

# ANSWERING ATHEIST SLOGANS *(SECOND EDITION)*

*HOW TO RESPOND TO 11 SKEPTICAL  
SLOGANS IN CONVERSATION*

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# INTRODUCTION

You probably believe Santa Claus is real. Or that the earth is flat.

If you believe in God, then you must be a superstitious ignoramus. This is the common assessment of internet atheists and some of the new atheists.

One might wonder how this persists in the face of a lot of intelligent religious people (e.g. William Lane Craig). Well, the new atheists are not entirely wrong for thinking religious believers suffer from shallow, naive thinking. Believers must share the blame.

A lot of Catholic Christians cannot give reasons for the hope that is within them. They have not learned to support their worldview with reasons and evidence. Rather, they are told to “just have faith” when they raise difficulties in Sunday school, private school, on retreats, or in Bible studies.

Don't get me wrong. It's a good thing to have faith in God. But you also want to have *good reasons* and *evidence* to share if you're ever asked about your beliefs.

The “just have faith” tactic sets up Catholic Christians for complete and utter failure when they encounter objections to the faith in college and adult life.

Objections saturate the world today. In the age of the internet, infidel and new-atheist websites provide people with mountains of quick information.

In a matter of seconds, they can Google a topic and find loads of objections. They can quickly silence Catholics with a list of grievances against their religion, especially if the believers are unprepared.

At *classicaltheism.com*, I aim to equip believers to defend their ideas in conversation. This eBook is a first step to improve your abilities to talk to skeptics with confidence. Clear and critical thinking provides the antidote to shallow thinking.

While an overabundance of information sits at our fingertips, most people remember slogans and sound bytes. They are inundated with small snippets of information presented in a clever way (e.g. memes).

Atheists are no different. Some atheists are experts in religion and philosophy. But you won't meet many of those. Most man-on-the-street atheists have never been exposed to a thoroughly explained, rational system of religious belief (such as one explained by St. Thomas Aquinas). Rather, they know the slogans.

Here you will learn to answer the popular slogans. By preparing to answer these, you provide great value to yourself and other believers.

Three reasons come to mind as to why mastering this material matters:

- 1) Slogans are often the most popular objections you will hear. By preparing answers, you can be confident in your ability to handle most objections.
- 2) Many believers get nervous in conversations with skeptics (myself included!). Having "go-to responses" to 11 slogans will calm your nerves, allowing you to counter atheistic ideas thoughtfully and charitably.
- 3) Sometimes an atheist or skeptic will challenge you in front of a group. By responding to the challenges with poise, you help build up the faith and confidence of other believers around you.

In each chapter, we examine a slogan and discuss how to answer it in conversation. For more direct information on conversation tactics, I recommend my free [Jumpstart Guide](#). The main tactic referenced throughout this eBook is what I call the #1 thing: **To Ask Questions Rather Than Make Statements**.

Never make a statement, at least initially, when a question can do the job. The person asking questions maintains control of the conversation and can steer it in a calm manner. Also, while it's often nerve-racking to *answer* questions, it's not nearly as difficult to *ask* one and listen to the answer.

With these introductory matters under our belt, it's time for the main event. Expect to emerge from this eBook prepared to topple 11 atheist slogans.

***Note:*** *Some of this material comes from my blog at [www.classicaltheism.com](http://www.classicaltheism.com). Check it out for more info on defending Catholic Christian ideas in conversation.*

# Chapter 1

## There Is No Evidence for God's Existence

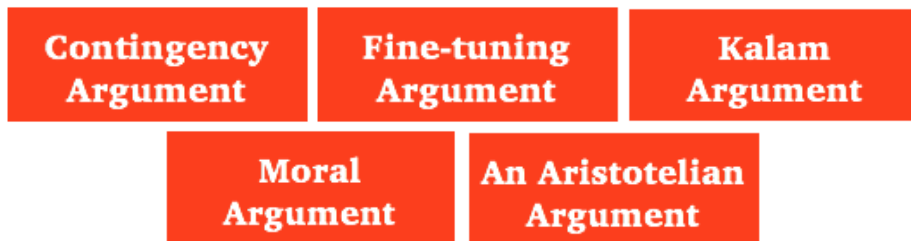
*There is just no evidence for God's existence. Religious people have blind faith in what they've been told to believe. They were brainwashed at an early age. Atheists demand evidence for claims; they are logical and rational. Sadly, religious believers are not.*

Have you ever heard a diatribe like this? How would you reply? If you've studied the issue, you may be thinking:

- There are many good arguments for God's existence.
- There are many intelligent people who believe in God.

Those replies are correct. Frankly, the atheist should know better. While the internet made it easy for new atheists to promote material, it also provided a simple avenue to learn *lots of evidence* for God's existence.

Consider these 5 links to videos arguing for the existence of God. Most of them are just a few minutes long and contain premises that are easy to memorize.



Despite the truth of those replies (the bullet points above), I prefer to respond with a simple question. I learned this one from Catholic Apologist Trent Horn. If someone proclaims, "There's no evidence for God's existence," I respond:

- **That's interesting you say there is no evidence. I'm curious, what's the best evidence for God that you've heard and what's wrong with it?**

By asking a tactical question, you're off the hot seat immediately. That's the power of asking questions rather than making statements.



Instead, if you launched into a 5-minute diatribe on the goodness, truth, and beauty of Catholicism, you fail to gain any information from the atheist and open yourself up to further attack. Any claims you make during that diatribe can be dissected and criticized. Also, it's nerve-racking not knowing what the unbeliever thinks of all your claims.

Keep it simple. Stick to Trent Horn's question. Memorize it. Here it is again:

- **I'm curious, what's the best evidence for God that you've heard and what's wrong with it?**

Next, recognize that the atheist can answer in three different ways.

A1: They have never heard any evidence.

A2: They have heard some evidence, but it is weak.

A3: They have heard some strong evidence, yet they point to a mistake in the reasoning.

In all likelihood, they will respond with no evidence (A1) or weak evidence (A2). In both of those cases, affirm their skepticism based on such evidence (or lack thereof), and offer something more for their consideration (e.g. the Kalam, Aristotelian, or Contingency argument).<sup>1</sup>

I would say:

- **You know, I'd have to agree with you. That support for God's existence is pretty weak, but there are stronger philosophical arguments out there. Have you ever heard of the Kalam or Contingency argument? Would you mind if I shared them? I find them to be good reasons to think God exists.**

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix D for a defense of an Aristotelian Argument for God's existence.

Naturally, you must *prepare* to offer these arguments well (see [the 3 P's](#)). But by following [the #1 thing](#), you find out more information about the atheist. You answered his slogan and moved the exchange to an intelligent conversation.

Of course, the atheist may respond with strong evidence he heard and assert a mistake in the reasoning (A3). This atheist or skeptic did his homework, and you should commend that! Moreover, you can reply to his objection, provided that you have done *your* homework. You could say:

- **That's a good point and shows that you have been looking into this issue seriously. Have you ever considered \_\_\_\_\_? [insert a resolution to the issue he raised]**

If you have not studied his objection and don't know how an answer, grant him the point with a promissory note. Let him know you'll look into it and get back to him. Intellectual honesty breeds better discussions.

### Chapter Summary

Slogan: There is no evidence for God's existence.

Your Response:

- 1) Ask: What's the best evidence for God that you've heard and what's wrong with it?
- 2) Prepare answers to the A1, A2, and A3 responses.

Suggested Resource: [On Guard](#) by William Lane Craig

# CHAPTER 2

## I BELIEVE IN ONE LESS (OR FEWER<sup>2</sup>) GOD THAN YOU DO

Some popular atheists register the objection like this:

*You do not believe in 2999 other Gods like Zeus, Thor, or Krishna. You should be reasonable and take that logic one step further. I follow the pattern to it's logical conclusion. I'm an atheist, and I believe in ONE LESS God than you do.*

Atheist comedian Ricky Gervais deployed this argument in [an interview](#) with Stephen Colbert in 2017. Lawrence Krauss made a similar point in [his debate with William Lane Craig](#).

### ANSWERING THE POINT

Greg Koukl suggests the following reply, "Yes, I believe in one less God and that makes all the difference. That is what makes you an atheist and me a theist." That's a good start.

Also, the fact that the atheist disbelieves 2999 other deities is not evidence that the 3000th is also worthy of disbelief. That might follow if all gods share an equal likelihood of existence. But the atheist provides no defense for this claim in his brief statement of the slogan.

The underlying assumption that all gods share an equal likelihood of existence gives the quip its rhetorical force. However, this assumption is precisely what any theist would deny. If there are good reasons to think that God (with a capital G) exists, it means little that we don't believe in gods of ancient mythology.

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<sup>2</sup> While atheists often formulate the objection as "one less God," someone pointed out on Facebook that the grammatically correct formulation is "one fewer God."

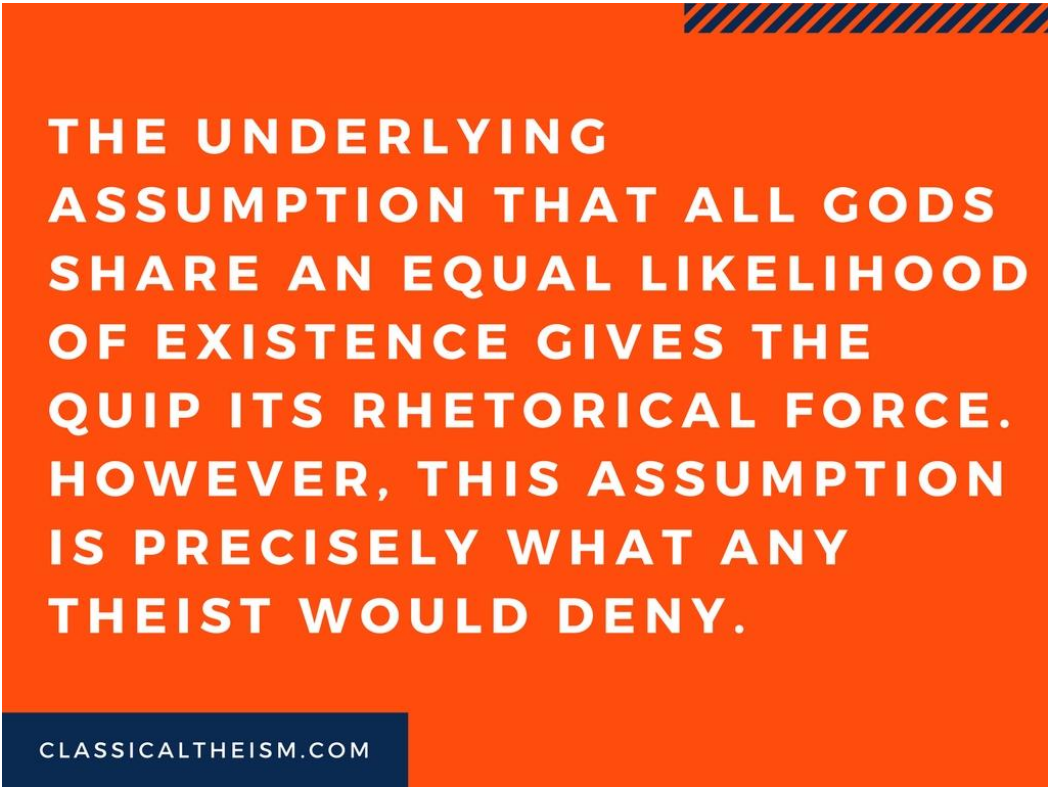


## AN EFFECTIVE ILLUSTRATION

Consider this scenario. There is a robbery during a parade. Someone stole a young woman's diamonds. Law enforcement searches through the crowd for suspects. So far, they have no good reason to think any one of thousands of potential suspects is the thief.

The police later find the diamonds in the hands of a man named Sal. One detective thinks Sal is the thief. Another officer is skeptical. The skeptic explains, "You searched the crowd for thousands of potential suspects, and you found no evidence that any one of them is guilty. I just believe in one less suspect than you do." Is this a helpful reply? Clearly not.

It's obvious that new information gave the detective a good reason to think Sal is the thief. Unless the skeptical officer provides justification for discarding the evidence, his skeptical objection consists of mere hand-waving. Similarly, the I-believe-in-one-less-God-than-you-do objection shows nothing for or against the existence of God on its own.



**THE UNDERLYING  
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HOWEVER, THIS ASSUMPTION  
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THEIST WOULD DENY.**

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## BROADENING THE POINT

Suppose the skeptical detective does not merely believe *this* suspect is innocent. Rather, he thinks that because thousands of other potential suspects were shown to be innocent, *there is no thief at all*. Why is this position absurd? It denies what we clearly know: someone stole the diamonds. It is much more reasonable to think *there is a thief* even if one has falsified thousands of other potential thieves.

Now, draw a parallel between the stolen diamonds and the beginning of the universe, the contingency of the universe, the existence of objective moral values and duties, and the fine-tuning of the universe for intelligent life, and other facts that point to the existence of God (just as diamonds point to the existence of a thief).

In the face of such evidence, it is much more reasonable to think *there is a God*, even if one has falsified thousands of other potential gods. Of course, the atheist will not accept this evidence without detailed explanation.

We have answered the atheist. The slogan provides no reason to reject classical theism, since there are *good reasons* to think God exists, even if there are also good reasons to reject the gods of ancient mythology.

### Chapter Summary

**Slogan:** You don't believe in hundreds of gods. I believe in one less (or fewer) god than you do.

**Your Response:**

- 1) Ask: Do you think all gods share an equal likelihood of existence? If so, why?
- 2) Prepare to share the *parade thief* illustration.

**Suggested Resource:** [20 Answers – Atheism](#) by Matt Fradd

# CHAPTER 3

## I DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD; I BELIEVE IN SCIENCE

Ever heard this one? Here's another version.

*As someone enlightened by science and modern technology, I can't bring myself to believe in God and old-fashioned superstition. People used to believe in gods that caused lightning and other natural phenomena until science gave us the real answers.*

In both cases, the unbeliever asserts an incompatibility between believing in God and believing in science. Several points could be made in response:

- Bacon, Copernicus, Newton, Pascal, Maxwell, Mendel, Pasteur, and Lemaître all believed in God.
- Modern science supports premises in philosophical arguments for God's existence (e.g. the [Kalam argument](#) and the [fine-tuning argument](#)).
- Science depends on philosophical presuppositions that support premises in philosophical arguments for God's existence (e.g. the *principle of sufficient reason* supports the [contingency argument](#)).
- Science depends on philosophical presuppositions that fit well with a theistic worldview and do not fit well with an atheistic worldview (e.g. rationality and ethical standards, as explained in [this talk](#) by Dr. James Anderson).

However, just because those points *could be made* does not mean they *should be made*. My advice: hold off on ALL of those points until you're clear on what the objection actually is. Instead, employ the tactic of asking questions.

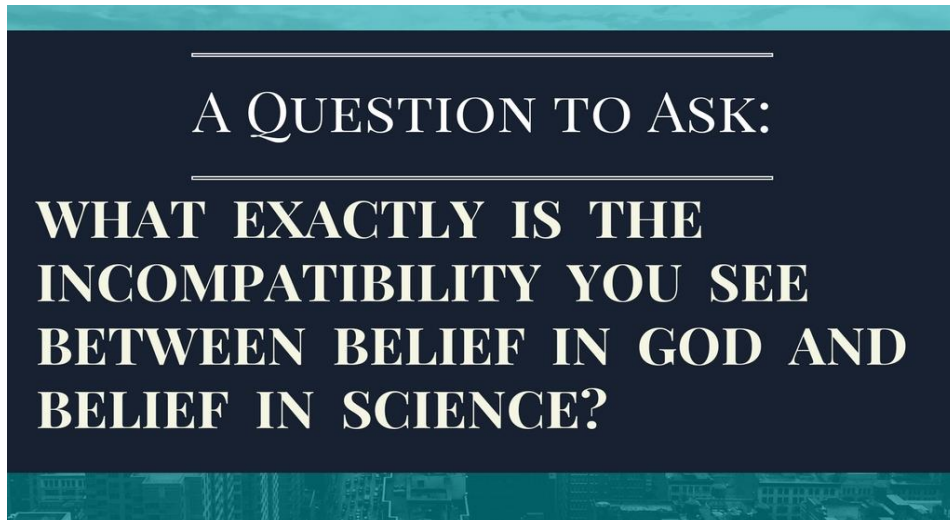
Here's one you could use.

- **That's an interesting claim. What exactly is the incompatibility you see between belief in God and belief in science?**

Here's another.

- **Interesting, but what would you say to someone who believes in God and is also a practicing scientist? Ken Miller<sup>3</sup> for example.**

This takes you off the hot seat. It gives the other person time to reveal precisely what troubles them. What *exactly* is the incompatibility they see between belief in God and belief in Science?



### **Specific Objections**

Once they explain the incompatibility they have in mind, aim to defuse the problem. Three of the most common objections are as follows:

1. Evolution shows God is not required to explain complex life.
2. Science shows that miracles don't happen and can't happen.
3. Science is the only way to truth, and there is no scientific evidence that God exists.

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Miller is a well-known evolutionary biologist. He is also a Catholic.

A quick examination of those objections reveals that they don't actually show any incompatibility between believing in God and believing in science.

Brief reply to 1: God could have used evolution. This objection gives no reason to think one can't believe in God and the theory of evolution *simultaneously*.

Brief reply to 2: *How* does science show that miracles don't happen and can't happen? If God exists, then miracles are possible. This seems obvious. The God who created the laws of nature can suspend them as He wishes. Also, what experiment (or scientific literature) shows that miracles don't happen? Unless the critic can cite chapter and verse on this, the claim that miracles don't happen is question begging.

Brief reply to 3: This is a version of *scientism*. One way to defang the objection is to ask, "Is it *true* that science is the only way to truth?" If yes, then there needs to be some *scientific evidence* that supports that claim. It's hard to imagine what that would even look like. What experiment could show that science is the only way we come to know truth? Moreover, there are truths of logic, mathematics, and ethics that we come to understand apart from the scientific method. For a complete takedown of scientism, see chapter 0 of [Scholastic Metaphysics](#) by Edward Feser.

## Chapter Summary

**Slogan:** I Don't Believe in God; I Believe in Science.

**Your Response:**

- 1) Ask: What precisely is the incompatibility between believing in God and believing in science
- 2) Prepare answers to the 3 common replies.

**Suggested Resource:** [Where the Conflict Really Lies](#) by Alvin Plantinga

# CHAPTER 4

## WHERE IS GOD? HAVE YOU EVER SEEN HIM? NO!

This slogan presupposes a finite, limited conception of God rather than the traditional God of classical theism. In other words, God is not like superman with even more cool superpowers. God is not a creature inside the universe. He is the timeless, immaterial, necessary, creator and sustainer of all that exists at every moment that it exists.

He does not fit into our finite categories. We cannot comprehend his essence in the sense of acquiring a full and adequate understanding of Him. We cannot feel what it's like to be in God's shoes, because the divine nature is vastly and fundamentally different from ours.

So, *where is God?* That's not a question that can be answered with a location.

*Look! There he is! Hovering above the Eiffel tower!* That's a silly thing to say. Whatever hovers over the Eiffel tower is not God *himself*, since it will be finite and limited in its act of hovering and appearing to our senses.

### A Helpful Illustration

Here's a good analogy to use. I'm borrowing from a blog article by Dr. Edward Feser (see the suggested resource at the end of this chapter). Suppose you're examining a painting of a crowd of people like in the *Where's Waldo* books.

A skeptic says, "I hear you think this was done by a painter. Where is this painter? Have you ever seen him? Of course not, because he isn't real!"

The skeptic continues, "Listen, I've studied this painting *extremely* carefully, and I haven't found evidence of any painter."

It would be silly to tell the skeptic, "Maybe you just haven't looked hard enough. If we examine this painting under the microscope we might find evidence of the painter. Maybe we need to look at the molecular level. Or if we send it out to a laboratory, they might be able to test for the presence of a painter!"



Why is this reply silly? Because analyzing the painting empirically and scientifically is not going to answer the question. The painter is not something to be found inside the painting at the microscopic or sub-molecular level. Rather, he is the necessary creator of the painting itself.

The existence of the painting *itself* cries out for the existence of a painter. Similarly, the existence of creation cries out for the existence of God. The cosmological argument, in its various forms, proceeds along these lines. See chapter 1 for links to the *Kalam* version, the *contingency* version, or an *Aristotelian* version.



### **But What About Jesus?**

In one sense, Catholic Christians can point to Jesus as the answer to, “Where is God?” We believe God entered the world 2000 years ago, took on a human nature, was crucified, died, and was buried. We also believe He rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven. God left His unique mark in first century Palestine through the miracles performed by Jesus.

For an accessible, inexpensive defense of the resurrection of Jesus on historical grounds, check out [Did Jesus Rise from the Dead](#) by William Lane Craig.

Nonetheless, even if God never entered the world in the person of Jesus, we would still have good reasons to believe He exists. Not being able to see Him with our eyes is not a good reason to disbelieve something whose nature is that it cannot be seen with our eyes.

### **Chapter Summary**

**Slogan:** Where is God? Have you ever seen him? No!

**Your Response:**

- 1) Ask: If you're looking at the *Mona Lisa*, where is the painter?
- 2) Prepare to discuss the painter analogy.
- 3) Prepare to discuss Jesus and his resurrection.

**Suggested Resource:** [Where's God](#) – article by Dr. Edward Feser

# CHAPTER 5

## AQUINAS HAS BEEN THOROUGHLY REFUTED

Maybe your college friend said this. Perhaps even a professor. It's not uncommon to hear such an assertion thrown out there. I use it to illustrate this idea: *you don't need to rebut phantom arguments.*

A *phantom argument* is a reference to an argument without substance, specificity, or clarity. It's hardly an argument at all. It is often an appeal to authority. Usually *phantom authorities*. The word phantom aptly describes it; trying to grasp the argument is like trying to catch a phantom.

Here are some more examples of phantom arguments:

- You know William Lane Craig's arguments have been debunked right?<sup>4</sup>
- Modern philosophers refuted Aristotle. No one today considers his views a live option.

These arguments consist of hand waving. Don't waste energy refuting them, because there is nothing to refute. How should you respond in conversation? Greg Koukl suggests something along the following lines.

### *Mock Discussion*

**You:** I find Aquinas's argument from motion to be quite convincing. Would you like to hear it?

**Objector:** Nice try, but Aquinas has been thoroughly refuted.

**You:** What if I told you that Aquinas scholars have refuted all of the refutations?

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<sup>4</sup> New atheist and biologist Jerry Coyne used this very slogan (i.e. *You know William Lane Craig has been refuted by scholars, right?*) [when I commented](#) on his website.

*End of Mock Discussion.*

By gesturing at *your own phantom argument*, you highlight the problem with the objector's. Hopefully, he realizes the need for substance and specifics. If he doesn't, switch to asking questions:

**You:** Interesting, who has refuted him and what was their argument?

Or here's another alternative.

**You:** Can you tell me what precisely is wrong with St. Thomas's arguments?

When entering discussions on tough topics, [be polite](#). But don't let the atheist get away with hand waving. Let alone hand waving the entire Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition! Or the entire history of western thought!

### **The Reality**

For the truth about Aquinas, [read Edward Feser](#). He *thoroughly defends* the following two ideas.

- Aquinas has been widely misunderstood.
- Much of his thought, including his arguments for God's existence, is eminently defensible today.

Most people fail to refute Aquinas because they fail to get Aquinas right. Feser provides the much-needed antidote.

### **Chapter Summary**

**Slogan:** Aquinas has been thoroughly refuted.

**Your Response:**

- 1) Ask: What if I told you Aquinas scholars have refuted all the refutations?
- 2) Ask: What precisely does Aquinas get wrong?

**Suggested Resource:** [Aquinas](#) by Edward Feser

# Chapter 6

## Religious Belief Is Irrational, Childish, Wishful Thinking, a Crutch, and the Opiate of the Masses

I lump these objections into one, because they can be dealt with in a similar fashion. Note that famous atheists espouse these slogans. Karl Marx quipped that religion is “the opiate of the masses.” Sigmund Freud promoted the idea that “belief is wishful thinking.” And the new atheists are quick to dismiss belief in God as irrational or childish.

The key response is this: none of these objections amount to showing the falsehood of belief in God. They attempt to highlight a deficiency in religious belief, but if the belief is *correct*, the deficiencies evaporate.

Consider the idea that “belief is wishful thinking.” If the belief is true, it is not *mere* wishful thinking. Moreover, on a Catholic Christian worldview, God might create human beings with a proclivity (or built-in mechanism) to wish for Him. After all, knowing God in the beatific vision is the chief end of man.

NONE OF THESE OBJECTIONS AMOUNT TO SHOWING THE FALSEHOOD OF BELIEF IN GOD. THEY ATTEMPT TO HIGHLIGHT A DEFICIENCY IN RELIGIOUS BELIEF, BUT IF THE BELIEF IS CORRECT, THE DEFICIENCIES EVAPORATE.



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Next, consider the idea that religion is “the opiate of the masses.” Again, if belief in God is *true*, this quip has no force. God may have created human beings to live in religious communities, and worship Him in large numbers.

What about the idea that religion is a crutch? Crutches aid those who are injured. If God exists, then He is the crutch we need to lean on in troubled times, and He will help us overcome the difficulties of this world. Again, if atheism is true, we can see the force of “religion is a crutch,” but if the God of classical theism exists, the objection has no force.

Lastly, the irrational and childish objection needs to be spelled out. What does the objector mean when he says belief is *childish*? Or *irrational*? He probably has the *there-is-no-evidence-for-God* objection in mind. Ask him and find out.

The atheist must explain *why* belief in God is irrational or childish. His explanation will constitute the actual objection. The *childish* and *irrational* labels simply add to the polemical nature of the slogan.

In his great little book *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, Alvin Plantinga distinguishes what he calls *de jure* and *de facto* objections to Christian belief. This chapter (in my eBook) deals entirely with *de jure* objections. *De jure* objections purport to show that belief in God is in some way defective (e.g. irrational, childish, wishful thinking), but not necessarily that the belief is false.

*De facto* objections attempt to show that belief in God is false, or conversely, that atheism is true. What I have illustrated here is a principle defended by Plantinga in detail: **There is no *de jure* objection that is independent of the *de facto* objection.**

In other words, labelling Christians as crowd-following, childish, wishful-thinking people does not show that Christian belief is false. The atheist must be taken to task and assume his burden of proof. He needs a *de facto* objection that shows belief in God is false. Otherwise, all of his objections turn out to be consistent with Christianity being true.

In the next chapter, we consider a very famous *de facto* objection.



## **Chapter Summary**

**Slogan:** Belief in God is irrational, childish, wishful thinking, a crutch, or the opiate of the masses.

**Your Response:**

- 1) Ask: Why do you think religious belief is irrational or childish?
- 2) Explain how *de jure* objections cannot decide the issue.

**Suggested Resource:** [Knowledge and Christian Belief](#)  
by Alvin Plantinga

# CHAPTER 7

## EVERYONE WHO WALKS INTO A CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL KNOWS THERE IS NO GOD

This slogan refers to the *problem of evil and suffering*, which theologians have discussed for centuries. I devote more space to this objection because (1) it is very widespread and (2) there are several distinctions that need to be made to offer a proper reply.

### Part 1

The problem of evil and suffering gives many believers pause. They are stumped when a [popular atheist objects](#): *Anyone who walks into a children's hospital knows there is no god.*

Of course, that's a false claim. Some people who walk into a children's hospital very well might have a firm belief in God. But let's fill in the missing premises of the argument.

Anyone who walks into a children's hospital may see terminally sick children suffering. A good God would not want children to suffer, and an all-powerful God could cure them. Moreover, a good, all-powerful God would indeed cure them. Yet, many die uncured. Therefore, a good, all-powerful God does not exist.

Essentially, that formulation offers nothing new. It goes back to Epicurus, who famously said:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

Catholic Christians can answer Epicurus, and others who raise this objection. But, *how we go about answering* is of critical importance.

## BEGINNING TO ANSWER

When facing the problem of evil and suffering, one should situate the problem appropriately. First, recognize that Christians, Muslims, Jews, and others have spilled a lot of ink on this question over the years. You don't need to know everything that's ever been said. Yet, you will need to know some big points.

First, find out what precisely the objector thinks. Never make the mistake of launching into verbose explanations without situating the problem. They might scream at you, "Where was God when my sister died of cancer at the age of 15!" Spewing eloquent explanations in return can only make that scene worse. Pause and take a breath.

No matter how strong they come on, follow this two-prong approach:

- Pray for the person silently. Something like this is good, "Jesus, have mercy on this son/daughter of yours and bring them into a deeper loving relationship with you."
- Ask follow up questions to frame the problem.

## FRAMING THE PROBLEM

Evil and suffering present problems to people in different ways. Is it an *intellectual* problem or an *emotional* problem the person is dealing with? This key distinction should drive the discussion.

Grief over particular cases of evil mark the *emotional* problem of evil. The person may reveal horrible encounters with suffering that left him feeling deeply sad or betrayed. Philosophical reasons for believing in a Good God cannot ease the pain of thinking that God, if He exists, has turned his back on this person. They may not rule out God, though they may indeed do so. They seem to rule out trusting in a God who has allowed such evil and suffering.

Skepticism or bewilderment about how someone can believe in God's goodness in the face of grim evils in the world often reveals an *intellectual* problem. This unbeliever finds the Catholic Christian's belief in a Good God rationally deficient.

However, this person does not display obvious discomfort or tell of any personal pains that led to this conclusion.

If it is an *emotional* problem, apologetics and philosophical arguments are probably not the answer. Instead, express your sorrow for the individual's woes, prayer for him or her, and ask God to demonstrate His Goodness in that person's life. In the future, you may speak again about issues related to God, Evil, and Suffering. If you feel it's appropriate, share some of your own struggles.

Always distinguish the *intellectual* problem from the *emotional* problem before delving deeper into discussion.

## THE INTELLECTUAL PROBLEM

After detecting the *intellectual* problem, make another distinction. Find out if your friend deems evil and suffering to be a *logical* problem or an *evidential* problem for God's existence. They may not know these terms. Explain them clearly, and ask the person what they believe.

The Logical Problem of Evil: God and evil are logically incompatible. Since evil and suffering exist, it is *not possible* that God exists. Is that what you believe?

The Evidential Problem of Evil: Evil provides evidence that God does not exist, but it does not show that it is impossible that God exists. It is *unlikely* that God exists given the evil and suffering we see. Is that what you believe?

By situating the problem and asking questions, you take yourself off the hot seat again. Moreover, you require the objector to clearly explain what they think. Only after this is done should offer counter-considerations. If possible, continue to use [the #1 thing](#) and ask questions rather than make statements.

## A FEW MORE POINTS

In the next part, I will say more on how to answer the logical problem and the evidential problem. Here, I offer a few brief, initial remarks.

- Many atheist and agnostic philosophers have abandoned the logical problem of evil. They do not think they can defend it. If the logical problem of evil fails, then it's possible that God exists along with evil and suffering in the world.
- The proponent of the evidential problem will struggle to demonstrate the *unlikelihood* of God's existence due to evil and suffering. They will attempt to mount a probabilistic. In the background of the probabilistic case lurks the logical possibility of God's existence and the evidence for God's existence. This places a heavy burden on the proponent of the evidential problem of evil to demonstrate that is *truly is unlikely* that God exists.

### Part 2

In [part 1](#), we examined how to situate the problem of evil in conversation. While we can pray and empathize when people face the emotional problem of evil, we want to have answers when they raise the intellectual problem.

Recall two subdivisions of the intellectual problem: the *logical* problem of evil and the *evidential* problem of evil. Proponents of the logical problem argue that evil and suffering prove God cannot possibly exist. God and evil are strictly incompatible.

Proponents of the evidential problem argue that evil and suffering demonstrate the unlikelihood of God's existence. Given the evil we observe, they say, we probably inhabit a godless universe.

With these ideas in mind, let's answer the challenge.

## THE LOGICAL PROBLEM

Those pressing the logical problem of evil need to show it is *impossible* that God exists given the evil and suffering in the world. Many scholars have abandoned this view. Alvin Plantinga [reports](#):

At present, however, it is widely conceded that there is nothing like straightforward contradiction or necessary falsehood in the joint affirmation of God and evil; the existence of evil is not logically incompatible (even in the broadly logical sense) with the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good God.

[Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, p. 117]

Why exactly have they abandoned the logical problem? Recall the famous Epicurean formulation:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.  
Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.  
Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?  
Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

We can reformulate the argument as follows:

1. An all-powerful God has the ability to prevent all evil and suffering.
2. A good God would always want to prevent evil and suffering.
3. Yet, evil and suffering are perennially present in our world.
4. Therefore, a good, all-powerful God cannot exist.

Proponents of the logical problem often appeal to disturbing examples of extreme evil to strengthen their case. While those examples might tug at our emotions, they do not improve the logic. It happens that (2) is false: a good God may not always want to prevent evil and suffering. Most important, the atheist discounts a missing premise.



## A MISSING PREMISE

The argument ignores a key premise that many Catholic Christians hold dear:

(5) God has morally sufficient reasons for the evil and suffering in our world.

For the logical problem of evil to succeed, it must be shown that (5) is false. In other words, that God *cannot possibly* have morally sufficient reasons for the evil and suffering in our world.

While atheists might reply, "Oh yeah, what's the reason for this or that terribly tragedy? Catholic Christians can respond as Timothy Keller does [here](#):

Just because you can't see or imagine a good reason why God might allow something doesn't mean there can't be one.

[\[Keller, \*The Reason for God\*, p. 23\]](#)

By pointing out it is *possible* for God, evil, and suffering to coexist, the believer evades the logical problem. If the unbeliever still maintains that God and evil are strictly incompatible, he needs an argument for this. How does he know that? How does he know it's impossible for an all-powerful, good God to have morally sufficient reasons for the evil and suffering in our world? This burden of proof has never been met.

## CONCLUSIONS

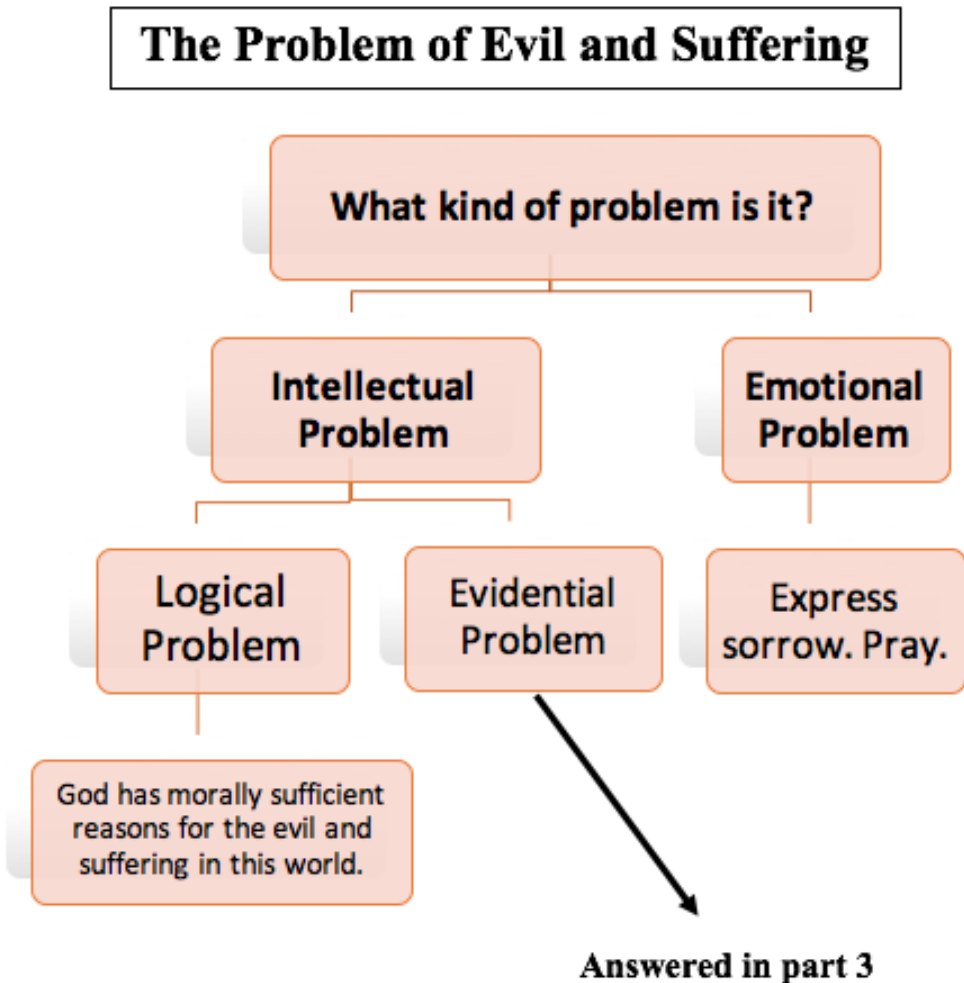
Catholic philosopher Edward Feser sums up the situation well in [this blog article](#):

[I have argued](#) that the existence of even the worst evils gives us absolutely no reason whatsoever to doubt the existence and goodness of the God of classical theism. In that sense the problem of evil poses no *intellectual* difficulty for theism. But [I have also insisted](#) that evil poses an enormous *practical* difficulty, because while we can know with certainty [that God has a reason for allowing the evil He does](#), we are very often simply not in a position to know *what* that reason is in this or that particular case.

Feser continues:

We can know some of the general ways in which good can be drawn out of evil – our free choices have a significance that they would not have otherwise; we can make of our sufferings an opportunity for penance for the sins we have committed; we are able to develop moral virtues such as patience, gratitude, courage, compassion, and so forth – but we cannot expect always to know why this specific child was allowed to be raped and murdered or that specific village was allowed to be destroyed by an earthquake.

In the following flow chart, I summarize our responses thus far:



## Part 3

In [part 1](#), we examined how to situate the problem of evil in conversation. In [part 2](#), we answered the logical problem of evil. We saw that the logical version poses no threat whatsoever to the existence of the God of classical theism.

Paul Draper, an agnostic scholar, says that “theists face no serious logical problem of evil” (*Pain and pleasure: An evidential problem for theists*, 1989). J.L. Mackie, a famous atheist philosopher, said that “the problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically consistent with one another” (*The Miracle of Theism: Arguments for and against the existence of God*, 1982). [Both citations taken from [Answering Atheism](#) by Trent Horn, p. 87.]

In part 3, we shift our focus to the evidential problem of evil.

### **THE EVIDENTIAL PROBLEM OF EVIL**

Proponents of the evidential problem hold that some evils make it highly unlikely that a good God exists. Some formulate the argument like this:

- (1) If pointless evils exist, then God does not exist.
- (2) Pointless evils do exist.
- (3) Therefore, God does not exist.

The atheist argues probabilistically for premise (2) i.e. pointless evils *probably* do exist. This leads to the conclusion: therefore, God *probably* does not exist.

As you may expect, the argument hinges on premise (2). What evidence supports the atheist’s claim that pointless evils exist? Usually, the skeptic presents various instances of terrible evil, and then concludes that the evils are clearly pointless.

For example, an out of control forest fire burns dozens of helpless deer to death. A tsunami wipes out half the population of a particular island. A 5 year-old dies after a painful bout with cancer.

The reality of gut-wrenching evil assists the atheist in making this argument. We theists cannot deny that terrible evil exists. However, when having a discussion about the intellectual problem, we must press the atheist with a question.

## THE KEY QUESTION

**How do you know those evils are probably pointless?** The typical answer is that they just seem to us to be pointless, and we cannot think of good reasons for allowing them. However, it does not follow from those considerations that the evils are *truly pointless*.

God very well may have morally sufficient reasons for the evil in the world. If He does, then the evils are not pointless. So, it turns out that the question of pointless evil depends on whether God exists or not.

If God does not exist, then there clearly are pointless evils. If God does exist, then pointing to *seemingly pointless* evils does not show they are *actually pointless*. This suffices to show that the probabilistic problem of evil *on its own* fails to provide a good reason to think God does not exist.

## OUR FINITE LIMITATIONS

The [butterfly effect](#) refers to the concept that small things in the present lead to enormous effects in the long run. To take a simplistic example: A butterfly flapping its wings might change the weather pattern on a battlefield which changes the outcome of a war and changes the course of human history for the next 100 years.

[Chaos theory](#), a branch of mathematics, focuses on analyzing such behavior. Again, the main point: one small change ripples through time, leading to future effects of extraordinary magnitude.

How does this relate to the evidential problem of evil?

Human beings cannot see the future. Heck, human beings cannot even see the present. We are largely ignorant of what happens in 99.9% of the world on a daily basis. We don't know the ins and outs of how a mere dozen of our neighbors impact the world. Assessing all of the causal influences and effects of over seven billion people is a hopeless endeavor.

Since we cannot even fully comprehend the present, and we are entirely ignorant of the future, we are in no position to render judgments about the *pointless* nature of evils. This does not prove there are pointless evils are a myth, but it does demonstrate that we simply are in no position to judge if evils are truly pointless.

For example, suppose a house catches fire in the middle of the night, killing a newborn baby and her parents. To us, this appears a pointless evil. However, our limited epistemic situation prevents us from assessing all of the effects and influences of this event. As William Lane Craig notes:

The brutal murder of an innocent man or a child's dying of leukemia could produce a sort of ripple effect through history such that God's morally sufficient reason for permitting it might not emerge until centuries later and perhaps in another land. When you think of God's providence over the whole of history, I think you can see how hopeless it is for limited observers to speculate on the probability that God could have a morally sufficient reason for permitting a certain evil. We're just not in a good position to assess such probabilities. [[Reasonablefaith.org](http://Reasonablefaith.org), see [this article](#)]

## WRAPPING UP

We have situated the problem of evil and answered it (see the complete flow chart below). Nonetheless, Catholic Christians must recognize that although we can answer the intellectual problems surrounding evil, the *practical* problem of real pain and suffering deeply disturbs many.

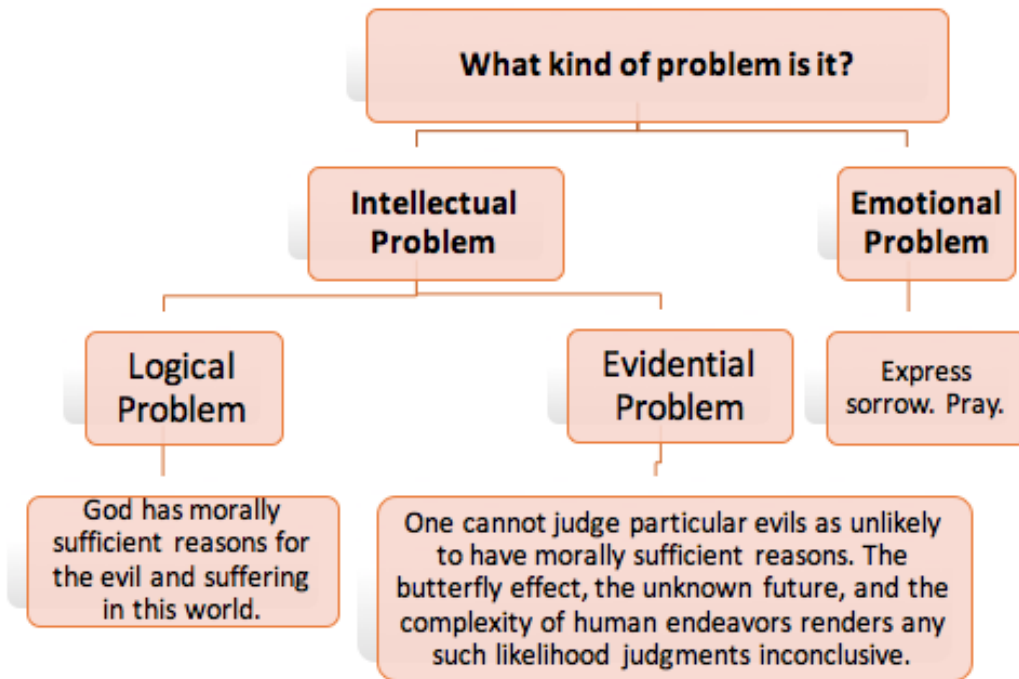
Yet, I contend that the Catholic Christian worldview provides the antidote for those haunted by pain and misery. I develop and defend this claim in other places on my blog.<sup>5</sup> For now, you have plenty of ammo to answer this slogan in conversation.

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<sup>5</sup> [Here](#) I show how Catholic Christianity fits better with evil than atheism does.

This flow chart gives a summary of the replies laid out in this chapter.

## The Problem of Evil and Suffering



### Chapter Summary

**Slogan:** *Anyone who walks into a children's hospital knows there is no God.*

#### **Your Response:**

- 1) Ask: Are you coming at evil as an intellectual problem or are you struggling with some personal problem of suffering in your life?
- 2) Ask: Do you consider evil to be a logical problem or evidential problem for theists? (Explain the terms as necessary)
- 3) Prepare replies using the ideas and illustrations from this chapter.

#### **Suggested Resources:**

1. [On Guard](#) by William Lane Craig (All levels)
2. [The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil](#) by Brian Davies (Advanced)
  - See [this post](#) for my full review of Davies' book.

# CHAPTER 8

## ABSENCE OF EVIDENCE IS EVIDENCE OF ABSENCE

This is a more sophisticated sounding version of the objection that there is no evidence for God's existence, which we debunked in chapter one. However, the atheist likely has some illustrations up his sleeve.

### ***Illustration #1 - Cancer***

If we suspect someone might have cancer, we run scientific tests. Suppose the doctors do several tests and screenings and fail to find any evidence that the patient has cancer. Of course, this does not prove with 100% absolute certainty that there is no cancer lurking somewhere. However, the rational thing to believe is that the patient is cancer free. In other words, *the absence of evidence is evidence of absence*.

*Our Reply:* In this case, absence of evidence is evidence of absence. However, the illustration allows us to clarify why. William Lane Craig points out two conditions that must be met for absence of evidence to be evidence of absence:

- 1) We have thoroughly searched for evidence in all appropriate areas.
- 2) We would expect to have more evidence than we do.

In the case of the doctors testing for cancer, both conditions are satisfied. They conducted thorough testing where they thought the cancer could be, and if there were any cancer, we would expect it to show up on the tests.

The atheist must show these conditions are met in his search for God if he wants the slogan to hold weight. In other words:

- 1) He has fully canvassed the appropriate area, inspecting arguments for God's existence carefully and rationally rejecting them.
- 2) We would expect to have more evidence if in fact God exists.

After explaining the two conditions, you should ask the atheist the Trent Horn question: **What's the best evidence you've heard for God and what's wrong with it?** This gives the atheist a chance to establish the first condition. However, if he fails to put forth any legitimate evidence, or the argument is falsely represented, you can correct him and the first condition is not met.

I contend that the atheist will fail to meet condition (1), because the evidence for God's existence and Jesus' resurrection is very good. However, to have a productive, successful discussion you will need to study this evidence deeply.

What can we say about condition (2)? Well, in order for this condition to be met we would need to expect more evidence than the *Kalam argument*, the *contingency argument*, the *moral argument*, the *fine-tuning argument*, *Aristotelian arguments*, and *arguments for the resurrection of Jesus*, *arguments from religious experience*, *arguments from miracles*, and *many others*. It's hard to see how we must expect to have more than this plethora of evidence.

### ***Illustration #2 – The Teapot***

Bertrand Russell, a staunch atheist, once asked if we should believe there is a teapot floating around the sun, somewhere between Earth and Mars. After all, you can't disprove the presence of such a teapot. Therefore, why not think the teapot is truly there?

*Our Reply:* We can grant the atheist this point. It would not be rational to believe in a floating teapot in Earth's orbit if there were no good reasons for thinking it's there. But what if there were good reasons for thinking a teapot were there? Notice, the question quickly turns to whether *there are good reasons or not* for believing something. If the atheist thinks God is just a floating teapot, he will need to do the heavy lifting of refuting your good reasons. This objection, it seems, is another version of there-is-no-evidence-for-God.

Lastly, theists don't argue by saying "You can't disprove God, therefore, God exists!" That's a bad argument. If some theists do argue this way, we can join the atheist in rejecting their idea.



## **Chapter Summary**

**Slogan:** *Absence of Evidence is Evidence of Absence.*

**Your Response:**

- 1) Explain the two conditions that show when the slogan applies.
- 2) Ask: What's the best evidence for God that you've heard and what's wrong with it?

**Suggested Resource:** [Does God Exist](#) by William Lane Craig (eBook)

# CHAPTER 9

## EXTRAORDINARY CLAIMS REQUIRE EXTRAORDINARY EVIDENCE

This slogan exhibits some power in conversation. First, there is a common sense ring to it. Second, it sounds intelligent. Someone uttering this slogan runs in skeptical circles and prepares to show believers their errors.

Third, it may instill fear and anxiety in the believer. A Catholic might think to himself, "Shoot, unless I come up with extraordinary evidence, there's no way I can convince this guy."<sup>6</sup> Lastly, it purports to set up a *rule for rationality*. This may not be explicitly stated, but the implication is that *rational people*, as opposed to gullible or superstitious folks, must follow this rule.

All of that can be quite intimidating in conversation, unless you have studied this maxim. That's what we're going to do here. Solid preparation provides the remedy to answering this slogan.

Let's ask an extremely important question: Is the slogan *true*? To make that judgment, we must examine the terminology in more detail.

### **What is an *extraordinary claim*?**

Ask the skeptic, what do you mean by an extraordinary claim? There are a couple of common replies. In each case, we will see that *good reasons* or *good evidence* suffice to back up the claim. We consider two common and respond below.

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<sup>6</sup> Recognize that convincing all skeptics is not your main task. Strive to *defend* the *rationality* of Catholic Christian ideas. Whether others are persuaded is not the measure of success. After all, you can find people that dispute pretty much any claim, even things we would take to be obvious truths. Their disbelief does not show that your beliefs lack rational warrant. Present your case the best you can and pray for the Holy Spirit to open the person's heart to trusting in God.

*(1) Extraordinary claims refer to rare events.*

Rarity, in and of itself, gives no reason to doubt a claim. It would be a *rare* event for your best friend to win the lottery, but if you had *good reasons* to think he did, you would not need to doubt the claim. For example, if you saw the winning ticket or the check mailed to his house from the state, that would make it completely rational to think your friend won the lottery.

This example demonstrates that rare events do not require special levels of evidence.

*(2) Extraordinary claims refer to supernatural events.*

This reveals the true nature of the debate. One's worldview (e.g. classical theism vs. atheism) dictates how one judges particular evidence. The atheist believes that *supernatural* events require extraordinary evidence, because he believes that God does not exist (or that it's very unlikely that God exists).

You might ask the atheist, "If God exists, is an event like raising Jesus from the dead really so extraordinary? While it is a rare occurrence, surely it's something the divine creator could bring about, right?"

In other words, if we have *good reasons* to think God exists, then *supernatural* events can be examined in light of the lottery case. Yes, they may be rare, but if we have good evidence to believe they occurred, we can rationally believe in them. We should not rule them out for lack of *extraordinary evidence*. This prompts our next question.

### **What is extraordinary evidence?**

What is *extraordinary evidence* anyway? If a discussion of the nature of *extraordinary claims* is insufficient to defuse the objection, ask the unbeliever: What do you mean by *extraordinary evidence*?

Again, let's consider a couple possible replies.

*(1) Extraordinary evidence is evidence that overcomes the exceedingly low intrinsic probability of an event.*

Again, take the example of your friend winning the lottery. This event has low intrinsic probability in the sense that it's unlikely that your friend will win the lottery, even if you know he buys a ticket about once a week. Nonetheless, if your friend *does indeed win*, simple, good evidence suffices to show that he did so. This simple, good evidence can take many forms:

- Your friend calls you telling you he won and wants to celebrate.
- A Facebook post of your friend's winning ticket.
- Another trustworthy friend calls you to relay the information.

While none of these establish the event with 100% strict certainty, they serve as evidence that your friend won the lottery. They make it *rational to believe* that he did so.

Yet, who adduced extraordinary evidence here? It seems that simple, mundane, good evidence suffices to show it's reasonable to believe that something with intrinsically low probability occurred.

*(2) Extraordinary evidence is evidence that meets a very very high bar of probability.*

Perhaps the skeptic has this idea in mind. Extraordinary evidence makes it wildly improbable, and borderline impossible, that anything other than what the evidence says is correct. On this view, extraordinary evidence establishes an event with 99.9% certainty, or close to it, such that no rational person could disagree.

First, observe that historical analyses, political claims, and philosophical theses seem to lack this extraordinary evidence. Did Caesar cross the Rubicon? Is raising the minimum wage a good idea for a particular state? Is it ethical to murder 5 innocent people to save 100?

These stock examples from history, economics/politics, and ethics underscore the point that the atheist will be hard-pressed to find "extraordinary

evidence" in any domain. Sure, he will encounter some good arguments and strong evidence, but there will always be historians, economists, and ethicists who disagree. He will hardly find the 99.9% near certainty he is after.

So, we can ask the atheist, "Is it irrational to believe Caesar crossed the Rubicon? Or that raising the minimum wage is a bad idea? Or that it's unethical to murder 5 innocent people to save 100? If not, why? Especially since these claims fail to meet your standards of *extraordinary* evidence."

The atheist has a couple options here:

- (a) Tone down the bar of extraordinary evidence to a more natural level.
- (b) State that none of those examples from history or ethics constitute extraordinary claims, so they don't need extraordinary evidence.

If (a) is chosen, then the conversation can resume along the lines that *good evidence* suffices to establish the rationality of a belief. Extraordinary evidence turns out not to be that extraordinary after all.

More likely, the atheist will argue (b). In doing so, he is consistent with the original slogan: *extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence*.

But we must press him with an additional question, "WHY do extraordinary claims need to meet this special high bar but those non-extraordinary claims do not?" Why is a special bar needed for the Resurrection of Jesus that is not required for the answer to public policy questions or ethical dilemmas?

In answering this question, the skeptic will reveal his hand. *Why exactly* are extraordinary claims treated separately? *Why* is this not special pleading?

He might reiterate his point about the *supernatural*. He does not believe in *supernatural* events, so any claim that purports to be supernatural will have to meet the tremendously high bar of evidence. This answer is honest, but also reveals that the slogan is not doing the argumentative work. Rather, atheism is presupposed, which means supernatural events cannot occur. If that is the main point, then let the discussion turn to God's existence. Since if God exists, then it is reasonable to believe supernatural events occur.

He might attempt to say that the importance of a claim renders it in need of extraordinary evidence. This can't be right, since public policy questions are also important. Make the atheist aware of this. In my opinion, the rhetorical force of this slogan comes down to a disagreement over the supernatural, which means it turns on the question of whether God exists. As we have seen in past chapters, this leads us to return to chapter one.

Lastly, I don't want to be misconstrued as saying the evidence for classical theism or the Catholic Christian worldview fails to meet a high bar. After all, there are *very good reasons* for being a Catholic Christian. My point here is that the skeptic has no good reason, other than his atheism, to set such an incredibly high bar of evidence for claims of religious worldviews.

Instead, we should look for *good reasons* and *good evidence* for the things that we believe. Good reasons and good evidence suffice to show the rationality of belief in something, even if it is something out of the ordinary.

On the next page, I include a flow chart mapping the thought of this chapter.

### **Chapter Summary**

**Slogan:** *Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.*

**Your Response:**

- 1) Ask; What do you mean by extraordinary claims?
- 2) Ask: What do you mean by extraordinary evidence?
- 3) Prepare replies according to the flow chart.

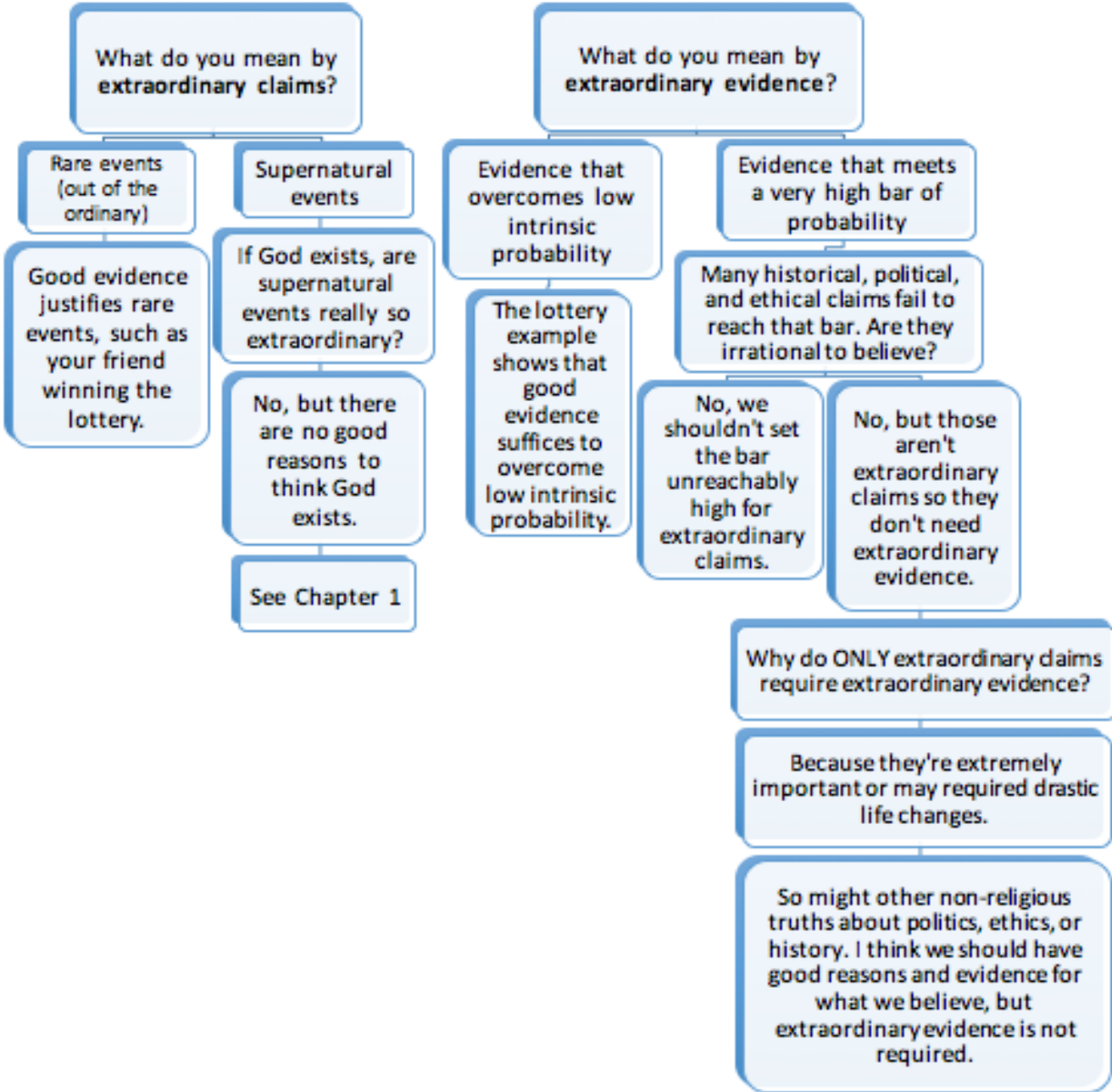
**Suggested Resource:**

- [Reasonable Faith](#) by William Lane Craig

This book contains a sophisticated discussion of probability in its chapter on miracles. For more ammunition in debunking this slogan and David Hume's arguments against miracles, I recommend Dr. Craig's book.

- [Do Extraordinary Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence?](#) (Article)  
By Matt Nelson

# Do Extraordinary Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence?



# CHAPTER 10

## DO YOU TAKE THE BIBLE LITERALLY? HAHAHAHA!

The “Hahahaha!” in this subtitle corresponds to a common lack of respect for the Bible among atheists. They may actually laugh at you if you do not answer this question to their liking. Of course, not all atheists are cavalier in their dismissal of religious belief. But the new atheists and their followers frequently display a distaste for Sacred Scripture.

That being said, how should you answer this objection? I left it for later in this eBook, since not all conversations with an atheist will necessarily involve the Bible. You might talk about God’s existence and Jesus without getting into the ins and outs of Biblical interpretation of the Old and New Testament. Nonetheless, if the subject does come up, you want to have a good answer.

Here’s a great way to respond. I stole the reply from Bishop Robert Barron. Say this:

- **That’s a good question. Let me ask you a question, do you take the library literally?**

The atheist may be perplexed or he may see where you are going. Either way, feel free to step in and finish the point. The proper answer to that question is: *it depends*. Some books and chapters in the library are taken literally, depending on the genre and context, while others are read figuratively, metaphorically, or as didactic fiction. The same applies to Sacred Scripture.

The Bible contains many types of writing: history, poetry, parables, proverbs, didactic epistles, didactic fiction, apocryphal literature, and so forth. Whether we taken a given passage literally depends on the genre and context of the passage in question.

Moreover, sometimes *it is unclear* whether the author intends the reader to take a passage literally. So, not every question will have a quick and easy answer. But, this tactical answer will get the atheist off your back and help you avoid looking like a rigid, literalist, fundamentalist.



Keep in mind, we don't want to answer in such a way that the atheist thinks we don't take the Bible seriously. As Catholic Christians, we believe the Bible is God speaking, and we affirm all that Scripture teaches is true.<sup>7</sup>

Thankfully, we have the Church as a guide for interpreting Scripture. She does not provide verse by verse interpretation, but rather a set of dogmatic parameters. Theologians are free to propose interpretations and debate them, within parameters laid out by the Church, who we believe is guided by God.

Lastly, the atheist probably has some specific passages in mind, such as:

- The killing of the Canaanites or Amalekites in the Old Testament
- Passages that teach against homosexuality
- Apparent contradictions in the Gospels or other books

To answer these tactfully requires further knowledge and study. I recommend an excellent resource below. For now, be prepared to give an answer to the skeptic who asks you about taking the Bible literally.

### **Chapter Summary**

**Slogan:** *Do you take the Bible literally? Hahahaha!*

**Your Response:**

- 1) Ask: Do you take the library literally?
- 2) Explain how the Bible is like a library.

**Suggested Resource:** [Hard Sayings](#) by Trent Horn

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<sup>7</sup> It is Catholic dogma that Scripture cannot teach error on faith and morals. However, the traditional Catholic position goes further and says that whatever is affirmed by Scripture, in any passage, is affirmed by the Holy Spirit, and therefore cannot be in error. So, we may be in doubt as to what a particular passage *affirms* is true, but there is no doubt that the passage avoids teaching error.

# CHAPTER 11

## IF YOU WERE BORN IN SAUDI ARABIA, YOU'D BE A MUSLIM

This slogan takes various forms. Famously, Richard Dawkins used it in response to an audience question in 2006. He said:

*You're not a Muslim. You're not a Hindu. Why aren't you a Hindu? Because you happen to be brought up in the America, not in India. If you had been brought up in India, you'd be a Hindu. If you'd been brought up in Denmark in the time of the Vikings you'd be believing in Wotan and Thor. ([source](#))*

This slogan purports to be an *undercutting defeater* for the theist. In philosophy, a "defeater" is a reason given against a particular belief. Alvin Plantinga distinguishes two types of defeaters:

*Defeaters are reasons for giving up a belief B that you hold. If they are also reasons for believing B is false, they are rebutting defeaters; if they aren't reasons for believing B is false, they are undercutting defeaters. ([Knowledge and Christian Belief, pg. 90](#))*

Why is this slogan an *undercutting defeater* and not a *rebutting defeater*? Simply because it does not show, or claim to show, that Christianity is false. The following facts may all be true simultaneously:

- People tend to inherit their religious beliefs.
- Few Christians live in Saudi Arabia compared to the Europe and America.
- Christianity is true.

These claims are not logically inconsistent. They can all plausibly be true. So, the slogan *itself* does not constitute a *rebutting defeater* for the Christian. However, it may seem to be an *undercutting defeater* in the following way:

*If the only reason someone believes in Christianity is the accident of birth location, then such a belief is unjustified. It amounts to dumb luck. It has the same warrant as believing you will win the lottery tomorrow.*

That reasoning deserves a response. Remember, it's always best to respond with a question if possible. I credit Jon McCray, creator of the Youtube channel *Whaddo You Meme*, for coming up with this great question:

**Do you believe in equal rights? Do you believe in equal rights for women, blacks, and homosexuals? ([source](#))<sup>8</sup>**

When they answer "yes" you can deliver the follow up question.<sup>9</sup>

**Well if you were born in Saudi Arabia, you wouldn't believe in equal rights. You only believe in equal rights because you were brought up in America.**

At this point, your interlocutor will likely adduce other reasons for believing in equal rights. They will argue that it's not *merely the fact* of being born in America that makes them believers in equal rights. Rather, they have given the issue some serious thought and decided what to believe on that basis.

Yet, the Christian can offer a similar reply. It's not *merely the fact* of being born in America that makes them Christian. Rather, they have given the issue some serious thought and decided to follow Jesus. This can lead the conversation into a discussion of the evidence for the Christian worldview. My point here is that this line of question and answer is enough to diffuse the slogan.

One can also question the skeptic further, again following McCray, and state:

**The only reason you're a secular skeptic is that you were born in America. If you'd been born in India, you'd be a Hindu. And so forth.**

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<sup>8</sup> I highly recommend watching the entire [Youtube video](#) where McCray takes apart this slogan in more detail.

<sup>9</sup> If they answer "no" then you will need to ask follow up questions like "What do you mean?" and ask them to clarify. They probably believe in equal rights in *some sense*, but they might think it's a trick question and just need a chance to clarify.

If the skeptic admits, "Yes that's true" then he has put himself in an awkward position. If *the accident of birth* objection shows a belief is false or unjustified, then it has just shown his own *secular atheism* is false or unjustified.

So, if the slogan has any power, it turns out to have too much as it will also destroy the objector's own worldview.

What is more likely is that the skeptic will not admit, "Yes that's true" since he has other reasons to support his atheism. Again, as Christians we can point out how we are in the same boat, and this leads into a more substantial discussion of evidence for the Christian worldview.

### **Chapter Summary**

**Slogan:** *If you'd been born in Saudi Arabia, you'd be a Muslim*

**Your Response:**

- 1) Ask: Do you believe in equal rights for women, blacks, and homosexuals?
- 2) Point out: If you were born in Saudi Arabia, you wouldn't believe in equal rights.
- 3) Point out: He is only a secular skeptic since he was born in America.

**Suggested Resource:** [Whaddo You Meme](#) videos by Jon McCray

# CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have completed our answers to 11 slogans that atheists and skeptics use to attack religious belief. Recall the first reason I gave for answering slogans.

- 1) Slogans are often the most popular objections you will hear. By preparing to answer these, you can be confident you can handle most objections.

If you have mastered the material in this eBook, then you can now be confident you can answer most objections. Of course, atheists may not state the objection *verbatim*, but I think you will find that most of their objections (if not all) fall into one of the 10 previous chapters.

My hope is that your discussions will move *beyond slogans* into more substantial discussions about the faith. However, when believers are caught flat-footed and stumped by slogans, the discussion often comes to a screeching halt. It's easier to change the subject or ignore the objection.

Now that you have answers to the most prominent slogans, you can be more confident in moving the conversation forward. You can be the person that stands out in a group.

Where should you go from here? Consider one or two of the suggested resources to go deeper into the arguments for the existence of God and how to present them in conversation.

Lastly, I must recommend [ClaritasU](http://www.claritasu.com), the best website where Catholic Christians gather to get clear about their faith. I am a member myself, and I don't get any kickbacks by leading you to the site. Quite simply, I want you to have the best materials open to you. *ClaritasU* has excellent courses taught by Brandon Vogt and forums to discuss the material further.

Thanks for considering my work. Any comments, love mail, or hate mail? Drop me a line at [jderosa@classicaltheism.com](mailto:jderosa@classicaltheism.com)

# APPENDIX A

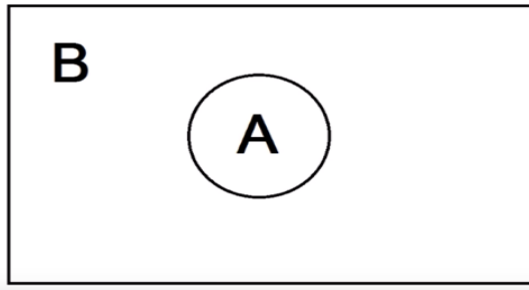
## THE KALAM ARGUMENT “DEBUNKED”

If you watched the short video on the Kalam Cosmological argument, *YouTube* probably recommended another video called “The Kalam Cosmological Argument Debunked.” Watch it, since I think it expresses some common atheist objections to the argument. What follows here is my response to their video.

1) *Re: Cause and effect only apply within the universe. We have no idea what goes on outside of the universe.*

A. I don't agree that cause and effect only apply within the universe. I think *whatever begins to exist has a cause*, and that this is a true *metaphysical* principle. That is, it applies to all being within the universe and any reality outside the universe as well. If something *did not exist* and then *did exist*, we can ask what caused it to exist. Even if that something was as large as the universe itself, *beginning to exist* requires a cause to go from non-being to being.

Non-being (i.e. nothing) cannot cause anything, so if there were no cause, then the universe would never exist. It cannot cause itself since it cannot preexist itself. So, you are left with asserting that things can “pop” into being uncaused out of nothing OR that whatever begins to exist has a cause. The latter is definitely more reasonable. So, it is reasonable to believe the first premise (which is metaphysical) and the narrators have given no reason to abandon it.



B. Remember that universe is defined as the sum total of space, time, matter, and energy. So, whatever is “*outside the universe*” (or multiverse if you believe in one), is spaceless, timeless, and immaterial, since otherwise it would violate the definition of universe. Anything that exists in B (in their diagram pictured above) must be spaceless, timeless, immaterial, and (by the first premise) able to cause the universe.

2) *Re: Interesting you say those models don't hold up to scientific scrutiny, when that same scrutiny also rejects the Kalam cosmological argument.*

A. This is not the case. Science is not in the business of rejecting philosophical arguments. Apologist Frank Turek points out that “Science doesn't say anything. Scientists do.”

B. Particular scientists may reject the Kalam argument, but that is irrelevant. As Dr. Craig says in his debate with Sean Carroll: Science provides support for a premise in a philosophical argument that has theological significance. So, at best, science could provide evidence against the premise, “the universe began to exist.” But it doesn't! As Vilenkin notes, *all of the current evidence and all of the current models support the fact that the universe began to exist.*

3) *Re: Premise one is broken. Premise two only applies to the universe in its current form. It isn't beyond the realm of possibility that the universe previously had other forms.*

- A. Premise one is not broken, and this video has certainly not demonstrated that claim. See my replies to (1).
  
- B. The speakers in the video seem to argue: yes, the universe in its current form had a beginning, but we don't know what happened prior to the big bang, and there may have been eternal stuff before that. The problem with this is that there was *nothing* prior to the beginning of the universe (or multiverse), since we define the universe as the sum total of all space, time, matter, and energy. So, there could not have been "eternal stuff" before that, unless this "eternal stuff" was timeless, immaterial, spaceless, and powerful enough to cause the universe, in which case that "eternal stuff" or "another dimension" sounds a lot like God! Also, see William Lane Craig's argument for the personality of the cause of the universe.
  
- C. All models of universes and multiverses that have been proposed show that the universe has a beginning.

For more information on answering objections to the Kalam Cosmological argument, I recommend [this lecture](#) by William Lane Craig.



# APPENDIX B

## THE FINE-TUNING ARGUMENT

If you watch William Lane Craig debate, you are likely aware of the *Fine-tuning argument* for God's existence. I left it out of the first chapter, because the discussion surrounding it often gets very technical, very fast. Or, it delves into scientific arenas where most of us lack expertise.

Nonetheless, I consider it a powerful argument. To learn the basics of the argument I recommend these two resource:

- (1) [This video](#) from Reasonable Faith.
- (2) [This article](#) by Eric Metaxes.

While I do not suggest leading with the Fine-tuning argument, I do think it has tactical value in conversations with a skeptic. Here's how.

The skeptic may repeatedly raise the "Where is God" objection and point to the fact that no one can see or feel God. How can you expect him to believe in something he cannot see, hear, or feel?

Next, present the Fine-tuning argument for God, showing that it is just way too unlikely that our one universe came about by chance. If you witnessed someone roll 100 6's in a row on a normal six-sided die, you would suspect the die was rigged! It must've been designed to come out that way. It's common sense.

Now, the most popular skeptical answer to the Fine-tuning argument is the *multiverse hypothesis*. The idea that there is an ensemble of universes outside of our own, such that new universes are produced in practically infinite numbers! Therefore, it's not surprising that *one* of these universe's turned out like ours.

The cash value here is that the skeptic cannot *see, hear, or feel* other universes (or world ensemble). Yet, he believes it? This, in principle, invalidates his objection that we should dismiss God because we cannot see, hear, or feel him.

That's a tactical approach to using the *Fine-tuning argument*, without having to learn the all of the science that underlies it.

# APPENDIX C

## THE BIBLE SUPPORTS SLAVERY

### Part 1

The Bible supports Slavery. This slogan provides atheists with an easy reason to dismiss the Bible. They will say: **“How can you support the Bible when it supports slavery! It’s an immoral book that only a blind idiot would follow.”**

This is a good opportunity for you to educate the objector. Learn these points and you’re off and running. First and foremost: “Slavery” in the Old testament context does not mean what most people have in mind. It does not refer to “chattel slavery,” especially that of the African slave trade, which involved kidnapping and immense cruelty.

Here’s a shocking (but true) point. Slavery is not intrinsically wrong. If you utter this, prepare to clarify it in less than 1.7 seconds. Here’s the clarification. The word “slavery” can be used in at least **3 different ways** and only one of those ways is intrinsically wrong.

Most people call to mind “chattel slavery” which involves forcing people into service indefinitely, cruelty, and a reduction of slaves to mere property. While this was indeed common in the African American slave trade (and horribly wrong), **it’s not what the Old testament describes**. So, we can stand with the skeptic in condemning this.

The Old testament “slavery” is really a process of “indentured servitude” that the poor and destitute (or those with enormous debts) would make use of for a time. They could “sell themselves” as servants/slaves to pay off a debt or obtain sustenance for themselves and their families (there are no government welfare programs in the wilderness!). While this type of “slavery” is not ideal, it is not intrinsically wrong.

Lastly, sometimes “slavery” refers to “penal servitude” where wrongdoers are punished with forced labor. This is also not intrinsically wrong though it may not always be prudent in various circumstances. In fact, most people know that some crimes come with a penalty of forced community service. This is analogous to the idea of penal servitude.

The bottom line: people registering this objection rarely make these distinctions. We must make them. When they are made, we clear the Bible of the charge of endorsing intrinsically wrong practices. Reveal these distinctions to the skeptic, and you will enhance the conversation. The types are:

- Chattel slavery: Comes with kidnapping, cruelty, and a reduction of persons to pure property.
- Indentured servitude: Selling one’s labor for a time (or indefinitely) to provide sustenance for oneself or pay off debt.
- Penal servitude: Punishment for a crime amounts to a specified amount and type of service.<sup>10</sup>

### **WHY DIDN'T JESUS SAY ANYTHING?**

Some protest that if He were truly a good person, Jesus would have publicly disavowed such a vile institution. There are many ways to answer this. Here’s one: Jesus had a greater purpose than eliminating slavery (or calling out folks for any other immoral political practices at the time).

Moreover, Jesus commanded us to love God above all things and love our neighbors as ourselves. This clearly precludes servitude practices that are intrinsically wrong.

To sum up: the charge that “the Bible supports slavery” reveals a misunderstanding of terms. Upon deeper analysis, we find that Jesus condemns the morally despicable practice of chattel slavery.

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<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Edward Feser for making these distinctions in a blog article entitled *Msgr. Swetland’s Confusions* ([available here](#)).

Moreover, we find that not all forms of slavery are intrinsically wrong. With these points in hand, we have diffused the atheist slogan and may instruct the skeptic in the process.

## **Part 2**

Let's take on a particularly difficult passage. Here's the big question: *What would you say if an atheist quoted or referred to this passage in conversation?*

### **Exodus 21:1-7**

- 1** "Now these are the ordinances which you shall set before them.
- 2** When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing.
- 3** If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him.
- 4** If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone.
- 5** But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,'
- 6** then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl; and he shall serve him for life.
- 7** When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do.

Next, they might object:

- In order for a man to keep his wife and children he had to stay a slave! That's not fair!
- Look, the women slaves were not allowed freedom in the same way male slaves were! This is terrible!
- Look how cavalier and commonplace the institution of slavery is! This passage reveals the disgusting nature of Old Testament religion.

Are you ready to respond? If not, keep reading.

## Some Background

Some Christians tremble when they read hard sayings in the Bible. However, we can trust in Christ who vouched that God's Word has not been broken (John 10:35). The Apostle Paul also reminds us that all scripture is inspired (2 Tim 3:16). So, whatever God wanted to include in His revelation is asserted by the Holy Spirit (i.e. "God-breathed") and without error.

How we have come to Trust God and His Word can vary from person to person:

- Some have been moved by philosophical or historical arguments,
- Others have had deep, personal experiences with God (or Jesus in particular).
- Others trust the testimony of what reasonable men have said about God.

Christian philosopher Stephen T. Davis puts it this way in his book *Rational Faith* ([available here](#)):

*But by far the most important reason why I believe in God is this: I have had experiences in my life that I naturally find myself interpreting in terms of the presence of God. I have experienced what I take to be God's protection, God's guidance, God's challenges, and God's mercy. (Pg. 30)*

Catholic Christian philosopher Edward Feser describes being moved to see the arguments from natural theology are correct (at least a handful of them, which he defends [here](#)).

But coming to faith does not obliterate all doubts. Difficulties in Scripture, Church history, or the practices of Churchmen lead to serious cases of doubt. One good response to doubt is to *seek genuine answers*. Matt Nelson, a Catholic author, explains this well in an article [here](#).

Now, let's return to our aim of answering the difficulties of this passage.

## Two Preliminary Points

Anyone attempting to counter attacks like these would greatly benefit from Trent Horn's book [Hard Sayings](#), which devotes two detailed chapters to the slavery question. In my response here, I draw largely from his work.

- 1) In Exodus 21:16, it explains that kidnapping and selling into slavery is punishable by death. This helps distinguish Biblical slavery from the African American slave trade and slavery in the antebellum south. Slaves could not be acquired through kidnapping.
- 2) This is a big point. Trent Horn labels this rule #15 for dealing with hard sayings in Scripture: ***Just because the Bible regulates it, doesn't mean the Bible recommends it.*** In a way similar to how Moses allowed *divorce* yet regulated it, the Bible allows slavery (mostly indentured servitude) and regulates it. Horn shows how the Biblical laws related to slavery are much more humane and respect the dignity of persons more than any culture of the Ancient near East (they all practiced slavery in some form). So, Horn argues, the Bible takes a gradual approach to the slavery question, first regulating it and making it more humane, and second recommending that Christian slave owners free their slaves (cf. Philemon).

Nonetheless, there are many places where the Bible, even in the New Testament, exhorts slaves to obey their masters. Presumably, attempting an uprising or fostering hate in their hearts against their masters would not be best for the slaves. The most important thing in life is serving God, and slaves should focus on that despite their poor lot in life. In Heaven, there will be no more slavery and all will rest in God.

- 3) Let's look at the particular passage cited (Exodus 21:1-7). When tackling the Old Testament, it's definitely important to consult commentaries, since most of us are not that familiar with the cultural practices and other facts of ancient history. A good Catholic Bible commentary available for free online is [this one](#). My comments expand on ideas from that commentary.

### **“If his master gives him a wife...” (v.4)**

This is to be understood as one of the master’s own daughters, or perhaps another woman kept as the master’s concubine. While this sounds unpalatable to us, in many cases it can be seen as doing what is best for the women/children. The master owns land and presumably can provide sustenance for himself and all of his family and slaves. If the wife and children went out free with the slave, they might be facing very harsh poverty or a new, unknown master. Their current master can ensure they are taken care of.

### **“When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do.” (v. 7)**

It was always expected that the daughter should become the wife of the purchaser, which is why she would not go out as the male slaves do. If you read verses 8-11, it explains the conditions for which she would go free. Namely, if the master does not marry her and does not provide her a marriage.

An alternative interpretation mentioned in the commentary is that **“she shall not go out as the male slaves do”** means she shall not go out to work in the fields (or have the same type of labor requirements).

Of course, this analysis does not answer every question, but it provides an interpretation to counter the atheist using this passage against you.

Study these points so you can remember them in conversation.

# About Me



- I teach high school mathematics in New Jersey and study philosophy and religion on the side.
- Currently, I take graduate courses at Montclair State University working toward a master's degree in pure and applied mathematics.
- I am a devout Catholic Christian and belong to Our Lady of the Lake Parish in Verona, NJ. As a Catholic Christian, I acknowledge Jesus Christ as my Lord, King, and Savior, and I desire to please Him with all that I do.
- My website, blog, and podcast are a labor of love; I deeply enjoy learning about faith, religion, and philosophy. **Nonetheless, my true love is my wonderful wife Christine, whom I married on April 22, 2017. She provides constant support and encouragement.**

May the Lord bless you, keep you from all evil, and bring you to everlasting life.

Peace,  
John DeRosa

