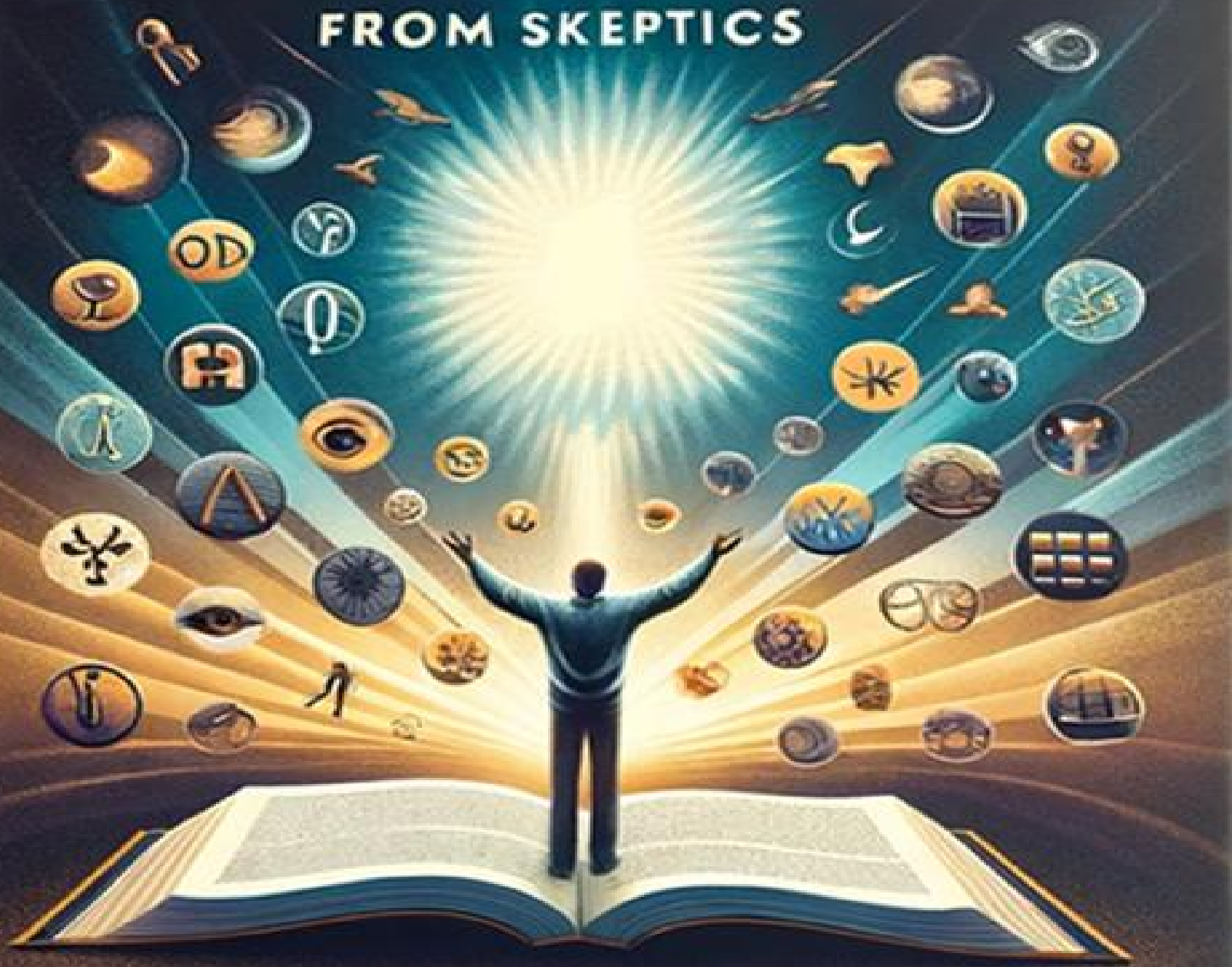


**ANSWERING
COMMON OBJECTIONS
TO
CHRISTIANITY**

FROM SKEPTICS



ALWAYS BE READY TO GIVE AN ANSWER

STEVE HAYS

Answering Common Objections to Christianity from Skeptics by Steve Hays

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21. How can you trust God's plan to bring you to a perfect heaven when he has a track record of failures? He created angels in a perfect place, but they rejected him and are now doomed to suffer forever; he put Adam and Eve in a perfect place and they lost it; he had to destroy the whole world in Noah's day; he had to confuse the languages at the Tower of Babel; he started the Church, and it ended up with Crusades, bigotry, division, etc. If he has failed to accomplish his plan of giving people a perfect place to live so many times, what makes you think he will actually get it right this time?

22. If Christians are really supposed to love others, how can they be happy for all eternity knowing that the majority of humans, and even some of their own friends and family, are in conscious, endless

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22. [If Christianity is the only true religion, how come so many other religions are just as successful at making people good, ethical, and moral, and making them feel fulfilled and happy?](#)

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1. Why Does the Bible Condone Genocide?

That's a question with a false premise:

- i) There was no OT command to eradicate Canaanites in toto.
- ii) Rather, there was a command to evict Canaanites living within the borders of Israel (Num 33:52.). Canaanites were permitted to live in bordering states. So it's not about eradicating a particular people-group, but about dispossessing the Canaanites to make room for the Israelites (Num 33:53). The Israelites couldn't occupy the promised land until the heathen inhabitants were expelled.
- iii) Mass execution was a contingency plan in case the Canaanites chose to stay and fight (Deut 20).
- iv) Peaceful coexistence between the Israelites and the Canaanites wasn't possible (Num 33:55).
- v) Foreigners were always at liberty to convert to the true faith.

[Related Q&A from Monergism](#)

2. Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?

i) The OT doesn't endorse "slavery." Lawmakers don't endorse everything they regulate. Rather, the law sets boundaries. The law doesn't prescribe an ideal.¹

ii) "Slavery" is ambiguous. This can stand for very different arrangements. In the OT you have:

a) Indentured service for insolvency or property crimes. This is a form of financial restitution.

b) Enslavement for POWs or war captives. This is more humane than executing POWs. Repatriating enemy soldiers isn't feasible inasmuch as they will simply regroup and resume hostilities.

c) Acquisition of foreigners. This is unenviable. However, living conditions in the ANE were harsh. Poverty and famine were widespread. Better to be a slave in Israel, with the legal protections and provisions afforded you, than to starve to death. These laws don't exist in a vacuum. They need to be understood in relation to the socioeconomic challenges of survival in the ANE.

G. Wenham, *Story as Torah* (Baker 2000), chap. 5.

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3. If God truly loves people why has he slaughtered so many of them throughout the history of the world?

From a Biblical standpoint, the question is not whether God loves everyone, but whether a just and holy God can love anyone given the fact that we are sinful, evil creatures.

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4. No One Religion can Know the Fullness of Spiritual Truth, Therefore all Religions are Valid. It is Arrogant to Say Otherwise.

That objection is self-refuting. In order to know that no one religion can know the full truth, you yourself would have to know the full truth to know where any particular religion falls short of knowing the full truth. You're in no position to say a given religion is partially true and partially false unless you have access to the whole truth, which forms the basis of your comparison.

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5. Christians Only Want Power Over Others - To Establish a Theocracy by Taking Over the State Mechanism

i) Even assuming (arguendo) that this is true, if, in a democratic republic, Christians are in the majority, then they aren't "taking over" the state mechanism. Rather, majority rule is built into our form of governance. Popular sovereignty.

ii) Christians have wide-ranging views on statecraft, viz., Amish, Lutherans (two-swords), Anglicans (Erastianism), theocrats, royalists, libertarians, social conservatives, disestablishmentarians, You can't generalize about Christian politics.

iii) In my observation, most Christians aren't political activists by nature. They don't find politics interesting. That's not what gives most Christians a sense of purpose. What makes their life meaningful or satisfying comes down to things like church, family, friends, and sports. The private sphere rather than the public sphere.

Christians generally get involved in politics to push back the encroachments of liberal social engineers.

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6. God is just a man made fairy tale.

There is NO god period. There never was, and there never will be. If you take some time to do some critical thinking you will reach the same conclusion

That's just an orphaned assertion in search of an argument.

[Related debate](#)

7. If God really cares about people and is all-powerful, why doesn't he create food for all the starving people in the world? Why doesn't he stop the earthquakes and tsunamis?

i) Because we are sinners, we are liable to natural disasters.

ii) Yes, God could prevent natural disasters, but there are tradeoffs. Consider those science fiction scenarios in which the protagonist travels back into the past to change the future. To preempt some tragedy or catastrophe.

Only he discovers that by making one thing better, he makes another thing worse. Every improvement is offset by losing something good. For every action, there's a reaction.

Suppose you save a child from starvation. Suppose the child grows up to be a murderous military dictator.

8. If God really cares for all people equally, how can he have a special “chosen” people?

i) If that's an allusion to the Jews as the Chosen People, then God chose the Jews as a means of blessing all people-groups.

ii) If that's an allusion to the elect, then the question is based on a false premise. God doesn't care for all sinners equally. Why should he?

9. If God created everything, why did he create AIDS, the ebola virus, etc.?

i) Since Gen 1 doesn't say anything about the origin of various diseases, that's a question which invites conjecture. We can only speculate.

ii) Apropos (i), keep in mind that diseases aren't gratuitous evils. Diseases serve a natural purpose. They help to maintain the balance of nature.

iii) Diseases can also be punitive. A divine sanction for sin. However, that's not a strict correlation.

iv) In theory, God may have created diseases directly, at the outset. Under that scenario, diseases might have existed in the animal kingdom while man was naturally immune to disease. But one result of the Fall was to make man liable to disease.

v) But some diseases also develop in the course of time. One thing leads to another.

10. How can it be just to consign people to eternal torment in hell for sins

committed in a relatively brief time on earth?

i) It's not as if sinners are merely punished for discrete sins. A sinner does what a sinner is. Sins are just the expression of the sinner's underlying character.

ii) Passage of time doesn't make the guilty guiltless. Once you do something wrong, it will always be the case that you did something wrong. Your culpability doesn't have an automatic expiration date. You're just as guilty a year later as you were a moment later. Only redemption can atone for sin.

iii) Sinners don't cease to be sinners when they go to hell. To the contrary, they become even more sinful in hell, since they lose all self-restraint in hell.

iv) For that matter, consider all the things we would have done wrong if we thought we could get away with it. That's culpable, too.

v) Although damnation is never-ending, the damned only experience their punishment in finite increments. A day at a time.

vi) A finite deed can inflict permanent loss or harm to the victim.

11. How can it be just to send people to hell when they have never had the opportunity to believe in Jesus?

No one goes to hell for disbelieving in Jesus. Disbelief is an aggravating factor. But the hellbound are already lost. Refusing the gospel isn't what renders them damnable.

In Christian theology, nobody can be saved unless he knows and accepts the gospel. This doesn't mean nobody can be damned unless he knows and rejects the gospel. Rather, to be lost is the default condition of sinners. To be lost is not a result of spurning the gospel. To the contrary, it's because sinners are lost in the first place that they desperately need to be saved.

12. If God truly wants people to believe in him, why does he not simply show himself to them like he did to Paul?

i) God doesn't intend to save everyone.

ii) Hardened unbelievers like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens say they find God morally repugnant. So, for them, it's not a matter of evidence.

13. If the Christian faith is false or based on fabricated source documents, how would you be able to detect the error given your belief that the bible is the only admissible, authoritative evidence?

i) You could raise the same hypothetical objection to any ostensible standard of comparison. But that only pushes the objection back a step. How could you detect error in Scripture, or show that Scripture was fabricated, unless you took something else as your standard of comparison? But in that event, the same objection recurs: how would you be able to falsify the standard of comparison you use to falsify the Bible?

ii) A better question is whether Christians can know that Scripture is what Scripture claims to be. If so, then the hypothetical quandary is unrealistic.

It's not enough to raise a hypothetical dilemma for Christians. Christians can just as easily raise hypothetical conundra for unbelievers of every stripe.

A critic needs to present some hard evidence that the hypothetical quandary is more than just a hypothetical defeater. Do you have good reason to think Christians are thusly deluded?

Put another way: if you have evidence, you don't need the hypothetical; if you need the hypothetical; you don't have evidence.

14. Why do Christians refuse to accept the scientific evidence for an old earth, evolution, etc., when they have no problem enjoying thousands of modern

conveniences which are the result of this same science?

i) Many conservative Christians are old-earth creationists. So the question contains a false premise.

ii) A number of young-earth creationists are highly-trained scientists (e.g. John Byl, Jonathan Sarfati, Marcus Ross, Kurt Wise).

iii) Many Christians reject evolution in part because evolution is at odds with scientific evidence. Cf.

D. Berlinski, *The Deniable Darwin* (Discovery Institute Press 2009).

_____, *The Devil's Delusion* (Crown Forum 2008).

C. J. Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist?* (Crossway 2011).

W. Dembski & J. Wells, *The Design of Life* (Foundation for Thought and Ethics 2008).

S. Meyer, *Signature in the Cell* (HarperOne 2009).

J. Richards, ed. *God and Evolution* (Discovery Institute Press, 2010).

J. Sarfati, *The Greatest Hoax on Earth?* (Creation Book Publishers 2010).

iv) It's a fallacy to infer that science must be true as long it produces results. For one thing, obsolete scientific theories like Newtonian physics were highly successful.

For a scientific theory to be successful, you only need a general correlation between apparent causes and apparent effects. But

ultimately, a scientist can only go by appearances. How he perceives the world. He can never find out what the world is really like apart from what the senses perceive.

v) Dating the age of the world involves the measurement of time. The measurement of time involves a temporal metric. Unless you know that time has an intrinsic metric, you can't measure the objective duration of successive intervals:

Yes, we measure time through changes in physical things which we take as our standard. Notice the ultimate arbitrariness of such a procedure, however: for unless we assume that time itself has an intrinsic measure, we have no grounds for taking some changes to proceed "at steady rates." We can judge that an atomic clock has a certain constant number of beats per second only if time has an intrinsic metric that allows one to compare non-overlapping intervals of time with respect to their length, so as to differentiate one-second intervals. That doesn't mean that time is actually composed of seconds; rather what is meant is that if we take an interval which we call a second, then any other non-overlapping interval will be either longer than, shorter than, or equal to our second. In that case, it is a meaningful question to ask whether an atomic clock has a constant number of beats per second and so is a good measure of time.

By contrast, if time has no intrinsic metric, as metric conventionalists hold, then there just is no fact of the matter whether any non-overlapping temporal interval is either longer than, shorter than, or equal to our second. In that case, there is no answer to the question of whether our atomic clock really has a steady rate of change and so is a good measure of time. It is just a human convention that certain processes proceed at steady rates.²

vi) If God made the world by ex nihilo fiat, then he could instantiate the world at any point in an ongoing process. So you can't simply run the clock backwards to the point of origin.

<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=9069>;

cf. Bas Van Fraassen, *Scientific Representation* (Oxford 2008), 130-32; cf. R. Le Poidevin, *Travels in Four Dimensions* (Oxford 2003), chaps 1-2.

15. Why do Christians refuse to accept the historical and archaeological evidence that much of the bible was plagiarized from ancient near eastern sources?

i) That's a vague, sweeping allegation. Why think it's true?

ii) The objection tends to be duplicitous. On the one hand, when we don't have corroborative evidence for reported events in Scripture, the unbeliever says this just goes to show that Bible writers made things up whole cloth.

On the other hand, when we can correlate reported events in Scripture with extrascriptural literary or archeological evidence, then the unbeliever says this just goes to show that Bible writers plagiarized extrabiblical sources. Whether the coin-flip comes out heads or tails, the Christian always loses.

If OT books accurately describe events that took place in the ANE, then we'd expect them to reflect an ANE background, viz. period customs, literary conventions, socioeconomic conditions.

iii) The inspiration of Scripture doesn't mean everything in Scripture was directly revealed to the writer. Sometimes the inspired writer relies on personal observation and memory. Likewise, historians routinely use sources.

iv) For more on the historicity of the OT, cf.

D. Baker, ed. *Biblical Faith and Other Religions* (Kregel 2004)

G. Beale, *The Erosion of Biblical Inerrancy in Evangelicalism* (Crossway Books 2008)

D. Block, ed. *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?* (B&H 2008)

J. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Baker 2001)

J. Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Lion Hudson 2008)

K. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans 2003).

J. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths* (Zondervan 2009)

3. <http://bylogos.blogspot.com/2011/07/on-mature-creation.html>

16. If the bible has all the answers, why are there literally hundreds of Christian denominations that all think they alone are right and all the other Christians are wrong?

i) The Bible doesn't claim to have "all the answers."

ii) Most denominations don't think they are right about everything while the other denominations are wrong about everything.

iii) Different denominations often result from historical factors that don't have anything to do with doctrine. They reflect different regional or national points of origin. Different cultural or ethnic traditions.

Because the Christian faith is a global faith, it is culturally contextualized from one time and place to another. It's not a franchise with the same menu everywhere.

17. Why are Christians always the first to support the rights of greedy corporations, unrestricted gun ownership, invasion of foreign countries, the death penalty, etc., but the first to oppose helping the needy through welfare, foodstamps, and so on?

i) That's a loaded question. To begin with, Christians don't have uniform positions on these issues.

ii) We need to distinguish between principles and the prudential application of principles. As a matter of principle, most Christians support national defense as a logical extension of self-defense. But how that principle applies in any particular situation is a prudential

question. It depends on the individual circumstances. On the specific risk assessment.

That's something we can only evaluate on a case-by-case basis. By weighing probabilities.

iii) Many Christians oppose the welfare state in part because it harms the poor rather than helping the poor. 4

iv) In addition, many Christians oppose the welfare state because they oppose totalitarian government.

4. Cf. R. Nash, *Poverty and Wealth* (Crossway Books 1986).

18. If God loves men and women both equally, why does the largest Christian Church (and many other denominations) refuse to allow any women, however gifted, to have any place of authority in the church?

i) Pastoral ministry is a privilege, not a right.

ii) There's a distinction between teaching and authority.

19. . If God loves all people, why does he condemn gays just because they were

born with a different sexual orientation than heterosexuals?

- i) To my knowledge, there's no compelling evidence that homosexuals are born with a homosexual orientation. That disregards the influence of socialization.
- ii) There's such a thing as impulse control. Even if we have certain impulses, we don't have to act on all our impulses, and in many cases, self-restraint is a virtue.
- iii) God has made many creatures. God made rattlesnakes. They serve a natural purpose. That doesn't mean they're safe to be around.

[Related Answer](#)

20.. If Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the whole world, then how can God send people to hell to pay for their sins again? Was Jesus' payment not good enough for him?

i) That question takes universal atonement for granted. However, in the usage of NT writers like Paul and John, the "world" is not a synonym for "everyone." Rather, the "world" connotes the kind of people Christ died for. As one commentator explains:

Some argue that the term 'world' here simply has neutral connotations—the created human world. But the characteristic use of

‘the world’ (ho kosmos) elsewhere in the narrative is with negative overtones—the world in its alienation from and hostility to its creator’s purposes. It makes better sense in a soteriological context to see the latter notion as in view. God loves that which has become hostile to God. The force is not, then, that the world is so vast that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it, but rather that the world has become so alienated from God that it takes an exceedingly great kind of love to love it at all. 5.

ii) In Reformed theology, Christ redeems the elect, not the reprobate.

5. Cf. http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/50/50-4/JETS_50-4_761-771_Hoehner.pdf

6. A. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Henrickson 2005), 154; cf. *BDAG* 5:62b; *EDNT* 2:312.

21. How can you trust God's plan to bring you to a perfect heaven when he has a track record of failures?

He created angels in a perfect place, but they rejected him and are now doomed to suffer forever; he put Adam and Eve in a perfect place and they lost it; he had to destroy the whole world in Noah's day; he had to confuse the languages at the Tower of Babel; he started the Church, and it ended up with Crusades, bigotry, division, etc. If he has failed to accomplish his plan of giving people a perfect place to live so many times, what makes you think he will actually get it right this time?

The question assumes the existence of evil is evidence that God's plan failed. But that's a false premise. Evil is part of God's plan. Evil serves a purpose in the plan of God (e.g. Gen 50:20; Jn 9:3; 11:4; Rom 9:17,22-23; 11:32).

22. If Christians are really supposed to love others, how can they be happy for all eternity knowing that the majority of humans, and even some of their own friends and family, are in conscious, endless torment?

i) There's a philosophical distinction between dispositional belief and occurrent belief, as well as a philosophical distinction between implicit belief and explicit belief.

And I think that philosophical distinction dovetails with certain theological distinctions as well. In Calvinism, regeneration is causally prior to faith.⁽⁷⁾ It causes a predisposition to exercise saving faith. Conversely, sin, in the elect or regenerate, can also result in false beliefs or impede the formation of true beliefs.

Likewise, I think many true beliefs involve tacit knowledge. That varies with age, education, and intellectual aptitude.

I don't assume that a Christian's loved one is damned if she happened to die before exercising explicit or occurrent faith in Christ. Regeneration is the seed of faith. Regeneration is the seed while faith is the flower. In principle, there can be a gestation period.

Regeneration creates a predisposition to exercise faith in Christ, but other conditions must also be met. These are ordinarily coordinated, but there can be exceptions. In principle the regenerate might die before hearing the gospel. Or the regenerate might die before arriving at the age of discretion.

Perhaps God already planted the seed, but it hadn't had enough time to blossom here-and-now. What we pray for in this life may blossom in the next.

ii) Then there's Tennyson's celebrated principle that it's better to love and lose than never love at all.

iii) It's also a commonplace of human experience that we can dramatically change how we feel about people. You have couples who can't imagine how they could possibly live without each other, yet 5 years later they can't stand each other.

iv) If our loved ones wind up in hell, they won't be lovable anymore. They will be utterly repellent. All trace of common grace long gone.

v) Finally, a Christian can reason back from Rev 20:4. If we can't be happy in heaven knowing a loved one is lost, then God will save the loved one.

That's a conditional argument. It doesn't predict what must be the case for Rev 21:4 to be met. That's something Christians will find out. Not something we know in advance. But the promise covers whatever it takes to fulfill the terms of the promise.

7. For an exegetical defense, cf. M. Barrett, "Does Regeneration Precede Faith in 1 John?";

<http://blogmatics.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/does-regeneration-precede-faith-in-1-john-by-matthew-barrett-ets-paper-nov-2010.pdf>

23. If Christianity is the only true religion, how come so many other religions are just as successful at making people good, ethical, and moral, and making them feel fulfilled and happy?

- i) That question builds some faulty assumptions into the question. You can't just stipulate that other religions make people good, ethical, and moral.
- ii) God, in common grace, preserves a sense of common decency among many unbelievers. That's necessary to preserve the human race. That's necessary to make the world tolerable for Christians.
- iii) There's no essential connection between virtue and happiness.

Why Does the Bible Condone Genocide?

Question from Visitor: Why does the Bible condone genocide? Was that just the Old Testament "god" who demanded that? It is clear

that in the book of Joshua, God commanded the Jews to utterly wipe out people groups that inhabited Canaan. If this is so, why didn't Jesus denounce him?

Response: Before we can even address this question, we must make one thing absolutely clear: God is God and we are not. He alone is the Creator, the Giver of Life – and so He, too, is the Taker of Life. He takes life from whomever He will, whenever He will, and however He wants (1 Samuel 2:6; Job 1:21; Deut 9:4-6, 10:14; Isaiah 45:5-7). Even if we take nothing else into consideration, that alone is more than sufficient cause for us to "lay our hands upon our mouths" (see Job 38-42, esp. 40:4). Doesn't the potter have a right to make one vessel for honorable use, and another vessel for dishonorable use, from the same lump of clay (Isaiah 45:9-10; Rom. 9:19-24)? Well then, so does God, who created humans from the dust, have the right to do with all of them however He sees fit. Woe to anyone who dares to argue with Him or accuse Him of wrongdoing in anything He does in His world and with His creatures.

Before we get to Canaan, consider this further point: not only may God take life as He sees fit – He does take the life of every last human on earth (see Heb. 9:27). We should not lose the shock of this fearful truth: death is not natural, it is not a normal process of time and chance, it is not a necessary mechanism of evolution. Humans were created to live eternally, and the fact that they do not bespeaks a horrible truth – we are all born under divine wrath and judgment. Death, as the Bible reveals, is the just penalty exacted for Adam's disobedience in the garden (Genesis 2:16-17; Rom. 5:12-14). Not only did God take the lives of all the Canaanites – He takes the life of everyone. The peoples of Canaan were dealt out this death penalty earlier than they expected; but in essence, their lot was no different than ours. We are all subject to death.

Now, let us consider the case of the Canaanites with these things in mind: as God revealed through Moses, He had a special purpose for giving them their just punishment of death a little earlier than they expected. Specifically, God was judging them at that time for burning their children in the fire as sacrifices, for their gross idolatry, divination, witchcraft, sorcery, and for mediums – i.e. those who call up the dead (Deut. 18:9-13).

In Deuteronomy 9:4-6 God Himself gives the reason for His command to slaughter the Canaanites; but it is of great importance that we also notice the following passage, where God declares that the Israelites were no less wicked than the Canaanites, and deserved the same fate:

4 "Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you. 5 Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob 6"Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people.

Deut 7:8

7"The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because the LORD loved you and

kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

This latter passage directly relates Israel's mandate to destroy the Canaanites and possess their land to what God had done for Israel in Egypt; therefore, it is vital to understand how God had just redeemed the nation of Israel. The climactic event marking Israel's exodus from slavery was the Passover; and in the Passover, the people all had to paint a lamb's blood on their doors so the angel of death would pass over their home (Exodus 11-15). If they did not apply the blood of the lamb, their firstborn would have been taken just like the rest of the Egyptians – they deserved the same judgment and only escaped it by the blood of the lamb.

In a similar vein, God warned the Israelites that they were not essentially immune from the Canaanites' judgment of slaughter: "But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live. And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them." (Numbers 33:55-56). The Israelites deserved judgment just like the others, whether Egyptian or Canaanite. This should serve to remind us that we may not assume that those who suffer unique or catastrophic calamities in this life are any worse than we ourselves, since it is only the grace of God in Jesus Christ which makes us differ from anyone (see Luke 13:1-5; 1 Cor. 4:7).

A couple more points may be helpful to keep the slaughter of the Canaanites in perspective: first, at that time in the OT, God had given the nation of Israel clear civil authority and responsibilities; and as a lawfully-ordained civil government, functioning directly under his

control, He commanded them to carry out His just judgment against the idolaters of Canaan. Although he gave Israel the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill" (better, "murder"), it is clear that this is a prohibition against unlawful killing of any kind, or taking vengeance into one's own hands. In the same document in which we find this commandment, we may also find many places where God commanded the Israelites to put their own people to death for certain types of disobedience (like idolatry). When it is a judicial act of a properly instituted civil government, taking a life may sometimes be warranted. Apparently, the slaughter of the Canaanites was one such judicial act, carried out by the magistrates of Israel.

We must be very clear here, however, that as Christians living under the New Covenant, our instructions to advance the gospel and "make disciples" never involve taking up the sword to do so. Genocide is never part of our specific mission, and the times in Church history when this has been forgotten are tragic and wrong. But be certain, just genocide will indeed occur again on the Last Day, when all those who do not know Christ and who disobey the glorious gospel will be punished with everlasting destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9).

A second point to consider: it should not surprise us that God sometimes uses people to carry out His judgment. He used Israel to punish Edom (Ezek. 25:14). But he also used the nations of Babylon and Assyria to punish Israel for her own sins and disobedience. Then, when he had finished using those nations, he punished them as well (see Isaiah 10:5-27). Throughout the scriptures, God uses people (even wicked people) to judge other people, and exercises his sovereignty over war and the results of war (see the Book of Habakkuk). But we must never forget that there is no command for Christians to kill unbelievers.

In sum, whenever God takes a life, he does so not only because he has that right as Creator, but also as the perfectly just Judge. God is infinitely wise and infinitely powerful, so you can be certain that if He does something He always has a good reason for it. In the passage we mentioned in Deuteronomy, God even gives us a reason for taking the lives of the Canaanites, although he was under no obligation to do so. In his all-seeing eye of pure justice, these people were wicked and the time of his forbearance was over. Likewise, God had a good reason to flood the entire earth and to kill the whole world, Noah and his family excepted. Again, God had a perfectly good reason to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah with fire (Gen 6-9; ; 15:16; Deut 9:4-6; Deut 10:14; Deut 12:31,32; Deut 18:9-14; Isa 2:6; 2 Chron 28:3). And God has a good reason to return in his own time and again destroy the world with fire (2 Pet. 3:1-13).

God's right to take life should deeply humble us to repentance, since we all justly deserve to be killed (Luke 13:3-5). Yet God himself took pity on rebellious mankind by enduring the full wrath we deserve upon himself. Let this drive us to the cross of Christ, where all the wrath of God is absorbed in Christ, the sacrificial Lamb of God, on behalf of all believing sinners. The lesson we can learn from all this is that, in this life, some get justice while others get mercy – but either way, God gets the glory. The Canaanites, whom God commanded the Israelites to slaughter, justly deserved death, as do we; but God has had mercy on us, since Christ has suffered the penalty of death and the wrath of God in our place. When we truly understand our just reward, and the immense depths to which Christ stooped to deliver us from that terrible condemnation, we will be quick to abandon the presupposition which so often undergirds such questions as these, that we have the right as autonomous beings to live as we please, and demand an explanation from God for his actions.

"Man is not naturally mortal; death is not the debt of nature but the wages of sin." - John Murray

Does the God of the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?

Why Does the Bible Never Condemn Slavery?

This is actually a misconception. If antebellum Southerners had followed Israel's law, slavery not only would not have existed but would have been treated as a capital offense.

Regarding kidnapping and slavery, please view the following texts from the Torah:

Exodus 21:16:

"He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death."

Deuteronomy 24:7:

"If a man is caught kidnapping any of his countrymen of the sons of Israel, and he deals with him violently or sells him, then that thief shall die; so you shall purge the evil from among you."

This demonstrates that slavery was not the same as the kind we saw that was ubiquitous all over the world or in the 19th-century antebellum south. At that time, tradesmen went to Africa (and other

places), kidnapped people, and brought them home to sell them to the highest bidder. Again, according to these passages, such a practice would be a capital crime in the Old Testament. Instead, persons who were slaves were usually indentured servants paying off a debt; a resident employee who temporarily was living in the employer's household to work off his debt to him. Sometimes it was for other reasons such as when financial disaster hit a particular household, the family would often sell themselves into service to help pay the bills. This clearly is not the type of slavery we usually think of today. The 'slavery' mentioned in the Old Testament was really indentured servanthood and was a very different kind of institution than the New World slavery that developed in modern times.

Consider the following observations made by Paul Copan:

Hebrew Servanthood as Indentured Servitude

We should compare Hebrew debt-servanthood (many translations render this "slavery") more fairly to apprentice-like positions to pay off debts -- much like the indentured servitude during America's founding when people worked for approximately 7 years to pay off the debt for their passage to the New World. Then they became free.

In most cases, servanthood was more like a live-in *employee*, temporarily embedded within the employer's household. Even today, teams trade sports players to another team that has an owner, and these players belong to a franchise. This language hardly suggests slavery, but rather a formal contractual agreement to be fulfilled -- like in the Old Testament.

Through failed crops or other disasters, debt tended to come to *families*, not just individuals. One could *voluntarily* enter into a contractual agreement (“sell” himself) to work in the household of another: “one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells himself” (Leviticus 25:47). A wife or children could be “sold” to help sustain the family through economically unbearable times - - unless kinfolk “redeemed” them (payed their debt). They would be debt-servants for 6 years. A family might need to mortgage their land until the year of Jubilee every 50 years.

Note: In the Old Testament, *outsiders did not impose servanthood* -- as in the antebellum South. Masters could hire servants “from year to year” and were not to “rule over [them] ruthlessly” (Leviticus 25:46,53). Rather than being excluded from Israelite society, servants were thoroughly embedded within Israelite homes.

The Old Testament prohibited unavoidable lifelong servanthood -- unless someone loved his master and wanted to attach himself to him (Exodus 21:5). Masters were to grant their servants release every seventh year with all debts forgiven (Leviticus 25:35--43). A slave’s legal status was unique in the ancient Near East (ANE) -- a dramatic improvement over ANE law codes: “Hebrew has no vocabulary of slavery, only of servanthood.”

An Israelite servant’s guaranteed eventual release within 7 years was a *control or regulation to prevent the abuse and institutionalizing of such positions*. The release-year reminded the Israelites that poverty-induced servanthood was not an ideal social arrangement. On the other hand, *servanthood existed in Israel precisely because poverty existed: no poverty, no*

servants in Israel. And if servants lived in Israel, this was voluntary (typically poverty-induced) -- not forced.

The Dignity of Servants in Israel

Israel's servant laws were concerned about *controlling or regulating* -- not *idealizing* -- an inferior work arrangement. Israelites entered into servitude voluntarily -- though not optimal. The intent of Israel's laws was to combat potential abuses, not to institutionalize servitude. *The Old Testament punished forced slavery by death.* Once a master freed a person from his servant obligations, the former servant had the "status of full and unencumbered citizenship."

Old Testament legislation sought to *prevent voluntary debt-servitude.* God gave Mosaic legislation to prevent the poor from entering, even temporarily, into voluntary indentured service. The poor could glean the edges of fields or pick lingering fruit on trees after their fellow Israelites' harvest (Leviticus 19:9,10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:20,21; cp. Exodus 23:10). Also, God commanded fellow-Israelites to *lend freely to the poor* (Deuteronomy 15:7,8), and to *not charge them interest* (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:36,37). And when the poor could not afford sacrificial animals, they could *sacrifice smaller, less-expensive ones* (Leviticus 5:7,11). Also, people were to *automatically cancel debts every 7 years.* And when a master released his debt-servants, *he was to generously provide for them* -- without a "grudging heart" (Deuteronomy 15:10). The bottom line: *God did not want there to be any poverty (or servanthood) in Israel* (Deuteronomy 15:4). So, servant laws existed to *help* the poor, not *harm* them or *keep them down.*

Rather than relegating treatment of servants (“slaves”) to the end of the law code (commonly done in other ANE law codes), the matter is front-and-center in Exodus 21. *For the first time in the ANE, God’s legislation required treating servants (“slaves”) as persons, not property.* Genesis 1:26,27 affirms that all humans are God’s image-bearers. Job states that master and slave alike come from the mother’s womb and are ultimately equals (Job 31:13-15). As one scholar writes: “We have in the Bible the first appeals in world literature to treat slaves as human beings for their own sake and not just in the interests of their masters.”

Three Remarkable Provisions in Israel

A simple comparison of Israel’s law code with those of the rest of the ANE reveal three remarkable differences. If Bible-believing Southerners had followed these three provisions, antebellum slavery would not have existed or been much of an issue.

1. Anti-Harm Laws: One marked improvement of Israel’s laws over other ANE law codes is the *release of injured servants* (Exodus 21:26,27). When an employer (“master”) accidentally gouged out the eye or knocked out the tooth of his male or female servant/employee, he/she was to go free. God did not allow physical abuse of servants. If an employer’s disciplining his servant resulted in immediate death, that employer (“master”) was to be put to death for murder (Exodus 21:20) -- unlike other ANE codes.¹⁰ In fact, Babylon’s Hammurabi’s Code *permitted* the master to cut off his disobedient slave’s ear. Typically in ANE law codes, *masters -- not slaves -- were merely financially compensated.* The Mosaic Law, however,

held masters to legal account for their treatment of their own servants -- not simply another person's servants.

2. Anti-Kidnapping Laws: Another unique feature of the Mosaic Law is its *condemnation of kidnapping* a person to sell as a slave -- an act punishable by death (Exodus 21:16; cp. Deuteronomy 24:7). Kidnapping, of course, is how slavery in the antebellum South could get off the ground.

3. Anti-Return Laws: Unlike the antebellum South, Israel was to *offer safe harbor to foreign runaway slaves* (Deuteronomy 23:15,16)" a marked contrast to the Southern states' Fugitive Slave Law. Hammurabi's Code demanded the death penalty for those helping runaway slaves. In other less-severe cases" in the Lipit-Ishtar, Eshunna, and Hittite laws" *fin*es were exacted for sheltering fugitive slaves. Some claim that this is an improvement. Well, sort of. In these "improved" scenarios, *the slave was still just property*; the ANE extradition arrangements *still* required that the slave be returned his master. And not only this, the slave was going back to the harsh conditions that prompted him to run away in the first place.¹¹ Even upgraded laws in first millennium BC Babylon included compensation to the owner (or perhaps something more severe) for harboring a runaway slave. Yet the returned slaves themselves were disfigured, including slitting ears and branding.¹² This isn't the kind of improvement to publicize too widely.

Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright observes: "No other ancient near Eastern law has been found that holds a master to account for the treatment of his own slaves (as distinct from injury done to the slave of another master), and the otherwise

universal law regarding runaway slaves was that they must be sent back, with severe penalties for those who failed to comply.”

If the South had followed these three clear laws from Exodus and Deuteronomy, slavery would have been a nonissue. What’s more, Israel’s treatment of servants (“slaves”) was unparalleled in the ANE.

So let's be careful and historically accurate when attempting to equate the African slave trade to the forms of slavery and indentured servanthood you hear about in the Bible. We still have slavery today and it takes place in the prisons. People pay a debt they owe society there.

Lastly, it is good to remember that the Israelites themselves were slaves of the Egyptians for 400 years and God delivered them, bringing judgment on all of Egypt for this oppression. God hates it, and so God delivering His people from the bonds of slavery is one of the key themes of Scripture, and the Exodus points us to Christ who sets us free from bondage.

If God truly loves people why has he slaughtered so many of them throughout the history of the world?

This question has been asked in many different ways by many honestly hurting and struggling people throughout history; and, like any question as deep and ubiquitous as this, there are no pat answers

that adequately address all the real issues behind the asking of it. However, I think there are a few unexpressed assumptions underlying the question which, when exposed and answered, help make sense of the problem of inexplicable, widespread suffering and death. To deal with these assumptions, I'd like to consider what the question presupposes *logically*; what it presupposes *about God*; what it presupposes *about people* and what it presupposes about moral knowledge.

Logically, the question may be turned into a proposition with these basic elements – *major premise*: a sovereign, people-loving God would always be able and willing to do things in the best interest of people; *minor premise a*: slaughtering people is never in their best interest; *minor premise b*: God has slaughtered millions of people throughout history; *conclusion*: God is not a sovereign, people-loving God.

On the face of it, this seems like watertight logic; but the premises assume too much. Consider the first premise: would a sovereign, people-loving God really *always* do what was in the best interest of *all* people? Only if you further assume two things: that the best interest of people must always be his highest, ultimate end; and that doing what is in the best interest of one person is never contraindicated by the best interests of another person. However, both of these implicit assumptions are fallacious. The bible shows many ends towards which God works; and although doing that which is best for the people he loves is an immensely high and oft-emphasized end, it is not the only one. And some of the other ends towards which God works – displaying just wrath against sins, for instance – simply do not allow for such a glib and all-inclusive expression of God's love as, “Of course he could never destroy

anybody if he's loving!". He is loving, yes. But he's also righteous, holy, angry at sin, etc.

Consider the next implicit assumption: that if God were to do what was in the best interest of one person, it would never involve the slaughter of another person. But what if a person's family member or friend was horribly wronged by another – raped or murdered, say – and that person went to the judge for justice. Would the judge be acting in the best interests of this wronged person if he said, "I'm too loving to punish this wicked man"? Of course not – what is in the best interests of the wronged person – what would be the loving thing to do for him, in the highest sense of the word – would be to give him the justice that he rightly desires against his adversary. Not to mention, it would be more loving to all the other potential innocent victims to keep this guy locked up. Although Christianity is rightly known for non-resistance and being willing to return good for evil, it is not as widely understood that this Christian willingness to forego vengeance is tied up with the certain knowledge that one day, God himself will fully avenge them (see Rom. 12:19; Rev. 6:9-11). So then, God may be loving, but he may still destroy because he is also holy and just. Similarly, he may be loving, but he may still destroy because it is in the best interest of one beloved party to destroy another offending party.

Also please note that the questioner has a presupposition that moral evil actually exists. How does he know that? And by what authority do they declare that their morality is as valid for all people? If it were a mere preference then they could keep the virtue to themselves, but when they impose it on others they must believe that their morality is always universally valid. However, if there is no self-revealing God then such ideas are nonsense or social constructs and ultimately meaningless. If we are merely chemicals and nothing more then

really, the Jews genocide of the Canaanites is no different than a day with the kids at Disneyland. Matter and chemicals do not care.

The question gets a little more complicated when pressed to the next level: “All right then, perhaps I can see why it would not be out of step with love to destroy a Hitler or a Jeffrey Dahmer, but what about when it is good, innocent people who are destroyed?” This question gets to the heart of the Christian religion, and only finds its perfect answer in the crowning event of the Christian faith, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ; and to plumb the depths of the answer would take many lifetimes of many scholars. But let it serve as a sort of first answer, or at least an inducement to study out the multi-faceted Christian explanation of the problem of the suffering of the righteous, to consider that those who have been the most deeply acquainted with the Christian faith, and who have undergone the greatest sufferings for no wrong of their own, have surprisingly been the most joyful and ready to endure those unjust sufferings. Now, this of course is not an answer in itself; but it indicates that millions of people, and by all accounts sane, happy, and well-adjusted people, have actually found great purpose and peace in suffering unjustly at the hands of others. The answer they have found could not just be some sort of academic, logical answer, therefore, but something real enough really to matter in the really bad things of life.

The logical explanation to this conundrum of Christians happily suffering in unjust affliction requires the unearthing of another implicit assumption: that being slaughtered, or wronged unjustly, could never be in the best interest of the wronged person. Now, at one level, of course, it's not in anyone's best interest to suffer unjustly. If so, causing this sort of suffering would not really be wrong at all – it would be like what the producers of a horror movie are doing when they make a scary film just because there are persons

out there who are perfectly willing to watch it since they enjoy the frightening thrills it gives them. If Christians enjoyed being wronged in this way, it would drastically minimize the reality of the wrong being done to them. But the fact is, it is not a masochistic sort of joy that they have in the midst of suffering – they really suffer, they really hurt, they shed real tears of sorrow when bereaved of their loved ones, they know the terror and piercing pain that any normal person must feel when in the midst of torment and torture. Yes, the destruction is real, and yes, it is very hateful and undesirable.

However, what is overlooked is that something truly bad could be used for an even greater good. Suppose a person were diagnosed with cancer and had to go through surgery to remove the tumor: it would be an unpleasant ordeal; there would be real pain; the surgeon would really have to cut through living flesh with a cruel scalpel; and yet, when the desired end is kept in mind, the cruel means seems merciful and loving. Even if the cancer patient is too young to understand why such cruel things are being done to her, those who can see more than she does will rightly know that the process is loving; and someday, she too will understand and be glad that she was forced to go through the unpleasanties, even when she would not have consented to it at the time, because there was a good purpose to the inflicted sorrow. Christians do not rejoice in pain like masochists; they rejoice like cancer patients whose disease was discovered early enough to ensure a complete recovery after the fleeting pain of surgery. They rejoice because they know that sorrow is a necessary pathway to a greater and more lasting good (see 2 Cor. 4:16-18; Mat. 5:4; John 16:33). Even Jesus, whose person and work is the one great theme of the bible, endured the most unjust torment in the history of the world with joy – but why? Because he knew, by the eternal plan of the Almighty Father, that it was designed for a greater glory and joy, which would be his for all eternity (Heb. 12:1-

2). He was willing to go through unjust pain out of love for those who actually deserved the pain; and this was for the dual end of spreading free love and goodness to others (because God really is love!); and likewise of winning something he himself would enjoy – infinite glory and the eternal love and friendship and adoration of millions of grateful people in a new, redeemed world. In the same way, Christians who suffer unjustly are full of joy that they can follow in the footsteps of Christ, both because their sufferings may be the means used to point others to salvation, and thus spread the love of Christ that they themselves have known; and also because they know that their own reward in heaven for enduring those sufferings will be unspeakably great (Mat. 5:11-12).

If what is implied by the question at hand were true; if, that is, even one truly innocent person were forced to suffer wrong for no purpose, without being compensated more than adequately for it, then I would be the first to join the ranks of them who condemn Christianity as a great farce and fraud. As we will see in a minute, there really are no innocent persons before God; but I do not say that to minimize the unspeakable wrong of unjust suffering. I don't have all the answers, and I don't know why a helpless child may suffer so horribly as some helpless children do suffer, but I know that God will not allow any senseless suffering to go unavenged, for one thing; and he will not allow any person to suffer more than he deserves, without causing that suffering to spring up a thousand-fold in the fruits of a greater and more eternal joy that would not have been possible without the suffering.

This brings us to the second set of underlying presuppositions we mentioned at the beginning: those *about God*. The first implicit assumption is this: if God is truly loving, he will never do anything that is not for the ultimate good of anyone. But as we already

mentioned, the fact is, although God is indeed loving, he has other attributes as well, that exist in perfect and harmonious union with his love. For instance, God is also a God of holy wrath and righteous vengeance; and because of that, he will destroy those who hurt his beloved children. He hates hands that shed innocent blood and lips that sow discord among brothers (see Prov. 6:16-19); he abhors the bloodthirsty man and is angry with the wicked every day (Psalm 5:4-6). Because he loves his children, he abhors those who senselessly destroy them, and he will bring fierce wrath against them someday. And because he justly loves his own glorious Name, he will bring fierce wrath against those who fling opprobrium upon it by their words and deeds. So then, far from his justice being at odds with his love, they actually work in tandem – his wrath against sin both avenges those whom he loves when they wrongly suffer and also ensures that the glory of the God who is their portion will shine all the brighter, for their joyful adoration, throughout eternity. Thus, his very wrath lovingly avenges and vindicates them, and lovingly provides an eternal reward for them.

The ultimate expression of this harmony may be seen in the life of God's own beloved Son. Since God loves his eternal Son perfectly, he will destroy with perfect hatred those who finally and irrevocably set themselves against both him and those who belong to him. Any formulation of the problem that does not take into account the fact that God's love for his Son and his people involves the destruction of their enemies, for the glorification of his own Name and Power, in order to win a greater love from all the redeemed whom he loved from the beginning, ignores very widespread biblical themes and misses a necessary component for answering our question (see Ex. 3:16-22; 6:2-8, for one example).

The final presupposition that we will consider is what the question assumes *about people*; and that is, that at least *some* people get bad things they don't deserve without ever being satisfactorily compensated for their suffering; but that is a premise which is patently false. The clear testimony of the bible and unavoidable conclusion of experience is that all people are tainted and broken in many deep ways. To underscore this point, just reconsider the original question – why has God slaughtered so many persons? But the fact is, not only has God slaughtered "many," he has taken the life of every last person on earth. Every person is subject to death and it is ultimately God who has taken the life of each one. Which goes to show that the human condition really is worse than many people wish to imagine. True, some people express their sinful natures far more wickedly and drastically than others, and as sure as God is just, an Adolf Hitler will receive a commensurately worse punishment than the hard-working farmer who never ate what he didn't work for and freely gave to all who were in need. Is this farmer still broken in many ways and a sinner? Yes, in ways that we are not capable of understanding, all of us have spurned and despised God's person and laws, even from the womb, and this is a bigger deal than we can possibly imagine (see Psalm 51:5; Rom. 3:9-20; 5:12-21). But he is not a Hitler and he will not receive a Hitler's punishment. When he does stand before the righteous God, he will have no room to complain that his punishment is too great.

But what is so amazing is that God's love and mercy goes infinitely beyond justice in bringing good to those whom he has chosen to give to his Son, as an eternal reward for His own unjust suffering at the hands of the wicked. From a field of sinners deserving only judgment, God has called out innumerable multitudes to give to them nothing but a grace and mercy so vast that every difficult thing that enters their lives will without fail be put to some use of greater

and eternal joy for them (Rom. 8:28-39). Even the worst sinner who faces God's righteous judgment will not be able to question God's love – his grace and long forbearance, which he had constantly rejected until it was too late, will be starkly evident. How much more will the sinner who was freely forgiven be able to testify of God's love? And included among those giving the most powerful voice to divine love will be those who in their lives suffered the deepest for the least cause.

In sum, this age-old question arises from realities that are nuanced and difficult, but pervasive and poignantly real. People really do go through deep hurts that really are unjust and inexplicable; and it really is intensely painful to go through those things, and difficult to understand why. The pat answers we've all heard cannot satisfy a person in that situation. It will not help to hear, "Well, God just didn't want to violate the free will of the person who raped you". It will not help to hear, "Why not just focus on all the positive things in your life?". It won't ultimately help to hear, "Well at least you're not getting everything you deserve" (although that answer has part of the truth in it, at least, and will help those who already know the rest of the truth in some measure). But it's still true that some people are more wicked than others, and those more wicked people take advantage of and hurt the relatively more righteous. Just as it's true that "natural" (i.e. divinely ordained) disasters kill tender infants and inveterate sinners alike. We may not understand why so many of these bad things happen all around us; but if we are willing to give an honest look at the God who revealed himself perfectly to humanity on the Cross of Calvary, we will have so powerful a testimony to God's great love, that we will be able to trust him in any circumstance. It was because of love alone that the Father put the innocent Son to torments for the just payment of the penalty of the sins of those who had hated him. It was by free grace and love alone

that he freely forgave them, made them holy, and continues to do everything necessary to give them eternal joy in his presence. It is only when we look at how that righteous and wrathful and merciful and loving God, even when he was lovingly saving a sinful people, was also destroying their ultimate enemy, the devil, and giving a sobering testimony to the eternal torment of all who continue to refuse his proffered mercy – it is only then that we can actually find answers that address every part of the painful reality without denying or making light of any of it.

Because the question really is so difficult, not just in the way of an interesting logical riddle, but in a way that bleeds with real human hearts and hurts, finding an answer that actually makes sense of everything is a stunningly hopeful thing. Maybe it still won't make perfect sense, but enough sense that it is sensible to trust the one who has provided the answer, just like we can trust a proven doctor to perform a surgery when we don't know all its ins and outs. And no other religion can find any real answer that's not just a denial of reality, or a minimization of justice and vengeance, or a stifling of mercy and love. Only the Christ who came once to suffer for the sins of his people that he might redeem them, and who is coming a second time to deal out eternal tribulation to those who hate him and them, but rest and eternal joy to all who trust in him (2 Thes. 1:5-12), can bring all the painful realities of a fallen and broken world to a thoroughly satisfying conclusion. Even if we do not understand why everything happens, we can look to such a One and trust that he knows all and will bring it all to rights.

Religious and Philosophical Pluralism:

by **Tim Keller & Charles Garland**

About every other week, I confront popular pluralist notions that have become a large part of the way Americans think. For example, pluralists contend that no one religion can know the fullness of spiritual truth, therefore all religions are valid. But while it is good to acknowledge our limitations, this statement is itself a strong assertion about the nature of spiritual truth. A common analogy is often cited to get the point across which I am sure you have heard — several blind men trying to describe an elephant. One feels the tail and reports that an elephant is thin like a snake. Another feels a leg and claims it is thick like a tree. Another touches its side and reports the elephant is a wall. This is supposed to represent how the various religions only understand part of God, while no one can truly see the whole picture. To claim full knowledge of God, pluralists contend, is arrogance. When I occasionally describe this parable, and I can almost see the people nodding their heads in agreement.

But then I remind the hearers that the only way this parable makes any sense, however, is if the person telling the story has seen the whole elephant. Therefore, the minute one says, 'All religions only see part of the truth,' you are claiming the very knowledge you say no one else has. And they are demonstrating the same spiritual arrogance they so often accuse Christians of. In other words, to say all is relative, is itself a truth statement but dangerous because it uses smoke and mirrors to make itself sound more tolerant than the rest. Most folks who hold this view think they are more enlightened than those who hold to absolutes when in fact they are really just as strong in their belief system as everyone else. I do not think most of these folks are purposefully using trickery or bad motives. This is because they seem to have even convinced themselves of the "truth" of their

position, even though they claim "truth" does not exist or at least can't be known. Ironic isn't it? The position is intellectually inconsistent. (Tim Keller)

In its pure form Pluralism is a fact. It's not an opinion or a belief or a religion. In other words, not every one believes the same things. We live in a society that's very diverse, not just ethnically, but also religiously. But when pluralism starts to become a philosophy, when it starts to become a religious dogma, then it becomes a different animal. And that's what I want to call relativism -- or religious relativism, philosophical pluralism. It goes by different names but that is the dogmatic religious assertion that all religions are basically the same, that no one knows the truth about God. And no one can know the ultimate truth about God in a way that invalidates other peoples' religious opinions and the belief that it's arrogant to say that you have the truth religiously and it is arrogant to try to persuade other people to believe what you believe religiously. That's relativism, philosophical pluralism. And I would say that's the default belief of most people you run into in our city.-- whether they're religious or not, most people think about religion that way.

Here is what I want to urge on you and try to unpack in several ways. And that is that relativism is itself a religious belief. It is a dogma. Relativism is. It has affirmations and denials and a missionary force. One of the affirmations of relativism is that God is ultimately unknowable. No one can know the truth about God. But how do one know that to be true? This assumes an ultimate understanding of spiritual reality. All religions are ultimately the same. All religions are following a path to God. It doesn't matter how you believe, it matters how you live. Do you see this? Those are religious statements. Those are matters of religious beliefs, dogma. Doctrines! If people say, "No, I'm not religious. I'm saying you can't

know. I'm saying, Nobody can know the truth about God. I'm not claiming that I've got a corner on it." But if you look at it closely, the statements of religious relativism are every bit as dogmatic as the statements of the Koran or the Bible. It's a religious dogma.

It has denials. Religious relativism denies with certainty that there is one God who is holy and just, who has taken on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, who is our creator and judge. Who can only be appeased and known through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and faith in him. Relativism says that is false. It makes a religious assertion: we deny this, creedally, that that is not true. It's a dogmatic assertion that relativism makes. And -- relativism seeks to persuade those who do not believe it to believe it.

Somehow, the relativist has come to understand that he alone sees the full reality. He alone is in the airplane. He alone is the king who is not blind telling the parable of the elephant. Only relativism is timelessly and objectively true. Relativistic belief is accepted so it can be taught as public fact in America today even though we have separation of church and state. I hear nonsensical statements like it is because of religion that all war starts - of course it is because of religion, but religion is an inescapable part of the human condition. Relativism also zealously fights to make sure no one believes in any absolutes while they must use their own absolute to establish this idea.

Now Christians have been known to be proudplenty of us. There are lots of arrogant Christians. But if you read the Bible, you see that Christians ought not to be arrogant. Arrogant Christians are betraying Christianity. And when we're arrogant, we're not believing the gospel. We're not being Biblical. But, ultimately, to hold a relativistic point of view, you have to turn the question back on

yourself and doubt your own doubts and say, "Why aren't the relativists' religious beliefs arrogant? Why isn't it arrogant to say that you're the one in the airplane? Why isn't it arrogant to say you're the king who's not blind and can see the whole elephant?" Ultimately, if you judge your doubts the same way you judge other peoples' religion, then you find yourself hoisted on your own petard. Right? Yes. It's just as arrogant to claim relativism, as it is to claim religious truth.

The Christian is not better in any way than a pagan. There are probably many pagans who have lived more moral lives than the Christian. In fact the Christian believes Himself not morally fit for God - a person who's so desperately broken that unless Jesus Christ dies under the wrath of God in my place, I can never be reconciled to God and have fellowship with Him." There are lots of people wiser than us, lots of people who are more moral than we are, people who are more devoted to their religion than we are. If a person claims anything different, he is missing the gospel. It's why we ought to be teachable. When we talk to friends who don't know Christ, we ought to be learning, instead of just talking.

But, someone will say, you only believe this because you were raised where you were raised, right? You say you know the truth but really its just provincialism. You're a product of your culture. So, how can you say it's the only truth?" But if you're raised here, you're raised in a relativistic culture. Right? And so you believe -- that all religions are one. You're a relativist. That's just because of your mom and dad -- and because you grew up in LA or the like. If you were born in Indonesia, you would not be a relativist. So, therefore, relativism couldn't be true. It's just a cultural construct. Right? You only believe it because of where you were raised so don't make any dogmatic assertions about all religions being equal. That's just what your little

culture believes. Once you get out and about in the world and are a little more cosmopolitan, you'll realize that that's just one view among many. The criticism has to apply to relativism if it has to apply to other religions, doesn't it?

So -- if relativism is your default mode, if that's what you've booted up with, because of where you were raised, let me appeal to you this way. At least look at it, doubt it, the way you doubt religion. Look at your own beliefs with the same critical apparatus you use to look at other people's beliefs. See that it's a religious dogma like others and see if it holds water as a religious dogma. Is it true? Is relativism true? Ask yourself this important question.

Christianity Only Wants Power to Take Over the State Mechanism

Visitor: I want to prevent organized religious institutions from invading and taking over the state mechanism. No Catholic church telling the kings what to do. No Saudi mullahs telling the people what is and is not moral-legal. No theocratic state a la Iran or the Taliban. I dislike the capture of the state mechanism by a competing organization based on appeals to religious authority. Separate authorities for separate spheres. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Religion should be kept out of the public square. Only those with secular ideas should establish policy.

Response: If in a democracy under rule of law, Christians were in the majority, then they wouldn't be "taking over" the state

mechanism any more than if secularists were in the majority. Instead, the majority has a strong influence on law and public policy. But checks and balances would still have to be in place. I couldn't agree with you more that no ONE religious group should completely take over the state mechanism. The depth of our depravity as human beings should preclude the possibility of giving this much power to any one man or group. However, I noticed a glaring absence from your list. It appears that you have overlooked the inclusion of your own religious/philosophical view: postmodern secularism. **Convince me that you do not intend to suppress other people's views by also including secularism on this list.** By not including it, you exempt yourself from the limitations of the separation of church and state and thereby give yourself and proponents of your view free reign to exert power, while everyone else remains limited. Awfully convenient for you to claim this exemption, don't you think? A truly liberal society, I would argue, is one that allows all views to participate. You see, by excluding yourself from this list, you appear, from my perspective, to have become the very thing that you wish to avoid. **Please explain to me how you're your viewpoint is any less susceptible to setting up a tyranny than any other religion.**

Don't you see the irony here? I am all for limiting the power of any group, including my own, since I am well aware not only of my own depravity but also the same propensity in others. "Secular" and "Secularism" are different animals. One is a fact, the other a philosophy. The country of France now is in the midst of instituting just such an anti-God policy. They have merely replaced "religion" with secularism. What is the difference? How is the divine right of kings in ancient Europe any different than states that have established secular monopolies? Worldwide Communism and National Socialism were both founded on secularist principles. **In**

other words, totalitarianism looks the same whether it is in the name of religion or irreligion. When America set out to establish a secular country this did not mean they envisioned that only secularists should be allowed to make public policy. By imagining that your views are neutral, you advance a form of tyranny by default. For you yourself are appealing to your own interpretive community when appealing to values, morals and the like. From the point of view of the civil magistrate your view should be no more authoritative than a God-believing "religious" view. Really, our laws should be deduced from which ideas are most persuasive and intelligible. Let us decide through open debate rather than censor any group as you propose.

But lets be clear: True Theocracy will only take place when Jesus Christ Himself returns as King of kings and judges the world. It is really not our short term goal to establish a theocracy so no need to fret too much about it. We do not obsess over issue this as secularists sometimes like to imagine. We believe gaining political power never saved anyone. In fact the greatest modern-day revival of Christianity has taken place in China, a place not known for being particularly friendly to Christians. While we want to proclaim God's word widely and make it universally known, Christianity does not grow by instituting civil laws and promoting behavior modification. It means very little to Christians if the society is only outwardly moral but knows not the Savior. God alone causes the growth of His kingdom in men's hearts through persuasion. While promoting God's law is indeed a goal of ours ... yet it must voluntarily adopted for it to be ultimately meaningful. Not by force. The idea of a rule of law and separation of powers was a wise one because it understood the limitations of human nature - that the power of individuals and groups must be limited, due to corruption. This limiting role of human power is essentially a Christian idea which comes out of

Presbyterian polity. So tyranny is not innate to Christianity - and while we acknowledge that there has been tyranny in the name of Christianity historically, this is not because people took the Bible too seriously, but because they did not take it serious enough. Secular progressives do not believe that human nature is flawed so it is unlikely such an idea would have naturally become central to our political process without a that element of Christian influence.

Remember, Christianity is primarily a religion grace. Bad behavior is really only a symptom of a much greater concern. That mankind's condition under sin's wages means death is certain. A mere outward change of societies behavior will simply not do. Consider this analogy:

"A man has been found guilty, shall we say, of a heinous crime and has been sentenced to death. He is now in prison, awaiting the day of his execution. A friend comes to visit him. This friend calls out: "I have good news for you!" Eagerly the condemned man asks: "What is it?" The answer comes: "Be good." In that message there is not so much as a shred of good news. It is most cruel mockery..."

It is not about niceness or morality... it is about our condition. If everyone became moral tomorrow it would have no consequence on our enslavement. What we need is the new birth, a resurrection of our soul, a restoration to God's original intent for humankind. What we need is the gospel.

Justifying Non-Christian Objections

by Douglas Wilson & Farrell Till

Whenever we object to something, we always assume some standard or rule that the thing violates. Similarly, when non-Christians object to the Christian faith, they assume some standard that Christianity violates. But can non-Christians justify these standards that they so readily use? In the following interchange, the editor of Credenda/Agenda, Douglas Wilson and Farrell Till, editor of The Skeptical Review , discuss the topic of justifying non-Christian standards of ethics and reason.

For the past thirty years, Farrell Till has been an English instructor at Spoon River College in Canton, Illinois. Prior to this, he was a preacher and foreign missionary for the Church of Christ. He attended two Bible colleges and received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Harding University. His preaching career spanned twelve years, five of which were spent in missionary work in France. After becoming an agnostic, he quit the ministry in 1963 and began a teaching career. For the past five years, he has edited The Skeptical Review , a quarterly journal that focuses on the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. He has regularly debated inerrancy-related issues in various public forums, including radio and television. Having begun this work as an agnostic, he now considers himself an atheist.

DW: *Many unbelievers commonly object to the God of the Bible on the basis of ethical "problems" with the character of God as revealed in the Scriptures. Whether they use psalms of imprecation, the slaughter of the Canaanites, the eternal wrath of God on the impenitent, etc ., the central theme is usually the same "Who would*

want to worship a God like that !" But despite the surface plausibility of the objection, a careful examination of it shows their Achilles attacking our Hector with his bare heel. Far from being the unbeliever's strongest case against the true God, this objection actually reveals the radical futility of unbelief; without God there are no ethical objections to anything .

FT: *Although you didn't expressly state the "objective-morality" position of evangelical apologists, you certainly implied it when you said that "without God there are no ethical objections to anything." The fallacy of this position is its failure to recognize that morality is an intellectual abstraction. As such, it is no different from abstractions of tragedy, sorrow, or any of many other abstractions the human mind has formulated from its broad range of experience. Arguing that human intelligence cannot determine if acts are immoral without a god to tell us they are is as illogical as arguing that we cannot tell if events are tragic without a god of tragedy to tell us they are.*

DW: *Fine, I'll bite. If there is no God, then all the things you mention are in the same meaningless category. Morality, tragedy, and sorrow are equally evanescent. They are all empty sensations created by the chemical reactions of the brain, in turn created by too much pizza the night before. If there is no God, then all abstractions are chemical epiphenomena, like swamp gas over fetid water. This means that we have no reason for assigning truth and falsity to the chemical fizz we call reasoning or right and wrong to the irrational reaction we call morality. If no God, mankind is a set of bi-pedal carbon units of mostly water. And nothing else.*

FT: *You bit too hard. In equating all human abstractions with "swamp gas over fetid water," you overlook verifiable facts. The*

human mind can think; swamp gas can't. Human intelligence can evaluate situations and formulate abstractions of beauty, happiness, sorrow, fairness and morality; swamp gas can't. Are these abstractions valid? Well, what IQ level is needed to conceptualize abstractions like beautiful, sad, fair, right or wrong? Can one with an IQ of 100 do it, or must his IQ be infinite? The existence of moral concepts is verifiable; the existence of gods who put such concepts into human minds is unverifiable. Please address this problem.

DW: *You missed my challenge. You acknowledge the distinction between human intelligence and swamp gas, but you have no way to account for it. If there is no God, then why is there a distinction between the chemical reactions in your head and elsewhere? Suppose we agreed that the walls of a house are straight. I say there must be a foundation under it -- a precondition for straight walls. Your hypothesis is the house has no foundation at all and doesn't need one. "See, the walls are straight without a foundation." But given your worldview's assumptions, why? Can you explain how time and chance acting on matter can produce the straight walls of reason and morality?*

FT: *No, you missed my challenge. You are the asserter, so you must bear the burden of proving your assertion. You have asserted that "without God there are no ethical objections to anything," so I insist that you prove that. You have admitted that human intelligence can formulate abstractions, but you say that "all abstractions are chemical epiphenomena, like swamp gas over fetid water." Prove that please. Can the brain's solution of algebra problems be right? If so, does "God" have to put the right solutions into the brain? If not, can a brain that correctly solves algebra problems correctly solve*

moral problems? If not, why not? Where did your god get his intelligence?

DW: *Since you insist, I'm glad to repeat my argument. If there is no God, then all that exists is time and chance acting on matter. If this is true then the difference between your thoughts and mine correspond to the difference between shaking up a bottle of Mountain Dew and a bottle of Dr. Pepper. You simply fizz atheistically and I fizz theistically. This means that you do not hold to atheism because it is true, but rather because of a series of chemical reactions. Thus, your atheism destroys rationality and morality. Intellectual and moral relativism have long challenged atheistic worldviews. No atheist has successfully addressed this problem, although you are invited to try.*

FT: *If I fizzed "flat-earthly," and you fizzed "round-earthly," would you argue that you don't hold your view because it's true but "rather because of a series of chemical reactions"? Would your "round-earthism" then destroy rationality and science? There is a truth in the theism-atheism controversy. The fact that no one can establish that truth to everyone's satisfaction doesn't mean the truth doesn't exist. So I'll repeat my challenge. What IQ level is necessary to abstract moral concepts? To discover moral truths? Let's take the Amalekite massacre (1 Sam. 15:2-3). How much intelligence is needed to determine that no morally perfect entity could have ordered the slaughter of children and babies?*

DW: *"There is truth in the theism-atheism controversy." Amen. You are able to say so because you assume that truth is objective. Again, you bet. But objective truth cannot be validly derived from the premises of your worldview. You are borrowing objective rationality and morality from the Christian worldview in order to*

attack the rationality and morality of the Christian worldview. There was a moral problem in the Amalekite attack -- Saul was disobedient and didn't kill everything as God instructed. You should have no objection. Given your worldview, there is no moral difference between the Amalekite massacre and a day at the beach. In both cases, all you have is atoms banging around.

FT: *If the Amalekite children who were killed with Israelite spears could speak, would they say there was any difference in what happened to them and a day at the beach? You know they would. What IQ level would they need to distinguish the difference? You have evaded the issue long enough, so why don't you tell us how much intelligence is needed to formulate abstractions of beauty, loyalty, justice, etc.? Without a god of beauty, can one validly determine that a sunset is beautiful? If so, why can't one determine that acts are immoral without a god of morality? Truth is objective because of reality, not because some deity arbitrarily decides what truth is.*

DW: *Well of course, you and the Amalekite children may assert some objective moral distinction between good and evil. But given the basic assumptions of your worldview, neither of you can justify that distinction. On your assumptions, the chance collection of atoms called Jews objected to the Holocaust; the random atoms called Nazis did not. And so what? Given atheism, what is the difference? Do the good atoms wear white hats? Your persevering but irrelevant inquiries about intelligence reveal that you do not yet understand the nature of the problem. Objective and universal standards of reason, morality, and beauty simply cannot exist in your purely material world. You are fighting Christianity with borrowed Christian weapons.*

FT: *When have I said that "objective morality" exists? It doesn't. To say that objective morality doesn't exist, however, is not to say that morality doesn't exist. Rational processes can validly distinguish "good" from "evil" just as they can validly distinguish happiness from sorrow, but I can't explain in 115 words how this can be done. If you care to debate this in a less confining forum than your "Disputatio" format, then let's do it. Meanwhile, why don't you explain where your objective morality came from? If you say, "From God," then please explain where he came from. No theist has successfully addressed this problem, but you're invited to try. Try to remember that you're the asserter.*

DW: *If morality is not objective, then it is subjective. If it is subjective, then it is as diverse as five billion subjective states of mind. Such fragmented subjectivity provides no authoritative ethical voice, and hence no morality deserving of the name. Related to this, you must now disclaim "objective rationality" as well as "objective morality," for the two are built on the same foundation -- or rather, in your worldview, not built on the same non-foundation. But if objective rationality does not exist, then your worldview does not permit you to reason for three words in a row, much less 115. The laws of logic are as nonmaterial as the God you so diligently oppose.*

FT: *Are you arguing that subjectivism cannot determine truth? If so, reality will not support your claim. You keep harping about my worldview, so please address the many problems in your "worldview." Where did "objective" reality come from? From God? Well, where did he come from? How can one determine what "objective" morality is? From the Bible? If so, a lot of subjectivism will be involved in reading and interpreting it. Looking for "objective" morality in the Bible will produce a morality "as diverse*

as 5 billion subjective states of mind." If not, why not? "Such fragmented subjectivity" will provide "no authoritative ethical voice" and so "no morality deserving of the name." Please address this issue.

DW: *Reality doesn't support my claim? Would this be your reality or mine? Would this be subjective or objective reality? If subjective, then I don't think ice cream has bones either. If objective, then you would have to identify (and defend) the authoritative voice through which this reality speaks. Of course, I am arguing (and have shown) that subjectivism destroys truth. The fact that you have in effect embraced subjectivism means that the debate over the existence of God is over, and we are now discussing certain problems that arise from an affirmation of His existence. Having shown that atheism is inescapably false, I am happy to turn to the problems you raise. Next round.*

FT: *You've been a master of evasion. You assert the existence of "objective" morality, but you have evaded all challenges to prove that it exists. Nothing exists -- not even your god -- simply because it would be nice if it did exist. In your final installment, please address this issue. How do you know that "objective" morality exists? Where did it originate? If you say from God, please prove that God exists. If "objective" morality is revealed in the Bible, it becomes something inseparable from subjective interpretation, so just what is the great advantage that your "worldview" has over mine? If you ignore this issue again, I'm afraid your evasion will be obvious to all.*

DW: *The proof you seek has been pervasive throughout the debate. I have been pointing to the impossibility of your alternative. The debate over God's existence does not fit in the same category as a*

debate over the existence of peach jam. The jam may or may not exist, leaving our thought processes unaffected either way. If God does not exist (as this alleged "master of evasion" has pointed out repeatedly above), then our thought processes (yours and mine) are one thing. If He does exist, then they are something else entirely. The content of your affirmations has been atheistic, your unacknowledged presuppositions theistic. This means that, on a fundamental level, you and I agree that He is.

Originally appeared in Credenda/Agenda (Vol. 7; No. 1)

If God loves all people, why does he condemn gays just because they were born with a different sexual orientation than heterosexuals?

Gaga is right. We were all 'born this way'. Psalm 51:5 - 'Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.' I tend to be among those who think it quite probable that homosexuals are born with a certain orientation ... but so are all human beings. This idea falls right into line with basic Christian doctrine which teaches that as a result of the man's rebellion against God and the fall (Genesis 2-3), we are all born sinners with an inclination to sin.

No one is singling out homosexuality and frankly, contrary to popular wisdom, most Christians do not obsess over this issue. The gospel tells us that we ALL cannot change and each of us is in a similar condition to the homosexual, prior to regeneration. We are

all born into bondage, a condition that we cannot change: Its called total depravity. By nature we are all morally impotent to obey God's commands let alone believe the gospel ... yet we all remain culpable for these transgressions (Rom 3:19, 20). If homosexuality can be exempt because people claim that they are born that way, then I guess this makes us all exempt from repenting of our various sins that we cannot naturally escape from. If I am born a man of pride and a bigot and cannot change this, does this exempt me from obedience to God in this area? Shall I give up trying to change my coveting and greed because I was born with such a desire? This also includes conservatives who are bigoted against people who are homosexuals. Conservatives must also repent of their sin of trusting in their own righteousness because God didn't save Christians because they were pure or because of something good He saw in them but rather, because of His sheer grace, plus nothing. The conservative religionist is as equally deserving of God's wrath as the homosexual, apart from grace.

I think it is clear that Scripture does not conceive of the church's primary role in the world as one of opposing public immorality through political means, but this does not mean we should remain neutral about it either. We will vote our consciences according to God's law but will not fret or get violent if we do not get our way. The Kingdom of God is not the least bit threatened by the laws and social engineering of men. Consider that the early first and second century Christians lived in an extremely diverse, corrupt and immoral society where they did not have any access to political power or influence in public policy other than through persuading people to believe the gospel. These early Christians did not waste their time picketing or protesting, as we now see some doing. Shouting matches were not their calling. They witnessed to the historic fact of the resurrection, they prayed, worshiped, and lived

pious & holy lives. Indeed this witness, in many cases, influenced society, but in many other cases, society went on in its paganism. These Christians knew that if there were to be a vast change of public ideas of morals, it would have to come through the grace of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by an imperial edict or judicial ruling. Laws do very little to change people's thinking or heart's disposition on such matters. And there is no evidence that Jesus went out of his way to take on any political causes, probably because, in themselves, they do have any power to change hearts.

Of course, many wanted Jesus to be a political organizer but that wasn't His interest (except in an eschatological sense). But that does not automatically mean He approved of the status quo. On the contrary, it simply means that the path of Jesus Christ is not identical with the path of political activism. I think Jesus' view of society really tended to grow out of his view of our individual and corporate alienation from God. He gave a diversity of responses to our alienation, but He did not mistake any symptomatic aspect of our lost condition--sexual depravity, greed, poverty, war, ignorance--from the root cause and remedy of that alienation: the gospel.

Jesus lived His life submerged in a culture of social problems and sympathetically tended to those problems, yet he never held out any hope for the substantial eradication of those problems apart from the gospel. The first century Christians, as revealed in the Scriptures, exemplified radical kinds of love and service, but none of these manifested itself as a stress on political activism. So there is great hope in the difference in the way Jesus views the actions of a Christian from the romantic possibilities for a political utopia, which may restrain some evil but itself really has no power to transform anyone.

Frankly, I have always viewed moralizing crusades with great suspicion. It appears to me to commit the church to such a course of action, which was never part of its original purpose, and is an attempt to accomplish something that must ultimately fail. The ultimate effect of merely attempting to focus on legal change might very well be to impede the hearing of the Gospel by those who need it most. To put it in other terms, we cannot minister to people if they perceive us primarily as their political enemies. I will give to you, however, that many biblically/theologically illiterate so-called Christians are crassly political and hostile to all kinds of groups. So surprising as it may sound to you, a more conservative view of theology is the answer to dealing with such ignorance and bigotry.

The theologically conservative position is that Christians should take no more interest in what gays do in their private lives than in what any other fallen sinner does, and that we should not distinguish ourselves by obsessing on the various homosexual agendas. Of course when we vote, we must do what we think is best by Biblical standards. But it is clear that homosexuality has by no means outpaced heterosexuality in the committing acts of evil. I am convinced that the response of Christians must include a great deal more love genuine acceptance of our gay friends and family. A Christians' principled opposition to gay marriage ought to be one form of confessing how unworthily we as Christians have treated marriage itself.

*I think it important to point out, however, that **the general thinking among the secular progressive crowd is that it is Christianity is perverse and immoral for placing homosexuality in its catalog of sins.** This is a huge turnaround from just a couple of decades ago such that whenever a Christian mentions that homosexual acts (among other*

immoralities) are sin, it often sends people flying into a rage ... which really goes to show that those who support homosexual unions are not religiously neutral in the least. They intend to not only hold a personal preference on the issue but force society at large to adopt a so-called "tolerant" view on the subject through re-education and judicial declarations.

I would challenge (those of you who believe this) to look at your own view as it is profoundly influenced by your own religious presuppositions. In fact I would argue that your view that homosexuals have the right to marry (or that we should teach school-children that it is acceptable practice) is no more "value-neutral" than any other religious view. You would impose on the collective society a view that cannot be demonstrated to be right, except that it is your own groups' arbitrary preference. The fact is that your own particular beliefs on the matter are anything but "secular" or "neutral" for they are ultimately based on your own underlying base commitments that you cannot ultimately account for, except by your own self-declared authority. A secular society doesn't mean only "secularists" can determine our laws and educational content, it means that all voices have the right to debate in the free market of ideas, and may the best idea(s) prevail. This is because someone's concept of justice, morality and goodness will always ultimately be imposed. Bias is something that is impossible to avoid. We are all religious creatures and cannot refrain from making moral judgments every day of our lives. Our deepest social problems are thus, pre-political, embedded in our worldviews.

So it is naive to think that the only thing that makes one religious is that one goes to church and reads the Bible. It is difficult to see how Christians are under more influence from their own interpretive community than others are from theirs. Thus, it seems obvious to

me that you enjoy being a postmodern secularist, and the philosophy of this group has been influential on you, but ultimately you just believe what you like to believe. This preference is derived from the answer you find most satisfactory but is by no means self-validating. It is hard for me to see, therefore, how you can escape a kind of communal solipsism. What therefore, gives your group the right to be exempt from the limitations of the "separation of church and state" since you appeal to an absolute authority for your morals that you cannot account for?

It is a fact that we live in a pluralistic society. But when pluralism starts to become a philosophy, or a religious dogma then it takes on new characteristics and could be characterized by calling it something more akin to "religious pluralism." It has affirmations and denials and a missionary force. This contemporary dogmatism itself is evidence that postmodernism is really just ultramodern. Religious pluralism has become so opinionated that it tends to drive out empirical pluralism; its plea for tolerance is so imperial that it is remarkably intolerant. True tolerance, however, simultaneously argues for truth and insists people have the right to disagree without fear of coercion. To give you a better idea of what I mean, you often are morally outraged that some conservatives have a gall to attempt to determine for the rest of us the standards our society will operate on, all the while you secularists are free to arbitrarily determine the standards our society should operate on (because you hide under the umbrella of so-called non-religious relativism). There seems to be a double standard here. By calling my position a religion you can conveniently neutralize any attempt by Christians to be involved in public policy in a society governed by separation of church and state. Yet your own belief system (that you somehow believe to be neutral and non-religious) can have free reign to alone determine the direction of our society. But there is no way to verify

the authority of your claims to know truth. Thus your assumption is that liberal religious pluralism does, in effect, have a monopoly on the truth. It alone claims the vantage point from which the true relation of the religions can be seen. This religious pluralism is already, therefore, presupposed to be the summum bonum, the god by which all other claims must be judged. But it is a totalitarian imposition to enforce the view that all views are equally valid.

Most secularists believe that in almost all cases calling homosexuality a sin stems from a deeply felt animosity towards the mere existence of gays. But Isn't it possible that Christians might be for preserving our civilization and limiting certain behaviors because they actually love the people who are in bondage to them? Love hates what is harmful and destructive in others' lives. Love is not just sentimental. When I see my friends caught in something that is ultimately harmful I come humbly with a clear attitude of "I love you and am committed to you but I can't stand to see what this is doing to your life." This is both true on an individual and a societal level. I come myself as one also broken by sin, not in arrogant pride or hate, for I am no better. In calling persons to leave their idols that hold them in enslavement, you may interpret as hate, but this is really not the motive or affection going on in our hearts. Of course, I cannot speak for everyone. But those who are truly committed to their faith do have such affection.

Unbelievers need to repent of their immorality; religious people need to repent of their morality; both need the gospel of Jesus Christ.

All worldviews do in fact inescapably hold to absolutes, including yours. It is unavoidable because this is God's universe. Every time you open your lips and put a sentence together with logic, you are counting on the fact that there are universals. You are thereby

"borrowing" from a system that you repudiate in order to repudiate that system. We live in a universe where logic and morals are unavoidably absolute. The point I was making is that I believe your system is unintelligible because on the one hand you deny absolutes, but in the other, you employ them when it seems to be convenient to you. You claim to be a relativist yet your life and practice betray your claim when you declare that slavery, racism bigotry against homosexuals and torture are wrong for all people, for example. Even the very statement you make that there are no absolutes exposes the inconsistency of your position. For you must believe that it is absolute that there are no absolutes. Thus you are claiming to have religious knowledge that others don't have. It is a claim to understand the nature of reality that cannot be verified. A bird's eye view of reality of the world that you claim to see and others cannot. So this absolute claim to relativism is a claim to know truth just like mine, except you cannot account for yours because it is hopelessly self-refuting, even under simple analysis. You are invoking universals to claim there are none. That confused logic is fatal to your system.

Social constructs are ultimately meaningless. If your view is not true in any ultimate sense, and does not appeal to ther Grand Narrative, then you are simply writing your own narrative in your own little corner, trying to somehow suck meaning out of it.