

# 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>.

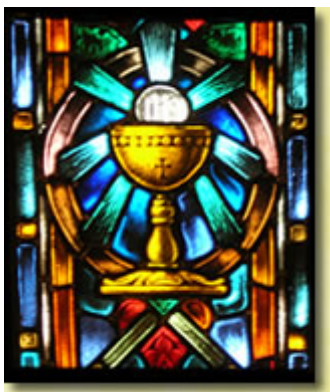
[3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4AHFBft2L8.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4AHFBft2L8)

[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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# Taste and See that the Lord is Good! A Sermon on Doubt

Psalm 138  
Hebrews 10: 32-39  
Matt. 24:9-14



Today's lectionary readings are for the feast day of the Martyrs of Uganda. These were a group of Roman Catholic and Anglican men who were killed by King Mwanga on June 3, 1886 for their refusal to renounce their Christian faith. The martyrs went to their deaths singing hymns, and praying for their enemies. The bravery of these young men so impressed the bystanders that many converted to Christianity, and the deaths of the martyrs of Uganda is considered the real beginning of the spread of Christianity in Uganda. There are today around nine million Anglicans in Uganda, and Trinity School for Ministry has close relations with them, especially with Uganda Christian University, and also with their Archbishop, Stanley Ntagali.

Given that today's lectionary readings are for the feast day of martyrs, it is not surprising that the focus of the readings is on holding on to faith in the midst of doubt. The Matthew and Hebrews passages specifically mention persecution. In Matthew, Jesus says, "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake." (Matt. 24:9). Hebrews speaks of "the former days," when the hearers were "publicly exposed to reproach and affliction." Some were imprisoned, and some were "plundered" of their property. (Heb. 10:33-34). The Psalmist mentions another kind of threat to faith: "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life." (Ps. 138:7). Jesus' Parable of the Sower mentions a third threat to faith: those who are distracted by the "cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and desires for other things." (Mark 4:18).

These passages might be discouraging. They indicate that it is a normal part of the Christian life to experience doubt, to be tempted to abandon one's faith, to just give up on being a Christian. I would suggest that these passages are actually cause for encouragement. They give us advance warning that being a disciple of Jesus is not all picnics in May, or singing "I've got peace like a river in my soul" when we're at summer camp, or the first day of June Term at seminary. They tell us that if you are a Christian, and you take the thing seriously, there is going to come a time when you are going to wonder, "What was I thinking?" And, "Is it too late to get out of this?" They also tell us that when it comes to reasons for doubting your faith, there is nothing new under the sun.

Persecution? In this country, Christians do not experience anything like what the Ugandan martyrs experienced, but do not deceive yourself. Ten years ago, I would have thought that the greatest threat to Christianity in our culture was "New Age religion," people who were into crystals and channeling and past lives regression. In the last decade, however, a group of

thinkers who call themselves the New Atheists have appeared, and they are surprisingly virulent in their hatred of Christian faith. I was reading an article online the other day about an Oxford University researcher named Kathleen Taylor, who claims that religious fundamentalism is a mental illness, and can be "treated" as such. I believe that there are such people as fundamentalists, and I can say with confidence that I am not one. However, I also know that fundamentalism is often defined as "anyone who believes more than the speaker does." There are people who would call me a fundamentalist because of what I believe, and it concerns me that there are those who would think that my Christian faith is a mental illness which they would gladly cure. Even more disturbing than this story were the numerous comments to the article, many of which stated that all religion was a form of mental illness, and that the commenters would be happy to see all religious people committed to mental asylums. More than one commenter wrote things like "What could be more insane than believing that there is an invisible person up in the sky who knows everything you do and rewards you if you're good and punishes you if you're bad?" While such attitudes show a real ignorance of what Christian faith is really all about, when you live in a society in which more and more people think that only a crazy person would believe what you believe, you might begin to wonder a little bit yourself.

The second threat that leads to lack of faith is personal suffering. Over and over again, the New Atheists point to the existence of evil and suffering in the world as the single reason that no rational person could believe in the existence of a good God, and certainly more people lose their faith in God because of personal tragedy than perhaps any other reason. Great Christian thinkers like C.S. Lewis, and Kathleen Norris have written about the doubts about God's goodness that they experienced after the death of close loved ones. If you have not yet experienced such doubt, be forewarned. You almost certainly will someday.

Finally, the problem of personal cares is, I think, a leading cause of the collapse of faith in contemporary culture. I would suggest that, for Americans, consumerism is an idol that is perhaps the greatest rival to God, even for Christians. We don't so much become adamant atheists as we get wrapped up in our careers, our need to have the latest gadgets, our concerns for personal financial security, and just buying more things. In the end, God gets squeezed out when all the stuff comes in. We just forget about God.

So my first observation about threats to faith is that there is nothing new under the sun. Twenty-first century Christians living in a post-modern world like to think that we're facing unique threats that no one has faced before. But the writers of the Bible knew about the three main threats: persecution, personal suffering, distraction. Our problems are the same old problems.

If the writers of the Bible knew about the problems, they also knew about the cure. The biblical writers point to three basic solutions to address questions of religious doubt.

First is wonder and gratitude. This is largely the Old Testament solution. And it's what we find in our Psalm this morning. The biggest problem with the New Atheists, I think, is a lack of imagination. Writers like Richard Dawkins live in a world that has lost its mystery. When your whole universe is reduced to what scientists can measure in laboratories, you suffer from imaginal cramp. For the New Atheists, God is just a big person who lives up in the sky. They can believe in a universe that is 14 billion years old, and whose visible size from earth is 46 billion light years, and is so incredibly fine-tuned that it can produce scientists who can measure these things, but they cannot believe in a God who could create such a universe or who is greater than the universe he has created. And certainly not greater than scientists like themselves.

Despite his troubles, the Psalmist realizes that the God who has created the universe is immensely greater than his worries because God is greater than the universe he created. "I bow down toward your holy temple, and give thanks to your name . . . for you have exalted above all things your name and your word." And later, "great is the glory of the Lord, for though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly." The ending of the Book of Job is about re-discovering the transcendence of the God who created the world: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know!" (Job 38:4-5). It is this theme of divine transcendence that appears again in the second half of the book of Isaiah when Israel is banished in exile, and God now promises Israel's deliverance and return to their land: "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighted the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?" (Is. 40:12) When we find ourselves beset by doubt, it helps to take time to recover a sense of wonder. The God who created the universe is greater than the universe he created, he knows what he is doing, and he can certainly handle our troubles.

Second, there is the cross. This is the new insight that the New Testament brings to the problem of doubt. The author of Hebrews writes to those who, under persecution, are finding themselves tempted to abandon faith. He reminds his readers that Christians have something that no one else has. This transcendent Creator of the universe that the Old Testament talks about has come to us in Jesus Christ. If God spoke through prophets in the past, says Hebrews, he has now spoken in his Son, "through whom he created the world." Jesus is the "radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." (Heb. 1:2). This transcendent source of wonder that Job and the Psalmist write about in awe has now come down to us, close and personal. By becoming one of us, Jesus knows what we go

through, and he has shared in our sufferings and temptations. The author of Hebrews writes: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15).

It is interesting that spiritual writers as diverse as Julian of Norwich, Martin Luther, George Herbert, Dorothy Sayers and Karl Barth all point to one solution to the problem of evil and suffering and doubts that beset our faith. They do not tell us to grit our teeth and tough it out, but to look to Jesus Christ, and especially to Christ crucified. When we look to Christ on the cross, we find ourselves responding, as did the apostle Peter to Jesus' question in John's gospel, "Do you want to go away as well?" Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:67-69).

Finally, there is hope. If the message to follow Jesus ended with the cross, we might well follow, but it would be a rather grim affair. But we worship a risen Lord, and the cross is followed by resurrection, and the whole message of Scripture is that we wait for God because we have faith that the God who acted in the past will act in the future. Turning back to our Psalm, we find "On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased. . . . Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me." (Ps. 138:3). Turning to Matthew, we read: "But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And the gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Matt. 24:13-14). And, finally, again, our passage from Hebrews: "Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward . . . you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you



may receive what is promised.” (Heb. 10: 36).

Of course, hope has to do with waiting. It is because we do not yet have what we hope for that we must learn to wait. This would be the point to talk about Christian practices. There are a number of practices connected with the Christian faith: the reading of Scripture, the practice of prayer, corporate worship, the celebration of the sacraments. It is surely no coincidence that numerous spiritual writers – Medieval mystics, George Herbert, Kathleen Norris – speak of the practical necessity of continuing the mundane tasks of praying the Daily Office, of reading and meditating on Scripture, of receiving the sacraments, of worshiping in community, when one is beset by doubts.

There is a kind of radical Protestant theology – a debased Lutheranism that Luther would have had nothing to do with – that repudiates all of this as a form of “works righteousness.” But that rather misses the point. Traditional definitions of the sacraments speak of them as “means of grace” – *grace*, not works! Biblical language about prayer and meditating on God’s word uses the language of “refreshment,” of “quenching one’s thirst,” of “satisfying hunger”: “Taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Ps. 34:8). Hebrews 6:5 speaks of those “who have tasted the goodness of the word of God.” In John 6:53, Jesus says, “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Engaging in Christian practices of prayer and meditating on Scripture, receiving the sacraments, reciting the daily office, and worshiping with fellow Christians is not “works righteousness,” trying to “earn our salvation.” Rather, these are the means by which the risen Christ shares his life with us. When we are starving, we do not think of eating as a “good work,” but as a way of keeping ourselves alive. Similarly, when beset by doubt, when we are suffering from spiritual sickness, the last thing we need is to starve from lack of spiritual nourishment. In times of spiritual aridity, when

prayer and worship and Bible reading might seem meaningless, one of the best things we can do is to just keep on doing it anyway. Pray, read the Bible and meditate on Scripture, receive the sacraments. These are means by which God feeds the starving soul.

If the temptations to doubt we experience are not new, neither are the remedies for our temptations. Recover your sense of wonder at the transcendent God who created and runs the universe, and be grateful. Look to the cross where your transcendent Creator become what we are; on that cross, he took upon himself your suffering. You do not suffer alone. Continue to hope that what God has begun in Christ, he will complete in you, and some day, in the whole universe. It might help to remember that these three prescriptions correspond to the three theological virtues. Faith is the recognition that this universe we live in is not all that is, but that there is a God of wonder who created and watches over it. Love is the awareness that in Jesus, this God is our high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses, and has suffered them himself. Hope looks to the time when the God who raised Jesus from the dead, will finish what he has begun, and will wipe every tear from our eyes in a new creation (Rev. 21:4) . In that time when our faith is tested, let us answer as did Simon Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

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Trinity School for Ministry Chapel

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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 ratiocinate. 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.