

# Why I Do Not Take the “New Atheism” Seriously: “Flying Spaghetti Monsters,” Orbiting Tea Pots, and Invisible Pink Unicorns



One of the reasons that I do not take the “New Atheism” seriously is that they do not know what they are talking about when they say that they do not believe that there is such “a being” as God. In any intelligent disagreement it is important that both sides understand each other’s position well enough that they can at least agree on what the disagreement is about. Suppose that I were having a disagreement with a contemporary scientist in which I claimed that I did not believe in the scientific discipline of “Physics,” and that I defended my position by arguing that there is no good evidence for the existence of “phlogiston,” or that I found the ancient Greek philosopher Thales’ claim that all reality is composed of the substance of water to be empirically falsifiable, or that I disagreed with Aristotle in his book entitled *Physics* that everything in the sublunar sphere is composed of the four elements of earth, air, fire and water, and that everything in the heavens is made of a fifth element called “aether.” If the scientist were very patient, he might well explain that phlogiston is a long discredited scientific theory and that the modern scientific

discipline of physics is not at all the same thing as what ancient Greek philosophers meant by "physics." If, however, I continued to make objections against "phlogiston" or claims about physical reality being composed of the elements of "earth" "air," "fire," and "water," the scientist at some point would likely throw up his hands in exasperation because I clearly did not know what I was talking about when I used the word "Physics."

The New Atheists (and their followers) continue to use arguments that show that they simply do not know what they are talking about when they use the word "God." This can be shown by the repeated use of a number of tropes that compare belief in the existence of God to belief in things like "The Flying Spaghetti Monster," Bertrand Russell's "orbiting tea pot," "Invisible Pink Unicorns," or "imaginary friends." A variation on the same trope would be Richard Dawkins' argument in his book *The God Delusion* against the claim that the possibility of life coming into existence on earth would be equivalent to claiming that a hurricane sweeping through a scrap yard could assemble a Boeing 747 aircraft. Dawkins responded that any being that could create a 747 would have to be "more complicated" than a 747. So if an entity existed that could create the universe, this entity would have to be even more complicated than the universe, and so its existence would be even more statistically improbable than the existence of the universe itself.

There have been a number of responses to this frequently used New Atheist argument. It has been argued that the *real* question is whether the universe has an intelligent designer, and that this notion is not implausible in the same sense as an orbiting tea pot or a "Flying Spaghetti Monster."<sup>1</sup> It has been pointed out that the argument depends on comparing the existence of God to something inherently implausible. However, if Russell were to ask about the plausibility of an orbiting

asteroid with two craters rather than an orbiting teapot, or, if, rather than a “Flying Spaghetti Monster,” we compared the existence of God to the possibility of a rare but not yet discovered bird living in the Amazon, the argument loses its force. The strength of the argument lies in the claim that the existence of God is implausible in the same sense as the existence of “Flying Spaghetti Monsters” or orbiting tea pots is implausible. But if this is the case, the real argument against the existence of God lies on other grounds – its inherent implausibility – and that is an argument that needs to be made, not merely asserted.<sup>2</sup> Finally, William Lane Craig has made the argument that “one does not need an explanation for an explanation.” If one argues plausibly that the existence of the universe demands a cause, it does not follow that one necessarily has to provide an explanation for the explanation of the universe. Indeed, such a demand would necessarily lead to an infinite number of explanations for any plausible inference about any thing whatsoever.<sup>3</sup>

While the above responses do indeed point to weaknesses in arguments that compare the existence of God to “Flying Spaghetti Monsters” or orbiting tea pots, they do not specifically address what I think is the most important problem with the New Atheists, and that is that the very use of such arguments shows that the New Atheists do not know what they are talking about when they use the word “God.” What all of these New Atheist memes – invisible pink unicorns, “Flying Spaghetti Monsters,” orbiting tea pots – have in common is that they compare God to finite contingent physical objects existing within the known physical universe. God is understood to be one additional entity among others in the same way that an orbiting teapot would be one teapot among other non-orbiting teapots or a “Flying Spaghetti Monster” would be composed of “spaghetti,” a physical substance of which every grocery store has numerous items. (This is also evident in the New Atheist claim “I just believe in one less god than you

do,” or the claim, “I don’t believe in the Christian god, but I don’t believe in Zeus or Thor either.”)

In the same way that an argument about Physics as a scientific discipline would have to address accurate accounts of the scientific discipline and not beliefs in phlogiston or physical reality being made of earth, fire, air, and water, New Atheist rejections of the Christian God at least should clearly show an understanding of what it is that Christians mean when they affirm that God exists. And no competent Christian theologian or philosopher has ever claimed that God is one finite contingent entity among others – another item existing within the physical universe. When the New Atheists say that they do not believe in God, comparisons to “Flying Spaghetti Monsters” and “orbiting tea pots” make clear that they do not know what they are talking about.

If one is going to deny the existence of God, then what needs to be denied is the God of historical Christian faith, and the place to turn for an account of this Christian God would be classic Christian theologians such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, John of Damascus or Thomas Aquinas, or even more contemporary theologians such as Karl Barth or Thomas F. Torrance (among Protestants), or (among Catholics) Hans Urs von Balthasar or Matthew Levering or numerous philosophical theologians such as David Burrell (my dissertation director) or Herbert McCabe, or Orthodox thinkers such as David Bentley Hart.

Among the most basic of Christian affirmations about God would be the following:<sup>4</sup>

(1) Since God is the Creator of everything else that exists, God cannot possibly be another “entity” within the universe. As Creator, God stands outside creation in a manner similar to the way in which an author stands outside a text. God cannot therefore be compared to any item existing *within* the universe, such as an orbiting tea pot.

(2) God and creatures exist in fundamentally different ways. God, by definition, is self-existent, and God's existence is both necessary and self-identical. God simply is, and he is identical with his own reality. In contrast, the existence of all creatures is radically contingent. Not only might they exist differently than the manner in which they do, but they might not exist at all. Their existence is radically dependent on the divine creative act in which God brings creatures into existence. (Aquinas's way of putting this is to say that, in God, essence [what God is] and existence [that God is] are identical, while in creatures they are distinct.) Because God exists necessarily, his existence cannot be compared to anything contingent by definition, such as an orbiting tea pot or a Flying Spaghetti Monster.

(3) Another way to make this point is to adopt the distinction made by some modern philosophers and theologians between "beings" and "Being." The 20th century German philosopher Martin Heidegger distinguished between *Seiende* (beings) and *Sein* (Being); in Latin, Aquinas tended to distinguish between *ens* (a "being") and the infinitive *esse* (to exist). God is not a "being" (*ens*), but *purus actus esse subsistens*, the "Pure Act of Self-Subsisting Existence ("To Be")." Unlike "Flying Spaghetti Monsters" or orbiting tea pots, God is not "a being" among others, but Necessary Self-Subsisting Existence.

(4) Any physical being must necessarily be contingent in its existence, since it depends on other entities to bring it into and maintain it in existence. An orbiting tea pot would have to be made by someone. A "Flying Spaghetti Monster" would be composed of of the parts of which it is made up (pasta and tomato sauce presumably), and so would not exist eternally or necessarily. Since God exists necessarily and eternally, God cannot be made up of physical parts, and so cannot be a body of any kind. Again, the analogy between God and *any physical entities* such as "Flying Spaghetti Monsters" or "orbiting tea pots" breaks down.

(5) All creatures (since they are created) are necessarily limited in some manner. They occupy a specific physical locality in space; they come to exist and cease to exist. To the contrary, God has no temporal beginning or end, and is not confined to any physical space, since space is the "place" in which created physical entities exist. (Traditional Christian theologians would go so far as to say that God is not temporal at all, but "eternal," since time comes into existence with created changing realities.) Another fundamental distinction between creatures and their Creator is, then, that between the "Infinite" and the "finite." Since God exists wherever anything he creates exists, God is not "finite" as are creatures, but "infinite," without limits of any kind.

The distinction between divine infinity and created finitude has consequences for how we think of God and creatures. For example, the "Infinite" and "finite" do not add up. A "Flying Spaghetti Monster" plus an "orbiting tea pot" are two entities, and the two together are greater than either one of them alone. However, because God is infinite, the addition of a finite world does not increase the amount of existence in the universe. God plus the finite universe is not greater than the infinite God alone. God without the world would still be God; however, the world without God would simply not exist. Accordingly, the atheist jibe "I just believe in one less god than you do" makes no sense. If God is infinite self-identical necessary existence, there could be no more than One God; however, one less God does not mean one less entity of the kind called "god," but no reality whatsoever.

(6) If God is One in the sense in which Christians understand God to be One, then an inevitable corollary is that God is unique, but not unique in the sense of being "one of a kind." God is not One in the sense of being the only instantiated example of "first cause of the universe" or "only existing necessary being." "Cause of the universe" or "necessary being" are not instances of particular ways in which beings can

exist. Aquinas makes this point by claiming that God is “not in a genus,” not even the genus of “being.” Unlike orbiting tea pots or “Flying Spaghetti Monsters,” God is not a “kind” or “example” of anything.

(7) God is absolutely simple and without composition (or parts). The kinds of things (“beings”) we come across in everyday life are always composed of parts because they are physical objects. However, the Christian God is without a body, and therefore cannot be composed of physical parts. Moreover, anything composed of physical parts is subject to dissolution of those parts, and can both come into existence (by combination of parts) or cease to exist (by dissolution). It follows that, since God’s existence is necessary, God cannot be physical.

In addition, other ways in which we might talk about composition in relation to postulated *non-physical* beings would not apply to God either. As already stated, God is absolutely unique and does not belong in a genus (category). One could not distinguish in God’s case between genus (the broad overarching category in which God would belong) and difference (what distinguishes God from others in the same category). Even the most fundamental distinction involved in any finite object – the distinction between essence (what it is) and existence (whether it is) – would not apply to God, since God, existing necessarily, simply is. The historical Christian understanding is then that God is absolutely simple, without parts of any kind.

Contrast God’s simplicity with such imaginary entities as “Flying Spaghetti Monsters,” orbiting tea pots, or invisible pink unicorns, all of which would be physical beings and necessarily composed of parts. Even Dawkins’ claim that any entity that could create a Boeing 747 would have to be more complicated than a 747 shows a complete misunderstanding of the Christian position. The Christian doctrine is not that God is “more complicated” than a 747, but absolutely uncomplicated

(completely simple).

(8) God is not only good, but the "Chief Good" (*Summum Bonum*). One of the classic dilemmas in philosophy is Plato's *Euthyphro* dilemma: Do the gods act rightly because it is inherently good to do so, or does something become good because the gods do it? In the language of monotheism, "Is something good because God commands it, or does God command something because it is good?" If one answers that God commands actions because they are inherently good, then there must be some source of goodness outside of God to which God conforms. On the other hand, if something is good because God commands it, then goodness is arbitrary, God could command something evil, and then evil would become good.

To state that God is the *Summum Bonum* cuts the gordian knot of the *Euthyphro* dilemma by making clear that God's very nature is identical with Goodness. A fundamental assertion of traditional Christian theology (going back at least to Augustine) is that being and goodness are convertible. To the extent that something exists at all, insofar as it exists, it is good.

That being and goodness are convertible does not mean that evil does not exist, but that even those things or persons who are evil necessarily have some kind of essential goodness about them insofar as they exist at all. In order for Hitler to accomplish his massive evils, he needed to exist, to be human, to be rational and capable of planning, to be able to persuade others to cooperate with his plans, etc. All of these qualities, as qualities, are good. They are the very same qualities that are necessary to accomplish great good, and were possessed by people like Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, Jr. Evil, then, as Augustine argued, has no existence of its own, but is parasitic; it depends on the prior existence of both being and goodness for its own existence.

Given then, that goodness and being are correlative, insofar



as God exists necessarily and is identical with his own existence, God must also be not only good, but the Highest Good (*Summum Bonum*), identical with his own Goodness as he is identical with his Existence, and, as the Creator who gives existence to all else that exists, the source of all goodness that exists in created things. Insofar as anything exists that we might call good, it is good because it has been created by the Good God. God's Goodness does not then conform to some source of goodness outside of God's own nature because God's nature is inherently good, self-identical with absolute Goodness, and the source of all goodness in creatures. To answer the *Euthryphro* dilemma: on the one hand, the goodness of God's actions do not depend on a goodness outside his own nature because God's nature is identical with and the foundation of all goodness. On the other, God's actions and commands do not make goodness arbitrary because they always conform to God's very nature as Good. To use an illustration: despite God's absolute freedom and omnipotence, there are some things that God cannot do because they would contradict his very nature as Goodness itself. God cannot, for example, tell a lie. God cannot be cruel.

Again we see the New Atheist tropes fall massively short of the Christian understanding of God. No orbiting tea pot, "Flying Spaghetti Monster," or "Invisible Pink Unicorn" could be self-identical with Goodness itself, nor be the source of all goodness in the created universe. To the contrary, insofar as such imaginary entities might exist at all, they would be simply one more example of an individually existing thing (*ens*), with the limited kind of goodness such a thing might have, but even then, a kind of trivial goodness. There would be no reason to believe that a "Flying Spaghetti Monster" or "Invisible Pink Unicorn" would be morally good, and it would be ludicrous to posit that either could be the source of all goodness in the universe.

At the beginning of this essay, I stated that in any

intelligent disagreement, it is important that both sides understand each other's position well enough that they can at least disagree on what the disagreement is about. My claim in this essay is that the New Atheists do not know what they are talking about when they use the word "God," and this is demonstrated by the kinds of arguments they use to refute the existence of God. In every case, believing in the existence of God is compared to believing in an additional imaginary being who would exist alongside other beings within the common universe, simply one more finite object among others – something like an orbiting tea pot, a "Flying Spaghetti Monster," or an invisible pink unicorn. If Christians understood God to be simply another entity existing alongside others within the universe, perhaps these objections might have some validity. Perhaps they would be valid objections against believing in deities like Thor or Zeus.

However, this is not what Christians mean by God. God is not an entity (*ens*), one being along side other beings (*seiende*) in the universe, but, in Aquinas's words, *ipsum esse subsistens* (Self-identical Self-subsisting Existence). That the New Atheists continue to use examples indicating that they think that the question of the existence of God has to do with the existence of such an entity makes clear that they do not know what they are talking about when they use the word "God."

1 Joe Carter, "Celestial Teapots, Flying Spaghetti Monsters, and Other Silly Atheist Arguments," *First Things* (MAY 15, 2010);

<https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2010/05/celestial-teapots-flying-spaghetti-monsters-and-other-silly-atheist-arguments>.

2 Mark F. Shallow, "The End of the Teapot Argument for Atheism (and All Its Tawdry Imitators)"; <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/554a/04dea71e0a0d13d8b7b7afa4cce886132f76.pdf>.

[3](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4AHFBft2L8) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4AHFBft2L8>.

[4](#) I am largely following Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas here, but there would be general agreement among Protestant theologians such as Karl Barth.

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## Why I Don't Take the New Atheism Seriously, Or Penn Jillette on the Bible



It turns out that I have a lot in common with Penn Jillette. Because I had watched some YouTube videos on science, the YouTube Bots assumed that I would be interested in (and recommended to me) a YouTube channel called “Big Think.” Big Think advertises itself as “the leading source of expert-driven, actionable, educational content . . . [W]e help you get smarter, faster. We aim to help you explore the big ideas and core skills that define knowledge in the 21st century, so you can apply them to the questions and challenges in your own life.” Sounds impressive. What Big Think actually seems to be is a bunch of videos largely by popular media scientists like Bill Nye (the “Science Guy”), Neil de Grasse Tyson (Nova, Cosmos), Michio Kaku, and “public intellectuals” of the “New Atheist” variety.

If I were to express the underlying logic of many of the

videos on Big Think, it would go something like this:

1) We're scientists and we're really smart (or maybe we're not scientists, but we're still really smart, and we think that scientists are smart too).

2) We don't believe in God.

Therefore,

3) If you want to be smart (like a scientist) or at least have people think you're smart (like those of us who aren't scientists), you won't believe in God either.

Anyway, YouTube recommended a Big Think video in which Penn Jillette (the magician) explained how he became an atheist. As I said, it turns out that Jillette and I have a lot in common. Both of us were raised in "generic" Protestant churches – what he calls the church of the "covered dish supper." (I'm assuming that Jillette's church was generic Liberal Protestant, while mine was generic [very] conservative Evangelical. He was raised Congregationalist; I was raised Southern Baptist.) Both of us were actively involved in high school youth groups connected with our church, and we were both influenced by a "cool" youth group leader. Jillette claims that when he was in high school that he read the Bible "cover to cover." So did I. Jillette claims that he took theological questions "very seriously," and read most of the theology books in his local library. I also took theology "very seriously" and I read a lot of books, although I certainly did not read most of the theology books in my local library.

Here's where the similarities end. Jillette tells his listeners that he made a deal with his parents that he would not have to go to church services if he went to the High School youth group instead. Jillette claims that it was reading the Bible that turned him into an atheist, and that eventually he was asked to leave the youth group because he

was using his new-found knowledge to convert other members of the youth group to atheism. Not only did I not leave either my youth group or my church, but for awhile I was the president of the youth group. Far from making me an atheist, reading the Bible became a life-long passion. I continue to read it every day and have read it "cover to cover" numerous times. After high school, I majored in philosophy in college, and later earned both an MA and a PhD in theology. None of this made me an atheist.

So what are the actual arguments that Jillette raises in this video? What about reading the Bible turned him into an atheist?

Jillette states:

1) "Anyone thinking about being an atheist, if you read the Bible or the Koran or the Torah cover to cover, I believe you will emerge from that as an atheist." "The Bible itself will turn you atheist faster than anything."

Okay, I'm intrigued.

2) "What we get told about the Bible is a lot of picking and choosing."

Here's where I get suspicious.

3) "When you see Lot's daughter gang-raped and beaten, and the Lord being okay with that."

Lot had two daughters. Neither was gang-raped or beaten. Quite the contrary; a significant point of the story of Lot is that although the men of Sodom threaten the strangers who are staying with Lot, no one is gang-raped or beaten. Not the strangers, not Lot's daughters. Later Lot's daughters do get their father drunk, and seduce him – the narrator clearly disapproves of this – but this is evidence that Jillette did not actually read the Bible cover to cover. He gets the story

wrong.

4) “When you actually read about Abraham being willing to kill his son . . .”

This is correct, but at the most, it shows that Jillette has not read the text very carefully. A key part of reading any text is understanding context. From beginning to end, the story of Abraham is the story of God’s promise to provide Abraham a son against overwhelming odds. Abraham and Sarah are too old to have children. Eventually Abraham does have a son, but the context makes clear that Abraham does not kill his son. And Abraham himself tells Isaac that God will provide a sacrifice, which God does. Moreover, the reader knows that Abraham did not kill his son, because the nation of Israel are descended from Abraham’s son. The point of the story is that Abraham has learned to have faith in God – that God can be depended on – something that Abraham consistently fails to do in the early parts of the story. The whole point of the story is that Abraham has finally learned to trust God – and God demonstrates that he is trustworthy because he prevents Abraham from killing his son.

5) “When you read the insanity of the talking snake . . .”

Again, this is proof that Gilette did not read the text very carefully. The story in Genesis 2 is not about the snake, but about temptation. The snake has a “walk-on” part – to provide an occasion of temptation. That later interpreters understood the snake to be a personification of Satan, the “tempter,” make it clear that no one understood “talking snakes” to be a normal everyday reality. (If there is a “talking snake” in Genesis, it’s the only one.)

6) When you read the hostility toward homosexuals, toward women . . .”

This shows that Jillette has been influenced by what he has been told is in the Bible rather than actually having read the

Bible. The Bible says very little about homosexuality – and, when Gillette was a teenager, few people in the culture would have approved of homosexuality, so it's unlikely that this was the reason he lost his faith. Modern studies like those of Jewish writer Tikva Frymer-Kensky make clear that the Hebrew Bible is not hostile toward women. It also seems clear that Gillette had not read the New Testament – he says nothing about Jesus' relationships to women, especially in the gospel of Luke, or the significant role of women in the book of Acts. Gillette does not seem aware that the first witnesses of Jesus' resurrection were women. Moreover, the letters of Paul make clear that women had important roles of leadership in his churches. Paul's instructions about family life in the "household codes" in Ephesians and Colossians challenge the sexism of first-century culture by encouraging husbands to love their wives. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says that men do not have control over their own bodies, but their wives do.

7) “. . . the celebration of slavery . . .”

Slavery was universally practiced in all ancient cultures. The Bible certainly does not *celebrate* slavery. In ancient Israel, slavery was significantly modified and humanized compared to surrounding cultures. (Old Testament slavery was not life-long; it was closer to indentured servitude for a limited period of time.) More significant, how could Gillette have missed that the foundation story of Israel is the story of the deliverance of a people from slavery? In the New Testament, one begins to see the beginning of the humane attitudes that eventually led to the abolition of slavery. One of the healing stories about Jesus concerns the healing of a slave. The same "household codes" that encourage husbands to love their wives, challenge slave-owners to consider themselves fellow "servants" of their slaves. In Philemon, Paul actually encourages a slave-owner to release his slave.

8) "When you read in context that 'Thou shalt not kill' means only in your own tribe. There's no hint that it means humanity

in general – that there's no sense of a shared humanity; it's all tribal."

This is the only time when Gillette gives any indication that he knows what context means, but unfortunately, what he says is so much nonsense. The Old Testament provides special protection for foreigners and "sojourners" (Ex. 22:21, 23:9, Lev. 19:34, Dt. 10:19). There are numerous stories in the Old Testament in which Israel's mission is extended to Gentiles. A major theme of eschatological passages is that the Gentiles will be included in God's kingdom. Also, Gillette seems painfully oblivious about how he, a Gentile, was attending a Congregational church in Connecticut. A key theme of the New Testament concerns the proclaiming of the gospel to Gentiles. This is a central theme of the book of Acts as well as Paul's epistles. Moreover, although Jesus explicitly restricted his ministry to Gentiles, there are numerous occasions when he healed Gentiles and spoke highly of them. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes so far as to tell his followers to "love their enemies," and to "bless those who curse you." Far from "no hint," the mission to the Gentiles is a key theme in the Old Testament, and at the heart of New Testament teaching. And, of course, the context of the very passage that Gillette had referred to earlier – the "insanity of the talking snake" – is the story of the creation of *Adam* (ha'adam in Hebrew, which means "human being") as the progenitor of the entire human race. In Genesis 1, we are told that God created humanity as "male and female" *in his image*, and the entire human race are descended from this original humanity. This is not "tribal" by any stretch of the imagination.

9) "When you see a God that is jealous and insecure. . ."

This is, again, a prime indication that Gillette simply misses the point of context and seems entirely ignorant of the historical setting of the Old Testament. The Old Testament does describe God as "jealous"; it also says a lot of other things about God. At the foundation of Israel's faith is God's



covenant with Israel, after having delivered Israel from slavery. The prologue to the Ten Commandments begins, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." This prologue provides the context for everything that follows in the Ten Commandments. One of the key terms that is used of God throughout the Old Testament is *hesed*, translated "loving kindness" and "mercy." It is because God has shown love and mercy to Israel by delivering the people from slavery, and by entering into a "covenant" with the people that a special relationship has been formed. Countless studies have shown the significance of the ancient Middle Eastern understanding of "covenant" for understanding the relationship between God and Israel. In this Middle Eastern covenant concept, God is portrayed as similar to a "liege-lord" who has shown great favor to a lesser partner. In entering a covenant, both parties have obligations. If one party violates the terms of the covenant, there are, of course, consequences.

Moreover, Israel's religion was unique not only in the Middle East, but also in the world, in being monotheistic. If there is only one God, then worship of any other god is not only a violation of the covenant, but also a case of self-delusion. One of the central themes of the Old Testament has to do with the foolishness and delusional character of idolatry. The New Atheists seem to think they show originality in their contempt for what they consider the false god of Christianity. They are fairly late on the scene. Nothing the New Atheists write can compare to the sarcasm of Elijah's words to the prophets of Baal, or Deutero-Isaiah's dismissal of idolatry. But this dismissal of idolatry occurs in the immediate context of Isaiah's proclamation of the oneness of God and uniqueness of God: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god." (Is 44:6)

It is the combination of this covenant partnership (based on God's favor and mercy toward Israel), combined with radical

monotheism, that provides the occasion of God's "jealousy." God is not "jealous" because he is insecure, but because he, and he alone is God, and he, and he alone, can provide for Israel's security. Idolatry is foolishness. (Ex. 34:6,14); it is believing a lie.

In the New Testament, it is the notion of "grace" (*charis*) or "love" (*agape*) that becomes the equivalent of the Old Testament notion of *hesed* (mercy or loving-kindness"), which is now located in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8). And it is because God is good to all without measure, that Jesus commands his followers to love even their enemies (Matt. 7:43-48).

If Jillette really had read the Bible "cover to cover," he would have known this. Or at least, he should have.

10) "When you see that there's contradictions that show that it was clearly written hundreds of years after the supposed fact, and full of contradictions . . ."

Jillette presumes to be a biblical scholar here, but he does not say what the contradictions are, or which parts of the Bible were written "hundreds of years after the supposed fact." Is he talking about the New Testament? No biblical scholar believes that the gospels were written "hundreds of years after the supposed fact." Paul's letters were written within a few decades of the facts; the scholarly consensus is that the gospels were written some time between 65 and 95 AD, well within the life-time of eyewitnesses. Much of the Old Testament also gives indication of being written by eyewitnesses – the court story of David; the writings of the major and minor prophets – even though they may contain later material as well.

Jillette seems to be thinking of the Torah here – about which there is disagreement among biblical scholars. Very

conservative biblical scholars would argue for the Mosaic authorship of the entire Pentateuch; very liberal scholars would say that none of it goes back to Moses. A great many scholars would land somewhere in between. The Torah is a composite work, with some parts coming from a much later period, e.g., the book of Deuteronomy, and many of the laws. At the same time, there is no reason to doubt that the book has a substantial historical core, and contains substantial ancient material, much of which may go back to Moses himself. At the same time, unless one assumes a "fundamentalist" notion of biblical authorship, that the Torah was written over a period of time does not detract from either the historical reliability or the theological significance of the text. It is the final canonical form that is Scripture, whenever it was finally written.

11) "It's like reading the Constitution. It's in English. You don't need someone to hold your hand. . . . Read what the Bible says. Going back to the source material is always the best. Someone's trying to interpret something for you, they always have an agenda."

Well, no. The Bible is not in English. The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. What we have in English are translations. I do agree, however, that reading the text itself is the best approach, even in English translation. But it seems that Jillette could have profited from having someone "hold his hand," since his understanding of the Bible seems so deficient that he clearly did not read it carefully. Much has been written on the Bible. Universities and seminaries are full of professors who have PhD's in Old and New Testament. If Jillette had read any competent commentaries or introductions to the Old or New Testament in addition to reading the Bible, he would not have made such egregious errors.

12) "I read the Bible, and then I read Bertrand Russell, and I read a lot of other stuff. . . . I read a lot of 'em"

[theology in the local library]. I was asked to leave the youth group because I was converting everyone to atheism.”

I also read Bertrand Russell, and Plato and Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hume, Sartre, Camus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Victor Hugo, Dostoevsky, C.S. Lewis, Tolkien, George MacDonald, Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Walther Eichrodt, Oscar Cullmann, Joachim Jeremias.

I was not asked to leave because I was converting everyone to atheism. I became the president of the youth group.

13) “With the help of Martin Mull, Randy Newman, Frank Zappa – the idea that these three men were out of the closet atheists, was so inspiring to me. . . . Having those people say the simple words, ‘There is no God’ meant the world to me, and gave me joy and gave me passion, and gave me love and gave me confidence.”

Martin Mull? Randy Newman? Frank Zappa? Really? I remember the first time I read Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Barth, Pannenberg. Was it like that?

14) “I’m on the side that’s winning. . . . If you counted atheism as a religion, it’s the fastest growing religion in America.”

This is a classic example of *Argumentum ad populum*, or the “bandwagon” fallacy. (If you’re a *really smart* “New Atheist,” you can look it up on Wikipedia.)

Finally, and most important – in typical “New Atheist” fashion, Jillette claims to be criticizing “religion” in general. However, the single religion Jillette is really criticizing (as are all the “New Atheists”) is historical orthodox Christianity. He begins by talking about his own upbringing as a Protestant Christian, and how he lost his Christian faith. Although he begins by talking about “the

Bible, the Koran, and the Torah," he then states that "reading the Bible will turn you atheist faster than anything." (Oddly, he does not seem to recognize that "the Torah" is actually part of "the Bible." The Koran is not.) The rest of his talk is a criticism of "the Bible," by which presumably he means the Christian Bible, which he claims to have read "from cover to cover" when he was in High School. Despite this claim, Jillette's criticisms are all addressed to the book of Genesis, with a single reference to the Ten Commandments. At this point, Jillette's "cover to cover" claim begins to sound very suspicious. Most puzzling in Jillette's argument is his complete omission of any reference to the New Testament whatsoever. He neither acknowledges nor even addresses the fundamental claim of New Testament and Christian religion, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God incarnate, who died on a Roman cross and rose from the dead three days later. If a "talking snake" is "insanity," what are we to make of a crucified God who rises from the dead? Jillette's criticism of the Bible is something like the film critic who claims the latest movie is "terrible," but it turns out that he walked out of the theater during the opening titles.

Is it fair to pick on Penn Jillette, a celebrity magician not known for his expertise in biblical studies, theology or philosophy? If a YouTube channel calls itself "Big Think," and advertises itself as "the leading source of expert-driven, actionable, educational content," and that YouTube channel presents Penn Jillette as an example of "the big ideas and core skills that define knowledge in the 21st century," then "yes." I'll take "New Atheism" seriously when it takes itself seriously enough to present serious arguments.

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# I get mail . . . about earthquakes

In response to my post entitled "[Why God Does Not Prevent Earthquakes or Tsunamis,](#)" I received some questions from "Rob." Here's my somewhat lengthy response.

Rob,

Thanks for your comment. The above is a blog post, and is by necessity concise. I could not address every possible question or concern, and some things were implied more than stated, or, I assumed could be concluded reasonably in what I wrote above. To your questions:

*1) Do you think this same sort of destruction of being is both possible and inevitable in the new heavens and new earth, which will be just as contingent as the first heavens and earth? If you don't think this will be the case, why?*

1) By definition, anything that is contingent is subject to the possibility of non-being. In fact, in a created universe, everything is intrinsically subject to the possibility of non-being at any given moment. The traditional Christian doctrine of creation is that if God were to cease the act of creation at any given moment, the entire universe would "blink out" like a light bulb. Even angels, who are "naturally" immortal, because immaterial, are dependent on God's continuing power to exist at all. (Angels are "naturally" immortal, because they are pure minds. Not being composed of physical parts, they cannot die should their parts be destroyed. Nonetheless, should God cease to create them, they would cease existing.)

Of course, any universally broad statement like "destruction of being is both possible and inevitable" also has to be understood in light of other premises implicit in the very

definition of contingency that would include an “unless.” Since all contingent being depends on God for its initial and continuing existence (by definition), the inevitability of destruction contains an assumed “all other factors being the same” or “unless” God wills otherwise. All contingent being always has the possibility of non-being, but, since all contingent being is given by God, there is nothing to prevent God’s continuing to give being. So, in the new heavens and the new earth, destruction of being is certainly intrinsically possible, since God alone is the source of creation, and could, if he willed, cease to create. However, destruction of being is not inevitable, if God decides either to preserve intrinsically destructible beings from harm, or to create beings in such a way that they have an intrinsically natural immortality (something like the angels). Both possibilities are logically possible. What God will do is up to him.

*2) If God could have created a world without these possibilities in the first place (which must be true if there is going to be a new heavens and new earth where there is no more pain and there are no more tears), why did he not go ahead with that in the first place?*

You are correct that God “could have” created such a possibility in the first place. But it is only your assumption that he didn’t. Our knowledge of what God has done in the universe is restricted to what he has done in the universe (or rather portion of the universe) we actually live in. The traditional Christian doctrine is that human beings are not the only rational creatures. Angels, for example, are “naturally” immortal. For all we know, God might well have created universes where other intelligent creatures exist who have something like the “naturally” immortal resurrection bodies of the new creation, something like Tolkien’s “elves.” Who knows?

However, it should also be clear that I was not addressing in my initial points what God "might have done" or "could have done," but what he actually "has done." My claim is that the goodness of God is not inconsistent with the world in which we actually exist, a world in which earthquakes and tsunamis actually exist.

As I stated: "It is likely the case that a planet like earth could not be the kind of planet that could support intelligent life like human beings if it were not also the kind of planet that has tectonic plates."

I perhaps should have qualified "like earth as we know it (and not how God could have created it in his infinite power)" and "like human beings as we know them (and not how God could have created them in his infinite power)", but I assumed that was obvious. A planet that did not have tectonic plates would not be a "planet like earth." Moreover, the "human beings" I was referring to are "human beings" like us, like we are now. I don't know whether a new creation and a new earth would have tectonic plates, but the kinds of human beings it would contain would certainly be different than the kind we are now.

There is an inherent logical inconsistency when a person complains that there should be no earthquakes or tsunamis. The person who makes that claim almost certainly owes his or her existence to living on a planet in which there are necessarily tectonic plates, which, when they shift, necessarily cause earthquakes. To wish there were no such things as earthquakes is almost certainly to wish that I were not here to complain about the existence of earthquakes. So the "nonsensical" implied "within the possible conditions for this actual universe in which human beings like us can actually live."

And, of course, it is also the case that the traditional Christian position is that God did create something like such a universe (with no human pain, death, or tears). The historic



Christian position is that human death is a consequence of sin. (As I stated above, the Christian claim is that the problem of evil has a moral, not ontological solution.) If human beings had never sinned, would there have still been earthquakes and tsunamis? Presumably. What would have happened if there had been an earthquake in a morally perfect world? I don't know. Perhaps there would have been an infallible earthquake alert system.

I jest, but only because we are talking about a non-existing possibility. In the world in which we exist, people do bad things, and there are earthquakes. Again, the question is not about what God "might have done," but rather whether there is any incompatibility between the goodness of God and the existence of earthquakes in the world in which we (sinners) actually exist.

But some possible answers to your question might include:

a) God likes variety. Thomas Aquinas suggests that creation ranges from purely immaterial substances (God and angels) to purely material substances (minerals). In between are non-rational living material substances (plants and animals), and in between them are rational material (bodily) substances – human beings. But those "in between" rational material (embodied) substances happen to live on planets and the normal way in which those planets come into existence includes tectonic plates, and thus the very real possibility of earthquakes.

b) The decision to create human beings in a contingent and potentially destructible universe was a decision by God to create creatures that could be "historical." Again, relying on Aquinas, Thomas argues that, as immaterial creatures, angels intuitively and completely know and will whatever they know and will. Angels do not ratiolate. They simply know. Angels do not consider. They simply choose. Accordingly, the very first decision each angel makes is either to love God

before self or to love self before God. And this decision is permanent and irrevocable. Thus, it is not that fallen angels do not repent. Rather, they cannot repent.

To the contrary, because human beings are embodied creatures, their knowledge and choices are mediated through physical created objects. Humans do not know God directly and immediately as the Chief Good, but rather know directly only created goods. Humans can know God only as the giver of goods, but do not (apart from revelation) know him directly. Human choices are always between various higher and lower goods, and take place over time. In the choice of higher and lower goods, humans develop virtues (or vices) and formed virtue produces character. Ultimately, it is human orientation toward God as Chief Good that enables human choices of lesser goods, but human beings can always choose lesser goods in preference to God as their Chief Good and final end. For human beings, unlike angels, both salvation and damnation are processes, a kind of pilgrimage that takes place over time. But life as pilgrimage in this sense is something that can only take place for embodied creatures. But – such embodiment by its nature is subject to the possibility of destruction and death, unless God acts to preserve contingent being from destruction.

Because human beings will and know “historically” (over time), redemption also must take place over time, and so God redeems human beings through a historical process of redemption that begins with Israel and comes to fruition in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, because human beings are historical, redemption is also possible – in a way that it was not for angels.

In the new creation, human beings will for the first time see God directly “face to face,” and will no longer come to know God through the mediation of fellow creatures. However, once this immediate knowledge takes place, “history” will end. Human beings will no longer live in “pilgrimage” but will be

finally fixed in their choice of Good or Evil, like the angels.

The above is entirely Aquinas's speculation, but I find it plausible.

Another possibility is:

c) We don't know. My number 5) in my initial post, combined with my 15) means that God is free, he can create a number of universes, any of them will be good, and, again, there can be no possible best.

*In this case your 'no best possible world,' response doesn't make much sense, because it seems that Christianity is interested in two worlds, one in which sin and death exist, and one in which they don't. It doesn't matter that the latter world isn't the best possible world, or that God could continue to improve this world eternally (which presumably He will in the eschaton) – what makes the question sensible is the fact that we can delineate between two such possible, contingent worlds. The question remains why God chose to create the first kind.*

It is not exactly the case that Christians believe in “two worlds,” like a Platonic distinction between this world of matter and another world of disembodied spirits. Rather, Christians believe there is one world that has two stages. The current stage is something like a “dress rehearsal” for the real play that is going to follow. During the “dress rehearsal,” human beings practice their parts (they live out their lives, they live and die “natural deaths”) At some point, the Director steps in and says, “Dress rehearsal is over. This is the real thing.” There is a direct correlation between “dress rehearsal” and the new creation which is the “actual play.”

I think that fiction has often done a better job of portraying

the relation between the “dress rehearsal” and the “actual play” than has theology or literature, perhaps because fiction writers have less constricted imaginations. Dante and C.S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce* are two of my favorite examples here.

Of course, God could simply have omitted the “dress rehearsal,” but then, we’d have to make sure we got our parts absolutely right the first time. Because, if Thomas is right, when we see God “face to face,” there is no opportunity for second choices, not because God does not allow them, but because they are not possible. “History” is only possible in a contingent universe in which we don’t have immediate awareness or intuition of God. The kind of world we live in now. Where there are earthquakes.

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## Why God Does Not Prevent Earthquakes or Tsunamis



There is an atheist apologetics website that calls itself [“Why Won’t God Heal Amputees?”](#) By “atheist apologetics,” I mean the kind of thing engaged in by advocates of the New Atheism like Richard Dawkins, that is, an attempt to make an argumentative case for atheism and against religion, specifically against Christianity. The basic argument of the website is a simplistic argument against the

existence of God based on the problem of physical evil. It is a variation on the “old chestnut” “village atheist” chain of argumentation:

*If God is good, he would want to eliminate evil.*

*If God is all-powerful, he could eliminate evil.*

*But evil exists.*

*Ergo,*

*Either God is not good*

*Or*

*God is not all-powerful*

*Or*

*God does not exist.*

The website presents the argument in terms of the problem of amputees.

*If God were good, he would want to heal amputees . . . etc.*

*But God does not heal amputees.*

*Ergo*

*There is no God.*

Atheist versions of the argument from evil do not usually distinguish carefully between moral and physical “evil,” and this is a classic example. The vast majority of suffering that takes place in the world is a result of moral culpability on the part of human beings. Hitler killed 6 million Jews. Wars create amputees. Physical suffering and moral evil need to be distinguished.

Moreover, it also needs to be noted that any attempt to address the problem of evil and suffering in the world can really only opt for one of two solutions, a metaphysical solution or a moral solution. Metaphysical solutions say that “evil and suffering are just the way things are.” Moral solutions say that evil is the consequence of the moral choices of some rational being or beings. Atheism, pantheism

and all versions of monism must necessarily opt for metaphysical solutions. Dualisms (Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism, Manichaeism) also opt for a metaphysical solution. Good and evil are in eternal and irresolvable conflict, and that is “just the way things are.”

Partially moral solutions can be found in those Eastern religions that advocate karma. At least some of the evil and suffering that exist in the world is a direct consequence of moral choices made by rational beings, either in this life or a previous life. Nonetheless, the solution is not complete, insofar as Eastern religions often try to combine karma with some kind of monist ontology. At heart, the basic problem in monist systems is still metaphysical. Since everything is ultimately Brahman, the existence of plurality, evil, and suffering is *maya*, an illusion, and so, at the end of the day, “evil and suffering are just the way things are.”

The Abrahamic religions may be unique in advocating a moral solution to the problem of evil. Evil exists because of the choices of rational beings (either human beings or spiritual beings [fallen angels]), choices for which God is not responsible. Augustine is the chief architect of what is sometimes called “the free will defense,” in his arguments against Manichaeism. I remain convinced that Augustine’s solution is still the only intelligible one, insofar as any solution that is not moral is not a solution. Any attempt to explain the existence of evil by saying that “this is just the way things are” is at bottom a throwing up of the hands in defeat.

At the same time, it is crucial to distinguish between the problem of moral evil (caused by the moral choices of rational beings) and what is sometimes called “physical evil.” Why are children born blind? Why does God not heal amputees? Or, as the question has been asked ever since the Lisbon earthquake, and frequently in recent years: [Why does God not prevent earthquakes or tsunamis?](#) The following is a preliminary

reflection not on the problem of moral evil – What about the holocaust? – but physical “evil.” Specifically, why does God not prevent earthquakes or tsunamis?

Any doctrine of creation has to include the following affirmations.

1) By definition, created being must be other than God, and a consequence of God’s free decision to create. God does not have to create at all, but if God creates a universe, that universe will necessarily have certain characteristics that must distinguish anything that is not God from God.

2) Creation is contingent, not only in the sense that it does not have to exist at all, but also in the sense that it could be radically different.

3) Creation is finite. By definition, anything that is contingent has limits.

4) Created being has an intrinsic order and intelligibility. An unintelligible and disordered creation could not be a universe in the strict sense, but would rather be a chaos, incapable of either supporting intelligent life like ourselves or of being understood by intelligent life.

5) Creation could be greater than it is, but also less than it is. By definition, any finite contingent being could be improved, to an infinite extent. By any definition, any finite contingent being could be less than it is, to an infinite extent. There is no upper or lower limit to that which is finite and contingent. To speak of a “best of all possible worlds” is nonsense. To demand that we should live in such is delusional nonsense.

6) Both contingency and intelligibility are necessary to a universe in which rational physical creatures (like ourselves) can live. A universe that was not contingent would not change, but would be static and without history. A universe

that was not intelligible would be unknowable.

7) The above characteristics are not only demanded by a Christian doctrine of creation, they are necessary to modern science. A universe that was not contingent would not need to be examined by experimental method to be known. A universe that was not intelligible could not be known by being examined. The reason why modern science developed in the West was because the Christian doctrine of creation (and only the Christian doctrine of creation) laid down the conditions by which modern science is possible.

8) In any universe that is both contingent and intelligible, destruction of being is both possible and inevitable. In universes where hard substances like rocks exist, contacts between rocks of sufficient size with organic beings (plants and animals) will result in death. In universes where animals require oxygen to live, lack of oxygen will lead to death. In cases where that destruction happens to intelligent self-aware beings, that destruction will be perceived as a disaster.

9) In a contingent and intrinsically ordered universe, there are conditions that make intelligent physical life possible. It is likely the case that a planet like earth could not be the kind of planet that could support intelligent life like human beings if it were not also the kind of planet that has tectonic plates. It is certainly the case that a planet that supports human beings must have water. However, where there are tectonic plates, there will inevitably be earthquakes. Where there is both water and tectonic plates, earthquakes will produce tsunamis, and if people live near shore lines, tsunamis will cause death.

10) To ask God to prevent earthquakes in order to prevent human suffering and death is likely to make a nonsensical request. It is possible that God could create a world without tectonic plates, but such a world would likely be one in which human beings like ourselves could not live.



11) To demand that any universe that God creates would be a world in which there were no possibility of suffering or death would be to demand that God create a world that is not both contingent and intrinsically intelligible, but such a world would not be a created world because contingency and intelligibility are the necessary conditions of creation.

12) To demand that God intervene whenever the conditions of creation might lead to suffering and death would be to demand that God either perform constant miracles or that God violate the conditions of a contingent and orderly creation. Questions like "Why does God not prevent earthquakes?" or "Why does God not restore the missing limbs of all amputees?" are silly questions. They do not take the conditions of creation (contingency and order) seriously.

13) In an orderly contingent world where there will inevitably be numerous threats to the lives and well being of intelligent creatures like ourselves, both pain and fear of death are good things. Pain is a warning that protects animals (both rational and non-rational) from destruction. Fear of death is a necessary motivator to keep animals and people alive.

14) The doctrine of creation also inevitably includes a doctrine of providence. Providence entails that God continues to order and preserve creation, but does so in such a manner that accords with both its contingency and inherent intelligibility. Providence is neither determinism nor deism. Providence entails that God is good to both the moral and immoral. Providence entails that God deals with evil and suffering not by doing away with them, but by producing good out of suffering and evil. Granted that God is all powerful, and God exercises providence, God can certainly heal people, and answers to prayer no doubt happen. However, to demand that God must prevent every act of physical suffering or that God restore amputated limbs is to demand that God perform constant miracles, that he override the normal operation of a contingent and ordered creation.

15) In any contingent universe, being (and life) are gifts, not owed to us by God. Whether or not human death is a consequence of sin (Christians believe that it is), that God gives life freely means that human beings can not demand it as something owed to us

16) Eschatology is a necessary part of the Christian doctrine of creation. The Christian claim is that history has a purpose and direction, and the current physical universe is not only not the only one that could possibly exist, but that it is also not the only one that will always exist. There is therefore a ground for the unlimited hope for something better that seems to be an inherent characteristic of human beings. Nonetheless, such hope is not grounds to question the real and limited goodness of the world in which we live now, complete with its earthquakes and tsunamis and amputees who are not healed.

There are, of course, some necessary pieces that to be added to the above if one is going to adopt any ultimately Christian and moral solution to the problem of evil, namely:

1) The relation between moral choices and suffering. In a world in which rational beings make moral choices, there would have to have been a first evil choice. What relation is there between the inherent possibility of physical suffering in a contingent and ordered world and actual suffering? That is, if there had been no fall into sin, would human beings still have been subject to physical suffering like that caused by earthquakes and tsunamis? Presumably, in an ordered and contingent universe that contains tectonic plates and water, earthquakes and tsunamis would take place whether human beings had sinned or not.

2) Redemption: Any Christian account of the problem of evil and suffering needs to say something about the incarnation, saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Christian solution to the problem of theodicy ultimately focuses on the

cross. At the same time, the cross is a moral solution to a moral problem.

3) Eschatology: Does the notion of a “new creation” and a “new earth” suggest some kind of alteration of current physical laws such that there would be no earthquakes or tsunamis in the “new earth”? In the “new creation,” there will be no death and “all tears will be wiped” away. Such a new creation would have to be considerably different than the one in which we live now. Given that there are no limits to the possible “greatness” of any contingent universe, such a new creation is certainly within the limits of divine possibility.

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# Answers to New Atheist Questions: Part 1 – Epistemology

A reader named “Dale” left the following comment in response to my sermon: “CallerID From the Source of the Universe”:

*There are two main forces in the universe. Order and chaos. Religion perceives order as good and chaos as evil. These forces have always existed in matter. It is religion that has labeled them as such. Some texts of the Bible have been in existence since 1500 BC. There have been billions of creatures that have been borne, lived, and died before the Bible came along to interpret meaning. It is the nature of matter to be the way it is. It is what it is. Being matter I must die. I go out of existence. That is difficult to accept. I had no existence before I was borne. Faith tells me that there is a transcendence existence beyond matter. Hope comes into play here to treat the anxiety of death. Call it a*

*psychological prop that keeps us sane. Here I can assent to faith or decline to do so. If faith, the promise of glory. Decline, hell or nothing. What is my choice. Glory sounds attractive. Organized religion plays on this dilemma. This is what atheists object to when they challenge believers in this psychological game of meaning.*

I thought Dale's comment was worth responding to at some length.



Thank you for writing, Dale. Your points are worth addressing, and I will do so at some length.

First, I want to point out that, in my sermon, I deliberately avoided addressing questions of the origins of evil or suffering, and instead focused on the question of what Christian faith asserts about what it is that God does about the existence of evil and suffering. I also avoided distinguishing between what philosophers call "natural evil" (earthquakes, birth defects) and moral evil (violence, murder, betrayal, theft). I did this for several reasons. First, as a preacher in a church that uses a lectionary, I had to preach from the lectionary texts for the day, and, second, unlike a lecture, a sermon is restricted to what the speaker can say in twenty minutes or so. A more adequate attempt to address the problem would necessarily deal with the origin of evil as well the distinction between natural occurrences (like earthquakes) that threaten human well-being (and are therefore discerned as "evil"), and events that have human causes and are designated as "evil" for moral reasons. The former are more properly "tragedy" than "evil," while the latter are more properly designated as "evil." If you lost your wallet, there would be

a genuine loss to which you might respond with "tough luck" (minor tragedy), but you would not generally consider the loss "evil." On the other hand, if I attempted to steal your wallet, then you would likely consider my actions "evil" even if I failed, and you would justifiably be angry with me, even if I actually had done you no harm.

More important than these distinctions, I think, is the question of response to evil, and, as I pointed out, it is one that I have yet to see any of the New Atheists address (or rather even acknowledge) with any sophistication. To the extent that the New Atheists ignore the fundamental Christian claim that God deals with evil in a particular manner, their criticism simply fails to hit its target. I note that your own comment did not address this central point either, but rather focuses on questions about the nature of the universe (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology), specifically questions having to do with "natural evil," and how we might know whether a given natural event is an evil. So I will address those questions.. Your comment covers a lot of territory and addresses several issues, so it needs to be broken down piece by piece.

*There are two main forces in the universe. Order and chaos. Religion perceives order as good and chaos as evil. These forces have always existed in matter. It is religion that has labeled them as such.*

You begin by making two assertions, the first, having to do with ontology or being, the second with epistemology or theory of knowledge. Claims about what we know and how we know, and claims about being (what is the case) are different kinds of claims and need to be assessed separately.

In order to address your first claim about ontology, it is necessary to begin with the second, about epistemology. I summarize your epistemological claims as follows:

1) Order and chaos are inherent to the structure of the universe. In themselves, they are neither good, nor evil, but simply are what they are (in itself a claim about ontology – I will address this later).

2) “Religion” has designated order as “good,” and “chaos” as evil, but these designates correspond to nothing real in the structure of the universe. They are [psychological] projections, based upon fear and unfounded hope, and are thus illusory (more on this later, as well).

3) Unlike, “religion,” atheism recognizes the universe as it is. It does not project illusory categories (“good,” “evil”) on the universe (implied but not asserted).

In response: I would not say that it is “religion” that has labeled “order” and “chaos” as “good” and “evil.” Rather, it is human beings who have done so. Both Plato and Aristotle said that philosophy begins in wonder, and, although the various historical religions all in different ways do indeed attempt to address questions about the meaning of life, the problems of suffering and evil, the purpose and destiny of human beings, it seems to be a fundamental characteristic of human beings as such to want to know answers to questions like “Why are we here?,” “Where did we come from?,” “Why is there evil and suffering?,” “What is the fundamental problem?,” “What is the solution to the fundamental problem?,” “How should we live?” These are the fundamental questions addressed by both religion and philosophy, and atheists engage in this activity as much as do the “religious,” and the New Atheism is simply one of numerous examples in the history of thought to attempt to address these fundamental questions.

Human beings are thus fundamentally metaphysical in orientation, and metaphysics is an unavoidable human activity in the sense that human beings, whether religious or not, whether atheists or not, whether philosophers are not, will attempt to answer these questions. It may be true that some religious people have identified order with “goodness” and

chaos with "evil," but this is not fundamentally (or necessarily) a "religious" affirmation. Plato's philosophy makes something like the same affirmation, and Plato was not "religious," but a philosopher. There are religions (like Christianity) that would make the formulation differently. (I hope to address this later). At the same time, the heated rhetoric of atheists like Dawkins and Hitchens makes clear that they do not merely believe that there is "chaos" in the universe, but that the suffering that results from such chaos is a genuine evil, and this evil is a primary argument against the existence of God.

Human beings address these fundamental questions of the meaning and purpose of life and the world through symbols, narratives, and intellectual constructs that provide attempts to answer the fundamental questions. Contemporary philosophy and theology tends to refer to these epistemological constructs as "world-views" or "paradigms."

One of the reasons that contemporary philosophers and theologians tend to speak in terms of "paradigms" or "world-views" has been the collapse of epistemological "foundationalism," the epistemological position of which Descartes is the prime example. Foundationalism is the position that any claim to knowledge of truth that is not self-evident must itself be based on knowledge of basic foundational truths that are self-evident, such as one's own existence or the law of non-contradiction. Any "truths" not justified by self-evident foundations are to be doubted. Foundationalism has collapsed because of its internal incoherence. Philosophers have come to realize that there are insufficient self-evident principles on which to build a coherent system, and there is lack of agreement on what the self-evident principles are. The conclusions that supposedly follow from self-evident principles are themselves subject to doubt, and, again, there is no agreement on what those conclusions are. Consequently, foundationalism's principle of

methodological doubt leads inevitably to skepticism. Finally, the consequences that follow from self-evident principles lead to trivial results. Any belief that actually makes a difference in one's life and is worth committing oneself to is a belief that is inherently subject to being challenged. Finally, before one can reach the point of recognition of self-evident principles and the conclusions that necessarily follow from them, one always has first committed oneself to non-self-evident beliefs that in themselves can be doubted. The "working-knowledge" that ordinary human beings need to navigate the world is based on "trust" to commitments that can necessarily be doubted, and such trust is socially located in communities that exist prior to the point at which we are able to doubt. Thus, St. Augustine's dictum: "believe in order to understand" is true not only as a prescription for Christian theology, but as necessary advice for anyone to operate in the world. There is no knowledge without prior faith and commitment to things that we cannot prove. Everyone "walks by faith, and not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Foundationalism thus collapses of its own weight. It is the epistemological equivalent of attempting to lift oneself by one's boot straps.

Given the collapse of foundationalism, it follows that atheism, just like "religion," necessarily depends on certain prior faith commitments. Just like "religion," if atheism is going to make a reasonable case for its positions, it must do so by embracing the plausibility of an epistemological "paradigm." And it does so. Just like "religion," the New Atheists "tell a story"; they use symbols and intellectual constructs to make a case that "there is no god" in the exact same way that adherents of various religions or philosophies have used stories and symbols to argue for the plausibility of their own religious or philosophical commitments for thousands of years. It's just that the New Atheism tells a different story, and appeals to different symbols and stories to reach different conclusions. The most popular story told by the New Atheists is that of the progress of rational science and



autonomous individualism over against the intolerant restrictions of irrational religion. Scientific atheism is good because it leads to more progress, more freedom, and more tolerance, while religion is evil because it is founded on irrational superstition, and results in tyranny, intolerance, obscurantism, and violence.

Such paradigms fail or succeed to the extent that they are both internally non-contradictory (consistency), and also can adequately account for and explain observed phenomena of the world around us (comprehensiveness). But they also have to have a certain aesthetic elegance, a "fittingness" that we find attractive, and "just makes sense." Paradigms that are internally inconsistent or clearly contrary to observed reality tend to collapse of their own weight, but particular paradigms can survive a great deal of both internal and external tension. For example, some Eastern religions claim that the observed physical phenomena of the world in which we live are *maya* or illusion, and that the fundamental goal of life is to escape from individual identity, which is, by implication, an illusion as well. Such a claim is, to say the least, in tension with what most Westerners would consider to be the self-evident reality of both one's own existence and the external world. (There have been Western exceptions, like the English philosopher George Berkeley, who argued for a philosophy in which matter did not exist.) However, Hinduism and Buddhism have survived for centuries in spite of fundamental affirmations that fly in the face of what most Westerners consider to be the self-evident nature of reality. At the same time, internal consistency and comprehensiveness are not alone able to preserve a paradigm. Thomas Kuhn's book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, is the source of the contemporary use of the term "paradigm," and Kuhn's fundamental argument was that the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric scientific paradigm was not the result of either better internal consistency or comprehensiveness. Ptolemy's paradigm was as capable of accounting for the data as was

Copernicus's. What led to the eventual overthrow of geocentrism in favor of heliocentrism was a kind of "aesthetic" elegance that was more simple, and thus more appealing. Similarly, a case can be made that numerous philosophical or religious systems have enough internal consistency and external comprehensiveness not to be self-evidently incoherent. Religious or philosophical systems can survive for quite awhile despite lack of consistency or coherence, and some philosophies and religions disappear not because they are self-evidently false, but because they become old-fashioned or are simply overtaken by other paradigms.. One thinks of nineteenth century Absolute Idealism or twentieth century logical positivism as two such philosophies that were once in vogue, but now have simply fallen by the way side.

Epistemological paradigms can be as simple as the accounts of primitive mythologies (although most mythologies are not actually simple) or as sophisticated as philosophical and metaphysical constructs like those of Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel or Martin Heidegger. Epistemological paradigms are also associated with the higher religions: not only the so-called Western religions of Judaism and Christianity, but also Eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism. Insofar as these intellectual constructs or paradigms are attempts to think within and out of particular religious traditions, they are theologies.

These paradigms can also be atheistic. For example, one thinks of Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Neitzche in the nineteenth century, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, in the twentieth, and, more recently, post-modern atheists like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, or Peter Singer. As such, the atheistic constructs are neither less nor more theoretical than the mythological, religious, or philosophical ones, and attempt to use exactly the same kinds of intellectual tools to address the same kinds of questions. They have no intrinsic superiority to the paradigms offered by theistic philosophical

systems, religions, or even primitive mythologies. They simply offer one intellectual construct among others in an attempt to answer basic worldview questions.

And, as paradigms, none of them are straightforward readings of what is "simply there." The atheistic assumption that nothing exists except matter is as much an intellectual construct (a paradigm) that attempts to make sense of reality as is the Buddhist claim that individual existence is an illusion and that the non-existing self is subject to rebirth until it escapes this illusion, or as the Christian claim that human beings have been created in the image of God, and are destined for eternal life.

So much for the epistemological claim. ("It is religion that has labeled them as such.") It is not "religion" that has "labeled them as such," but simply human beings with a desire to know, who engage in the process that Plato and Aristotle say begins in wonder. Some who engage in this process have commitments to some particular religion. Some do not. But the process is the same, whether engaged in by advocates of particular religions or advocates of none.

This does not imply that one "paradigm" is as valid as another, nor that there is no way to decide between paradigms, but it does eliminate the atheist presumption that "religion" is an implausible "interpretation" of reality – "It is religion that has labeled them as such" – while atheism is simply a recognition of what is self-evidently the case. Both offer competing paradigms, and there is no such thing as a straightforward reading of the way things just are. It may be the case that, as you write, "matter [simply] is what it is." But that is not simply and self-evidently true.

This leads to your metaphysical claims, which I hope to address later.

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# Caller ID From the Source of the Universe: Another Providence Sermon

Jonah 2:1-9

Psalm 29

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:22-33



Recently I have been reading some books written by folks like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens who have been labelled the “New Atheists,” and I am going to let you in on a secret. The secret is that these books are not about what you might think they’re about. Given the publicity that the New Atheists have been getting, you might think there must be some new knockdown argument that these people have worked out, and the New Atheists finally have proof that there is no God. But what I’ve discovered when I read the New Atheists is that they’re just the Old Atheists recycled. They have no new arguments.

There is some discussion of how science can explain everything we need to know, but any first year under-graduate philosophy student should be able to tell you why this is just not the case. There is also some discussion about problems that have supposedly been raised by contemporary biblical scholarship, but, again, any first year student in biblical studies at a

decent seminary [like Trinity School for Ministry, where I teach] has a more sophisticated understanding of the Bible and contemporary biblical scholarship than these folks exhibit. There is also usually an account of some of the horrible things that Christians have done in the name of God, but anyone who has studied any church history at all knows about things that make their stories seem tame. After all, it was Christians who wrote books like *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, not atheists. It was Roman Catholics who made Joan of Arc a saint, not Enlightenment freethinkers. The names of Thomas More and Thomas Cranmer, the sacking of Constantinople by the Crusaders, the hanging and drowning and burning at the stake of Anabaptists by just about everyone, and the pogroms against the Jews, shows that the committing of atrocious acts of Christians against one another and against those of other religions, has been an equal opportunity sport.

What should be no surprise is that the real argument that comes up time and again in these books is a problem that has been with us since at least the time when the Book of Job was written, the problem of evil and suffering in the world. As the old argument goes, if God is good, he would want to prevent evil and suffering. If God is all powerful, he could prevent evil and suffering. Since evil and suffering exist, it is clear that God is either not good or not powerful, or, more likely, there is no God at all.

Examples abound. The atheist Christopher Hitchens has written a book entitled *God is Not Great*. If you read the book, it is clear that what Hitchens really means is that God is not good. The New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, who was once a born-again Christian, now calls himself an agnostic, and has written numerous books attacking orthodox Christian faith. However, he is quite clear that it was not biblical scholarship that made him abandon his faith, but the problem that bad things happen to good people.

Of course, this should not be a surprise. Anyone who has never

had a moment when he or she has questioned whether God exists or God is good in the light of something bad that has happened in their life is either sheltered or is just not paying attention. Christians worship a Savior who prayed that the cup of suffering might pass him by (and it didn't), and who cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" from a Roman cross. A religion one of whose central tenets is that God the Father abandoned God the Son to death by crucifixion is not exactly naïve about bad things happening to good people.

What is odd about these books is that the critics do not actually seem to notice how it is that the Christian faith addresses problems of evil and suffering. I have yet to read the atheist text that even begins to consider seriously the implications of what it might mean that Christians believe in an incarnate God who was put to death by his own creatures, even the religious leaders of his own covenant people. Rather, all these books begin with assumptions about what the authors think God should do or what they would do if they were in charge of the universe. Since God has not created the kind of universe they would have created, God must not exist. Or, rather, the very fact that evil and suffering exists in the universe at all is definitive proof that there is no god.

In this sermon I want to look at this morning's readings to notice that the Bible actually deals with problems of evil and suffering in a way that these critics just do not seem to notice. For purposes of this sermon, I won't distinguish between moral evil and "bad things" that just happen to us—what philosophers of religion call "physical evil." By "evil," I just mean "bad things," things that threaten us, things we fear, things that cause us suffering, whether these things are caused by our own sins, by the evil actions of others, or whether they are physical disasters like earthquakes, cancer, or children born with birth defects. Christian theologians and philosophers point out important differences between these various kinds of evil, but I don't

have time to go there this morning.

The Bible is not a philosophy text. Scripture does not give us a detailed theological or philosophical discussion of the nature of evil, and how God deals with it. Instead the Bible provides numerous examples and short explanations for the reasons why particular bad things happen to particular people at particular times: God's judgment, human sin, the fall of Adam, the inexplicable suffering of innocents like Job or the blind and deaf that Jesus healed, the battle between good and evil in the Book of Revelation. However, while there is no detailed theological or philosophical theory, there is a general pattern that speaks to the question of how God deals with evil and suffering, and we can see those broad details in this morning's readings.

First, then, let us look at the Psalm. Psalm 29 is a hymn of praise to God as Creator, and it focuses on God's sovereignty in creation, as well as the way that creation manifests God's goodness and care for his creatures, but also his sheer majesty and transcendence. The Hebrews were a pastoral people, a rural people. In the Bible, there are no detailed philosophical arguments for God's existence from the fact of the existence of the world like those we find in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, but the biblical writers seemed to have thought that it was obvious that God's existence, his greatness, and his goodness are evident in the world he has created. Time and time again, especially in the Psalms, the biblical writers proclaim a sense of awe, a sense of beauty, a sense of order, a sense of the fragility of creation that comes from observing God's creation. Notice particularly the water imagery in this Psalm: "The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over many waters." (Psalm 29:3-4) Notice also God's care for his creation: "The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth." (v. 8). This awareness of the divine presence seems especially characteristic of rural and pastoral people because they are

close to nature in their ordinary lives. Insofar as Western culture has become urbanized and cut off from nature, we seem to have become progressively secular.

My wife Jennie and I just returned from a vacation where we spent some time in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, and, as we got away from the city and were surrounded by nature as far as the eye could see, we found ourselves overwhelmed alternately with awe, by unspeakable beauty; we experienced a sense of tranquility, and a sense of our own smallness in light of the hugeness of magnificent mountains, and open skies, and meadows and plains that stretched for miles and miles. There were even some moments of genuine terror as we drove over the highest road in the Continental Divide and looked down over the edge of sheer mountain sides to drops of thousands of feet. I thought at the time, "There are no atheists in National Parks." John Muir, who was one of the pioneers in arguing for the preservation of natural spaces, untouched by human development, once wrote: "God's love is manifest in the landscape as in a face."

Of course, it is not true that there are no atheists in National Parks. Presumably, Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins could visit Rocky Mountain National Park and return unchanged. But their refusal to see God's love in a landscape is sheer dogmatism. We have no reason to think that Dawkins' and Hitchens' perspective is the correct one and Muir's was not.

So that is the first element in the pattern. God is Creator. He loves his creation. He is sovereign over his creation, and his goodness can be discerned in his love and care for creation.

But if God is the good Creator who cares for his creation, then what about the "bad things" in creation, the things that threaten and destroy? Let's turn to Jonah. What we find in Jonah 2: 1-9 is in capsule form a description of how the God



who is Creator deals with evil and suffering in his creation. That God is Creator does not mean that bad things do not happen. It does mean that God is present in the midst of our trouble, and that God brings good out of the bad things. It means that God deals with evil by redemption.

The prayer in Jonah is a classic example of a Song of Thanksgiving. We can find similar imagery in the Psalms, for example, Psalm 34 and 40. Jonah recounts that he was in despair, but that he called out to God: "I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me." (Jonah 2:2). As Jonah plunges literally into the watery depths, God saves him. We tend to think of the great fish in the story as sent by God to punish Jonah. But in the context we could argue that rather it is the fish that saves Jonah. As Jonah descends into the depths, God appoints the great fish to snatch Jonah from "the belly of Sheol." (v. 2) After Jonah was rescued from the watery deep, he prays, "you brought up my life from the pit." (v. 6) In consequence, Jonah responds with Thanksgiving. "But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you what I have vowed to pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord." (v. 9)

As with the recognition of God's presence in creation as the Good Creator, Jonah's response is one of faith. The New Atheists can easily make the argument that it is sheer coincidence when someone is rescued from or survives a near death experience. And, of course, there are lots of people who are not rescued and do not survive. But who is to say that Dawkins or Hitchens are right and the Book of Jonah is wrong? That the spontaneous feeling of gratitude that we feel when we come through the other side of some bad patch is nothing more than an illusion? Is not gratitude a fitting response when we find ourselves rescued from the depths? To whom do the New Atheists give thanks when they feel grateful for being alive?

Finally, let us turn to the gospel story of Jesus walking on the water in Matthew 14. If we put together the creation imagery of Psalm 29 and the thanksgiving imagery of

deliverance from Jonah's Prayer, we have two indispensable clues to understanding this gospel narrative. In the story, Jesus' disciples are in trouble. They are in a boat on the sea. The boat is "a long way from land, beaten by the waves," and the wind is against them (v. 24). Then something amazing happens. Jesus comes to his disciples by walking on the sea, and, understandably perhaps, they have a case of mistaken identity. They fear he is a ghost. A concise way of describe their response might be, they were "freaked out." But then Jesus identifies himself: "Be of good cheer! It is I! Do not be afraid!" (v. 27) Peter responds by trying to walk to Jesus, but he begins to sink, and, like Jonah and the Psalm writers, he cries out. Just as God rescued Jonah from the watery depths with the help of the fish, Jesus rescues Peter. Finally, note how the story closes. As soon as they get into the boat, the wind stopped.

To anyone familiar with Psalms like our Psalm, and with stories like the Jonah story that include prayers for deliverance, this should be an "Aha!" moment. The story leads to one inevitable conclusion. It is what I want to call Caller ID from the Source of the Universe. When the telephone rings, we don't know who is calling, but if we have Caller ID these days, we can tell quickly: "This is Martha" or "This is Phil," or "This is someone I don't know." When Jesus walks across the water, when he rescues the disciples and Peter from the storm in answer to their prayers, it is as if the universe's Caller ID is providing an identification. If you know your Bible, only one character does things like this. When Jesus rescues his disciples from the storm, and calms the sea, Caller ID is saying "Your Creator is on the line."

That is why the disciples respond as they do: "And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (v. 33)

So that is the third element in the Bible's general pattern of how a good Creator deals with bad things. First, God is good,

God is Creator, and God cares for his creation. Second, that God is Creator does not mean that no bad things happen, but that even in evil and suffering and the threats of death and destruction, God remains with us, that God brings us through the worst, and that God rescues and redeems. How God rescues and redeems is more of the story, and would involve talk of how God has chosen a special people, first Israel to whom he gave his law, and now the church, and we just don't have time for that in this sermon. But, finally, and most important, God redeems not only by creating and rescuing and redeeming a people and giving a Law but by becoming one of us. The Jesus who walks across the water to his disciples is the Creator who controls and calms the storm.

That Jesus is this Creator come among us is the heart of the story of how God deals with the bad things that happen. It is not just that Jesus calms the storm, but that he himself endures the worst storm that his creatures can throw at him. Recall another reference to the Jonah story in the gospels. Jesus stated: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:40) At the deepest level of the biblical pattern of how God deals with evil is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. In the biblical account, the very Creator of the Universe, who loves and cares for his creation, who does not abandon but rescues those in distress, rescues them by himself becoming one of them, and goes through what they go through. As Jonah sank into the depths, so Jesus faced the cross, and the greatest evil that humans fear, death itself. As Jonah was rescued from the depths, so God the Father rescued his Son by raising him from death on the third day.

In one of my favorite essays, Dorothy Sayers refers to the incarnation of God in Jesus as "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged." <sup>(1)</sup> If the incarnation is true, she says, then, for whatever reason that God made human beings, "limited and

suffering and subject to death – He had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair,” she writes. And, of course, a subset of the final theme is that the followers of Jesus, his church, share in his death and resurrection as we become his disciples through faith and the sacraments. So from top to bottom, from beginning to end, the Christian version of how it is that God deals with suffering and evil is that God loves and cares for his creation, but also takes it seriously, so seriously that he provides rescue and redemption from evil and suffering in that creation by taking the full consequences of death and evil on himself, and coming out on the other side, and taking us with him.

That has interesting implications. It does not mean that we get to live in a world that we might have preferred to make up ourselves, a world in which bad things never happen, or that we never have to endure suffering or evil ourselves. It does mean that even in the midst of the worst that the world can throw at us, the God who came among us in Jesus is always with us. It does mean that the God who endured the cross asks of us nothing he has not gone through himself. It does mean that our way to participate in God’s way of dealing with suffering and evil is to follow Jesus, which may mean taking up a cross as he did. But it also means, that, ultimately, God will deal with suffering and evil by redemption and rescue. Just as, in the story of Jonah, Jonah was rescued from the depths, some day the entire universe will be rescued from the depths, and will rejoice with Jonah’s gratitude: “I called out to the Lord, and he answered me . . . With the voice of thanksgiving I will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!” (Jonah 2:9)

Now, again . . . I cannot prove to you that the Christian version of how to deal with evil and suffering is right, and the New Atheist version of how the world works is wrong. The

New Atheists can always claim that Jesus was a deluded prophet, and his disciples just made up the story of his resurrection. I can say that there is as much faith involved in saying that evil is unredeemable (which is what the New Atheists are really saying) as in saying that God deals with evil by rescue and redemption. And I also think that I can say that if the Christian version of things is true, if Jesus really is alive, it is not only the case that God is Great, but that God is supremely Good. And, finally, as a Christian, I think that the Christian approach has one great advantage. It gives me a reason for why I sometimes just feel grateful, grateful for things like the Rocky Mountains, and being rescued from distress. And it gives me Someone to whom I can say "Thank You."

*Creed or Chaos? Why Christians Must Choose Either Dogma or Disaster.* (Originally published London: Methuen, 1947).