and matter and an expectation of our Big Bang via a multiverse and asserts both accordingly, even so the moral makeup of the human has a need for the reality of God, and the Christian asserts this reality with a logic similar to that of the scientists.**

* [Dialectic, Section V](#) of Kant's Critique Of Practical Reason (beginning on or near page 161).

** See [Sagan and Kant](#) (especially the section on Kantian Analysis and Treatment) for a brief presentation of how Kant justifies our acceptance of God via this moral need. Essentially a human knows *how* to be moral without God, but could not grasp *why* to be moral. There is an inevitable conflict between morality and the desire for happiness which can only be reconciled via the Highest Good, which calls for immortality to attain (or at least to approach) moral perfection *and* a commensurate happiness, and for a God to provide that happiness.

2. Empirical Evidence for the Existence of God

With respect to evidence of the truth of the Christians' gospel, a change takes place in the sincere converts to the Christian faith such that they are becoming more loving in a natural and reflexive

way. And accordingly there is actual and personal evidence of the Christians' God in that the Christian experience provides what the gospel promises. And this is consistent with the assertion of William James' [The Will To Believe Section IX](#) where, for example, if we want people to be friendly with us, we can't just wait for that to happen, but must step out and begin by being friendly with them. Likewise those who convert to Christianity will find evidence of the truth of the Christian message in experience, but this experience is not possible except through living the gospel message in active faith. (See Moral Status Of A Christian And The New Birth in section 3 below.)

Additionally there is good evidence in the New Testament for the Resurrection of Christ. The Resurrection story caused such a commotion that if Jesus' body were still in the tomb the Jewish authorities (including a fervent opponent of Jesus, Saul of Tarsus) would have produced the body in order to silence the disciples. Also the disciples, who were thoroughly disillusioned and downcast, suddenly changed and risked and gave their lives in testimony of the truth of the Resurrection, hardly to be expected for those knowing it to be a fraud. And then the testimony of Paul (the former enemy named Saul) is quite credible. And the written reports of the early Christians, and especially of Paul, were produced during the lives of people familiar with the events of that time and these reports would have been contradicted if the story were not true.*

* And regarding such evidence see especially the essay by [Philip Vander Elst](#) (listed also below in the further resources) as to the validity of the reports of the New Testament.

Thus there is considerable empirical evidence for the truth of the Christian gospel.

3. Moral Status Of A Christian And The New Birth

Very often in discussions between atheists and Christians, the Christians will assert that "atheists have no reason to be moral in the absence of God," and then the atheists will often respond with: "if the only reason you are being moral is because you fear punishment or expect reward by your God, you are deplorable and not a really moral person at all. We atheists can act morally without regard to any God."

Following is a response by this Wesleyan Christian.

Aspects of Christian Faith and Living

An important consideration for the edification of the atheist, especially concerning Wesleyan Christian thinking (among that of many other Christians), would be to admit that a person might originally enter into the Christian faith out of fear of punishment or hope of reward, but then, as a result of the conversion, comes to experience the New Birth where eternal life is counted as obtained, and all moral and loving acts ensue from a New Nature which excludes all calculations concerning condemnation or reward* (and this relates to the Empirical Evidence For The Existence Of God section immediately above). This New Nature is often expressed by the Wesleyan as: "while I am far from perfect, I am not as far as once I was; and I am on the way." John Wesley put it this way: "what the gospel promises has been accomplished in my soul." In other words I have the experience (given sufficient time) that I have changed and that I am

becoming more loving in a natural and reflexive way. And this experience is in addition to, and a confirmation of, the gospel message.

* This assurance does not constitute any sort of license for lawless conduct, for, as Wesley stated: "I am saved from the *fear*, though not from the *possibility*, of a fall from grace."

As a result then of the conversion, Wesleyan Christians *act in reflection* of their New Nature and not in order to manipulate God into any sort of favor.

4. The Thinking Of A Consistent Atheist Regarding Morality

It might also be helpful for Christians in conversation with atheists to try to put themselves in the place of an atheist with respect to the moral, e.g., "It's very difficult for me to imagine how I would actually act absent a belief in God. In the first place I would have to try to thoroughly grasp that in the materialist, atheist world people will have no more *objective* value than roaches or mailboxes, i.e., we would all be nothing more than clouds of dancing atoms which will eventually dissipate and blend in with thin air.

"Once I might fully grasp this I could then start thinking and acting like an atheist. The moral makeup of atheists can be pictured as a spectrum ranging from a rational, logical and consistent atheist at the one end, i.e., the 'bold' atheist (a la [Ted Bundy](#),* for example) who rejects all concern for any alleged morality (except possibly for public show and animal pity,** and who would want, of course, to be very careful about any unlawful activity out of fear of the police); to, at the other end, what might be called the 'timid' or 'mild' atheist who realizes (like all thinking atheists) that there is no objective meaning to morality or dignity, and yet (unlike the bold atheist) goes on living morally anyway, at least for the most part and perhaps due to some animal pity or just due to habit (perhaps from having been reared in a theist culture) or by following Stephen Uhl's '[Golden Rule of Enlightened Selfishness](#).' I imagine presently that if I were an atheist I would be a timid one and would act in accordance with the feelings of animal pity. However, if I had an opportunity to safely and profitably cheat someone for whom I might have no feelings of pity*** and especially if that someone would not suffer much from being cheated, I suspect that I, as an intelligent and consistent atheist, would be strongly moved to do the cheat and in that case act like the bold atheist.

* I know of no one who expresses the atheist "moral sense" better than this [Ted Bundy](#), the notorious serial rapist and murderer.

** Animal pity will encompass the feelings that most people have when they witness the mistreatment of helpless people, and also of animals which are close to humans, e.g., cats, dogs, horses, etc. It will encompass also feelings of compassion.

*** See [Sagan and Kant on Atheism and Morality](#).

"Again all this is sheer speculation for I really have no idea what sort of atheist I would be. In any case I know that as an atheist I would no longer have any basis for condemning another person, e.g., Hitler, for immoral actions, for absent God the term 'immoral' would no longer have

any objective meaning. It would be like asserting that chocolate ice cream tastes better than vanilla, i.e., a matter of personal taste. Indeed, actions undertaken in accordance with the moral law would constitute a sheer vanity."

5. God And The Fact Of Evil

Here we first need to consider what evil is, namely a moral depravity. According to what was just established at the end of the preceding section, atheists have no standard by which to make moral judgments (except as "echos" of theists or for public show) and so for whom the term "moral depravity" would just be meaningless prattle. For them the holocaust should be something on the moral level of a massive storm destroying all the trees in a large forest, i.e., a natural occurrence and of no more moral significance than the blowing wind. But since the Christian does have a legitimate and objective meaning for the term we must take on the atheist's challenge in this regard and respond, namely: it is very common for the atheist to assert that the God of the Christians is either unable to deal with evil or unwilling to do so, and which contradicts the Christians' assertion that God is omnipotent and loving.

Response by this Wesleyan Christian

The approach to this challenge might go like this: God has already acted to eliminate evil in the world, and has done so in a way which is consistent with the freedom conveyed by God to the human (such that the humans are not simply herded like frightened or disciplined cattle). Taking a cue from Gandhi,* we can be assured that God has given the humans the answers to all the problems that can ever arise (including the holocaust and any other evil), but has done so in a fragmented way such that every person has a bit of the answer and where there must be cooperation and spontaneous sharing to find the complete answers. But humans are reluctant to *share*, preferring rather to *sell* in a market.** This free sharing is very much what Jesus seeks with his Gospel, sharing rather than selling, and serving rather than dominating and this is the primary way that God has chosen to deal with evil, by calling for a conversion which results in the New Birth, and then acting per universal love and not in pursuit of gain.***

* This is presumably per [Gandhi's take on Matthew's gospel](#) story.

** This may be a very good indicator of an "original sin" which continues to plague the human race.

*** Instead of monetary gain, and consistent with the human proclivity for competition which promotes greater production, the recognition of achievers could be in the form of awards and trophies and praise, not unlike what motivates many high school and college sports teams and players. See [Lin and the organization of cooperative competition](#).

Part of this answer was formulated by the ingenious John Rawls, namely: since talents are dispersed randomly, all talents actually belong to the species and not to the individual. Accordingly all persons must be aided by society to discover their talents and then are to be given sufficient means to develop these to the fullest. For example, a composer like Beethoven will need a quieter place of work than most of the population, and should be given that . . . but no

more than that, i.e., no more than what is needed to be content and productive. See [Alma Deutscher](#).

This solution to the problem of evil is also suggested by the authoritative earliest Christian society where the church nearest Jesus in terms of time and spirit undertook to live according to a [Christian socialism](#) which works toward the elimination of injustice and inequality and abuse and all factors leading to hatred and mutual destruction.*

* See this New York Times article about [early church communalism](#). And certainly the Christian marriage is a model for a communal society, i.e., each giving according to talent and receiving according to need. And this more recent article concerning the American bishop's sermon at the [wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan](#).

In a word: evil, including that of the holocaust, can be eliminated and avoided by all humans becoming "new creatures" in Christ and acting accordingly and sincerely, e.g., in loving and spontaneous and non-calculating sharing on a worldwide basis whereby then the foundations of evil are eliminated, and where all people are looked upon as family. Kant in his thesis on [Religion Within The Bounds Of Sheer Reason](#) (Sentence 8.4 of the General Remarks to Part I) asserted that no one can reasonably expect God to do what the humans can also do on their own.

6. The Atonement

A common complaint of the atheist concerning Christian thinking is the atonement. "Why and how," the atheist questions, "does the execution of an innocent person pay for the sins of a guilty person? That hardly seems right or just."

A suggested response from the Christian goes like this, "There is another justification for this atonement, namely: Jesus needed to die in order to show his disciples what he meant by a New Nature and how to obtain it. The disciples had spent several years under his guidance and teaching, but they continued to try to 'lord it over each other' and simply could not grasp the meaning of Jesus' words. In this way, by dying on the cross and being resurrected on the third day, Jesus could finally convey the meaning of, and need for, a new spirit (and not just words to be argued about), and the disciples could understand and convert in confidence and receive the Holy Spirit and start living and loving the way Jesus did, and go out in his name and teach and convert others. Without this death the disciples would never have caught on to what Jesus was about, and without the resurrection which assured the disciples of the truth of Jesus' message and the promise of conversion, his death would have been futile." See also [Kant's Religion Within The Bounds Of Sheer Reason](#), Part II., First Section, C, Par. 5. Closely associated with this is [Jesus Without A Stenographer](#).

7. Complaints Against The "Unfairness" Of The Christians' God Regarding People Who Never Heard Of Jesus

There is an understandable objection by many, Christians and atheists alike, to the assertion that people who never heard of Jesus, and hence could not have accepted him so as to follow him in his way, would be assigned to hell. Here are five speculations for overcoming this objection,

speculations which are based on the reported character of God, especially God's compassion and justice. The first four will apply to people only to the extent that the Gospel and an opportunity for conversion have not been clearly presented to them.

Conversion in Hell per C. S. Lewis

Here people who are in hell (which, according to Lewis, is a place very similar to earth and populated by ghosts of people who are sinful and selfish) are encouraged to hear a message of redemption and who can comply with a provided assistance, and thus leave hell and enter heaven. According to Lewis the only people/ghosts who remain in hell are those who choose to. For more on this see "[The Great Divorce](#)" by C. S. Lewis. And see also (again) the essay by [Philip Vander Elst](#) concerning the influence of C. S. Lewis on him as an atheist before his conversion to Christianity.

Conversion while dying.

According to this theory, in the fleeting moments before death all people, who have never heard about Jesus nor clearly understood him, are presented (in a dream-like state) with the story and invitation of Jesus and who can then choose to comply with that and thus attain heaven, or refuse to do so and end up in hell. This incorporates the notion of a "slowdown of time" for a proper and sufficient presentation. This would be similar to the opportunity of Mozart's [Don Giovanni](#) in his dying moments

Reincarnation to hear the message of Jesus.

In the Christian scripture of Hebrews we learned that people are "appointed to die once." This might be interpreted to mean that a final and true death does not arise until people have been born into a situation where they clearly learn of the story of Jesus and understand him, and have the opportunity of accepting or rejecting him. This would be a tie-in with the Hindu and Buddhist thinking of rebirths.

Not guilty of voluntary faults.

According to Pope Pius IX: "Those who are hampered by invincible ignorance about our Holy Religion, and, keeping the natural law, with its commands that are written by God in every human heart, and being ready to obey him, live honorably and uprightly, can, with the power of Divine light and grace helping them, attain eternal life. For God, who clearly sees, searches out, and knows the minds, hearts, thoughts, and dispositions of all, in his great goodness and mercy does not by any means suffer a man to be punished with eternal torments, who is not guilty of voluntary faults."

Annihilation by person choice.

Here people who never accepted Jesus and who die in a state of sin (and thus are unfit for heaven) would have the option of spending eternity in hell or of being totally annihilated. This

would be similar to the "The Great Divorce" approach first above in that there is a way out of hell, and it would depend upon the choosing of the individual.

8. Creationism via Evolution

God sets off the Big Bang to result in a world which is "very good" ([Genesis 1:31](#)). After the human species had developed far enough, God (via [prevenient grace](#)) inserts the feeling of moral respect in all humans. Before this they were just advanced animals, and now they could conceive of the moral law and respond to it (as well as invent musical instruments, compose music and be thrilled by it, among a host of other things.). All humans initially fell from innocence into sin and with a proclivity to violate the moral law when convenient.* To overcome this proclivity [Jesus was sent into the world to make disciples](#). The purpose of evolution (as opposed to an instantaneous creation**) was to present a problem for the humans to solve. The end result of the solution of this problem, as well as the decoding of the mysteries of the universe, is for the humans eventually to fashion and produce a world free of fear and suffering, not only for the humans but for all of creation.***

* Immanuel Kant has observed that when the humans first understand the moral law, they realize that they have already violated it. (Citation?)

** According to some [recent research](#) this evolution may be faster than we have thought.

*** This reasoning was much influenced by C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* as cited in [The Language of God](#) by [Francis Collins](#). See also [Alma Deutscher in a society where talents belong to all](#), and [God's Left-hand Joke](#) for how homosexuality is useful in balancing needs and resources. See also this article in *The Christian Century* entitled [Evolutionary science meets evangelical faith](#), how teachers are helping students accept science without losing their religion.

9. The Holy Trinity

The Christian may well expect the subject of the Holy Trinity to arise with an assertion that it is totally absurd, namely three persons-in-one. A good approach might be to utilize the reality of space as an analogy.

There is a single, all-encompassing space which embodies three distinct dimensions, i.e., width, length and height,* each of which epitomizes the entire, single space, but all of which are still different. Likewise the Christians' Holy Trinity is a single Godhead which embodies three distinct Persons, i.e., Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each of Whom epitomizes the entire, single Godhead, but all of Whom are still different. Accordingly space can serve as an analogy for the Holy Trinity. Moreover while space itself is invisible, we can still see things *in* space. And likewise while the Holy Spirit is invisible, we can spy actions which *represent* the work of that Spirit through the hearts of Christians.**

* Relative to a person's body there would be width extending to one's left and right; and length extending in front of and behind; and height extending from below the floor that the person is standing on to above that floor.

** This paragraph is essentially a copy of a posting on the [Trinity](#).

In a related regard we might consider one member of the Christians' Holy Trinity, namely Jesus, and here we can draw on an analogy with light. According to quantum mechanics light is at one and the same time both [fully a particle and fully a wave](#) (and not just partly one and partly the other, and which in scientific parlance is called a duality). In Michael Guillen's book *Amazing Truths* (Chapter 3) this fact serves very well as an analogy for the Christians' assertion of Jesus as fully human and fully divine. Such an assertion concerning Jesus as a duality may be a contradiction or paradox logically, but conceptually is no more absurd than this duality of light, an established fact of quantum science. (And this does fit well with the Christian notion of Jesus as "[the light of the world](#)."*)

* Here is my personal speculation as to how such a dual nature might work, and in this regard we can take a cue from the Hindu notion of reincarnation: when God the Son is incarnated as human (Jesus), he gives up all prior recollection (of his divinity) just as the Hindu soul, upon its reincarnation, loses all memory of a past life. Accordingly then Jesus, as reported in the Christians' scriptures, speaks not from knowledge, but from faith and then from the ensuing experience (e.g., his word makes water into wine), but which experience alone is not sufficient for perfect knowledge of his divine nature,** but only to strengthen his faith as a human. It is only upon the Resurrection that Jesus unifies his memory to include the divine and the human. So before his birth Jesus is only divine, and from the birth to the resurrection Jesus is only human (speaking here of consciousness), while since the resurrection Jesus is both fully human and fully divine (again speaking here of consciousness), i.e., a duality.

** In the Jewish context of his time, Jesus will not have been able to infer and recognize his own divinity from these reported miracles because many of the prophets of old, who were not divine, were said to also have worked miracles on occasion.

10. Encouraging The Atheist To Convert To Christianity

Following are some considerations for the Christian to present for consideration when the atheist may be mulling about the strength of the Christian appeal (and some of which have already been cited above):

[Multiverse](#) This is a comparison of the faith of Christians in God with the faith of scientists with respect to the Big Bang, and where a belief in God is no more daring than a belief in a multiverse. This was presented also in No. 1 above

[Sagan and Kant on Morality](#) The moral law arises via human rationality and independently of any notion of God, but can only be rationalized, i.e., provided with a purpose, by means of the concept of the Highest Good, i.e., immortality (to achieve to individual, moral perfection and

obtain commensurate happiness), and also God (to compel nature to provide the happiness called for by that moral perfection). See also the related and very explicit exposition of the license belonging to the *bold* atheist entitled: Imagined [Lectures at an Atheist Youth Camp](#).

[Rational Religion](#) In Paragraph 8 of the General Remarks to Part I Kant indicates that the Christian religion is the "only moral religion in human history." This can serve as a guide to any atheist who is wondering which religion he or she might want to convert to.

[Christian Liberty](#) Here is a quick rundown on the liberty of the Christian, and includes a unity of principles of action of St. Paul and the modern Christian, and how any differences between the two are based on different understandings of what is helpful and hurtful, what is medicine and what is poison. Also see: [The Golden Rule-A Proxy For Scripture](#), Constitution for a Community of Sovereigns. Related to, and prompted by, and expanding on this, is a post on [St. Paul and the Identification of Heterosexuals and Homosexuals](#). In this regard see also [God's Left-hand Joke](#).

Hebrew Scriptures. I find it helpful not to get involved with discussions about some of the brutality which is occasionally cited in the Hebrew scriptures and which atheists will often bring up. My justification is that these older scriptures serve the Christian primarily in understanding the worldview of Jesus' environment and the context of his speech and actions. Any defense of these episodes I leave to the rabbis and scholars of these scriptures. This view (independence of Christian thinking from ancient scriptures) is maintained by [Matthew 7:12](#) where Jesus informs us that the Golden Rule "is the Law and the Prophets," thus encompassing most of the meaning of the Jewish scriptures in a single rule. And a confirmation of the primacy of Christian teachings in this regard is given in [John 5:1-18](#) where we see that no alleged command of God from anywhere may be interpreted by a Christian to inhibit an immediate act of love.

[From Atheism To Christianity: A Personal Journey](#), an essay by Philip Vander Elst concerning his conversion to Christianity and with special reference to the influence of C. S. Lewis in making this move.

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