

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Western Humanism and the New Atheism

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“Nothing comes from nothing—nothing ever could.”

—Maria Von Trapp (Julie Andrews), “Something Good,” in *The Sound of Music* (1965)¹

By far the most direct and radical challenge to the Christian faith is to deny the existence of any God. In the twentieth century the atheistic worldview that rejects all beliefs in supernatural or transcendent beings achieved influence far greater than at any time previously in the West. Even in the twentieth century, though, its influence has far outstripped its adherence in terms of sheer numbers. While atheists remain in the minority in all Western countries, they have had an inordinate influence on the culture as the most forceful advocates of the secularization of society.

WHO SAYS GOD IS DEAD?

One commonly hears that about 95 percent of Americans believe in the existence of God. This figure is problematic, though, if one is at all particular by what is meant by “God.” In a 1994 Gallup survey, only 83 percent stated that they believed in a personal God, while some 12 percent believed in a spirit or life force. In other words, about 12 percent of Americans are pantheists of some sort, while only about 83 percent are monotheists.

Of the 5 percent remaining, 3 percent said they did not know if they believed in a God or not, while 2 percent said they did not believe. The difference between these two answers is marginal (since many atheists say both that they do not know *and* that they do not believe), but suggests that of the 5 percent of Americans who do not confess belief in a God or divine power, about half would describe themselves as agnostics while the other half would probably be agreeable to the designation atheists.²

¹ A line which Christian philosopher Norman L. Geisler is fond of quoting to express the cosmological argument for the existence of God.

² George H. Gallup, Jr., *Religion in America 1996* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Religion Research Center, 1996), 24. These figures should be regarded as approximations, and other surveys suggest some qualifications are in order. For example, a 1994 survey by the National Opinion Research Center found that while 94%

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Gallup's figures show also that men are a little more than twice as likely not to believe in a God than women (some 5 percent of men do not believe). Young adults (ages 18–29) also tend not to believe somewhat more than the general population, and evidently some 7 percent of teenagers do not believe in a God. It is also interesting to note that 8 percent of those with postgraduate education do not believe in a God.³ This figure is not much higher than for the general population and suggests that belief in God cannot be dismissed as the archaic belief of the uneducated.

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While belief in a God is very high in the United States, in other parts of the world a different picture emerges. Worldwide it is estimated that there are about a quarter of a billion atheists and nearly a billion people who are either nonreligious or whose religion has little or no place for a God. While about four-fifths of these atheists and agnostics reside in China and in former Soviet republics, a good many of them are to be found in other parts of the world.⁴ In 1981 the percentage of people in Western Europe who professed not to believe in God ranged from 16% in Great Britain and West Germany to 29% in France and 35% in Sweden. Another 7% to 15% in these countries said they did not know. Thus in Western Europe, where Christianity has flourished continuously longer than anywhere else in the world, overall only about three-fifths of the people believe in God.⁵

Atheism, then, and the more noncommittal agnosticism, are positions found throughout the world and which have had an enormous impact on the world in this century. In the United States, where their numbers are comparatively small, atheists and agnostics exert a disproportionate influence on the culture through their advocacy of the complete secularization of American society.

WHAT ATHEISM SAYS

It is commonly assumed that atheism is the belief that there is no God, and that an atheist is someone who believes there is no God. Most atheists, however, reject these definitions. They point out that the term atheism derives from the Greek *a* (not, without) and *theos* (God, god), and conclude that atheism is simply the lack or absence of belief in a God or gods. That is, an atheist does not necessarily deny the existence of a God, but simply has

said they believed in a God or higher power, 4% believed only sometimes, and 16% believed but had doubts. The number of people in America with strong belief in a personal Creator God may be closer to 60%. See Glenn H. Utter and John W. Storey, *The Religious Right: A Reference Handbook*, Contemporary World Issues (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1995), 78.

³ Gallup, *Religion in America 1996*, 25.

⁴ See *The World Almanac and Book of Facts* or similar reference works for these figures.

⁵ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 3–4, 479 n. 7, 480 n. 11.

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no belief in the existence of a God.⁶ George Smith, for example, asserts that in this sense both the man who has never heard of the concept of God, and the child who is too young to grasp the concept, are “atheists.”⁷ This claim is an old one: the eighteenth-century atheist Baron D’Holbach wrote, “All children are atheists, they have no idea of God.”⁸

Atheists wish to secure two benefits from this redefinition of the term atheism. First, by defining it as the lack of a belief, rather than a belief itself, they wish to render atheism impervious to criticism. One cannot criticize a non-position! On this basis atheists frequently dismiss out of hand all claims that atheism is a dangerous or corrupt philosophy, since it is not a philosophy at all, but merely the lack of a particular philosophical concept. Second, atheists commonly argue that since they lack a belief while theists are adhering to and promoting their belief, the burden of proof rests fully on the theist to make a case for belief in God. That is, the atheist has nothing to justify, no belief to defend or substantiate; the burden of providing justification or evidence rests solely on the theist. An atheist is in the same position as someone who lacks belief in elves—they have nothing to prove and no need to defend their belief, while the person who does believe in elves is obliged, if he wants anyone else to take his belief seriously, to provide some rational justification for that belief.⁹ This is what Antony Flew, one of the leading atheist philosophers of the twentieth century, called the “presumption of atheism.”¹⁰

The claim that atheism is not a position that needs to be defended is rather odd, and strangely contradicted by atheists themselves. Take, for example, B. C. Johnson, who repeats the standard claim that because atheists merely have a “lack of belief in God,” they are not offering any explanation of things which needs to be justified.¹¹ Yet this claim comes on the heels of the following statement about the purpose of his book: “For some time now atheists have been in need of firm grounds upon which to base their position.”¹²

⁶ E.g., George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1979), 7; Gordon Stein, “The Meaning of Atheism and Agnosticism,” in *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*, ed. Gordon Stein (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1980), 3–6, which reviews several atheists who adopted this definition; similarly, Antony Flew, *Atheistic Humanism*, The Prometheus Lectures (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1993), 23. This definition is endorsed by Michael Martin, though he suggests it be called “negative atheism” and distinguished from the “positive atheism” which is an actual position denying the existence of God; cf. Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 463–64.

⁷ Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 13–14.

⁸ Cited in Stein, “Meaning of Atheism and Agnosticism,” 4.

⁹ Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 26.

¹⁰ Antony Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” in *God, Freedom and Immortality* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1984), 13–20.

¹¹ B. C. Johnson, *The Atheist Debater’s Handbook* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1981), 11, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

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George Smith actually entitles his book *Atheism: The Case Against God*, which obviously implies that atheism is a position that rejects belief in God.

The attempt to defend their unusual definition of atheism by etymology misunderstands how the word was formed. Traditionally the term has been construed as *athe-ism*, that is, the “belief” (-ism) that there is “no God” (*athe-*), rather than as *a-theism*, the mere absence or lack of belief in God. It is silly to define atheism in such a way that not only babies (as is commonly claimed), but also animals and even inanimate objects, would qualify as atheists—since all of these lack belief in God! When atheists are not worrying about the definition, they commonly speak of themselves as “atheists” with the clear understanding that the term refers to people who have rejected the concept of God.

Of course, most atheists do not claim to know with certainty that there is no God. Flew, for instance, is eager to say that atheists are not “bigoted dogmatists” who are closed to the idea of God.¹³ Such dogmatic atheism would leave itself wide open to the objection that one would have to be omniscient to know that there was no God—so that in effect one would have to be God to know there was no God!

Although atheists often deny espousing such a dogmatic atheism, they frequently do end up asserting in quite dogmatic terms that God does not or even cannot exist. George Smith, for example, writes, “It is logically impossible for god—a concept replete with absurdities and contradictions—to have a referent in reality, just as it is logically impossible for a square circle to exist. Given the attempts to define god, we may now state—with certainty—that *god does not exist*.”¹⁴ This is actually a fairly common sentiment in the atheist literature. The nineteenth-century atheist Annie Besant, for example, admitted that to say “There is no God” would be irrational because it would be asserting “a universal negative” which would require “perfect knowledge” to justify. But it turns out that Besant allowed for the possibility of a God unknown to her only if it is a finite entity in some unknown place (say, “on the far side of Sirius”). If that God is said to be an infinite being, she argued that such a God cannot exist because the assertion of an infinite God is a “universal affirmative” that is contradicted by the existence of anything (such as oneself) that is not God.¹⁵

Besant’s argument, of course, misunderstands what theists mean by describing God as “infinite.” They mean, not that God is everything (which would be pantheism, not theism), but that he is unbounded by finite limitations of matter, energy, space, or time.

¹³ Flew, *Atheistic Humanism*, 23.

¹⁴ Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 88, emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Annie Besant, “Why I Do Not Believe in God,” in *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*, ed. Gordon Stein, 31–32.

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In other words, God is incorporeal, omnipotent, omnipresent, and eternal. These characteristics imply that God is not part of the universe and therefore is a concrete being distinct from everything else. Thus Besant's denial of an infinite God really is a universal negative after all.

Atheism, then, is a position which is often presented in a remarkably double-minded way. Atheists claim not to have any belief about God, but then vigorously deny that God could exist. Atheists deny that atheism is a position that can or needs to be defended, but then offer arguments in defense of atheism. Again, George Smith illustrates this philosophical schizophrenia in unmistakable fashion. After arguing that atheism is not a position or belief but a mere lack of belief in a god, he changes gears in order to explain why atheism is significant: "If atheism is correct, man is alone. There is no god to think for him, to watch out for him, to guarantee his happiness. These are the sole responsibility of man."¹⁶ It is clear here that atheism is a philosophy, or at least a basic worldview, after all. It is not merely a lack of belief in certain postulated entities (like elves) but a view of the world as self-existent and self-explanatory and of human life as self-determining. Atheism is the belief that man is alone, that is, that the living beings in this universe must fend for themselves because there is no transcendent Creator or other supernatural beings to help them or to hold them accountable for how they live.

Atheism therefore entails *naturalism*, the belief—as Carl Sagan famously put it, "The COSMOS is all there is, all there was, and all there ever will be."¹⁷ For most atheists, atheism also entails secular *humanism*, the belief that human beings must determine their own purpose for life and must solve their own problems. For an atheist, the only alternative to some such humanism is *nihilism*, the belief that life has no purpose or meaning. While nihilism is a reasonable inference from atheism, most atheists resist nihilism and argue for what Antony Flew calls *Atheistic Humanism*: a positive philosophy of life that embraces life as meaningful despite the lack of any divinely created purpose for the human race. This is the philosophy of the *Humanist Manifesto I* (1933), the *Humanist Manifesto II* (1973), and the *Secular Humanist Declaration* (1980).¹⁸

Given this basic worldview in which the natural cosmos is all that exists and yet human life is held to be meaningful and purposeful, atheists cannot legitimately place the burden of proof exclusively on the theist. The modern atheist espouses a worldview in conscious opposition to the theistic worldview that has dominated Western civilization for about 1600 years, and they therefore bear some burden of proof to show that there is no

¹⁶ Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 27.

¹⁷ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 4.

¹⁸ See Paul Kurtz, ed., *Humanist Manifestoes I and II* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1973), and Paul Kurtz, *A Secular Humanist Declaration* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1980).

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transcendent God responsible for the existence and nature of the world and for the existence and meaning of human life.

THE FOOL HAS SAID ...

Atheists are naturally offended by the Bible's declaration that "the fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 14:1a; 53:1a). The meaning of this statement is not that atheists are stupid or lacking in intelligence, but that the denial of God is evidence of the moral corruption in their thinking. Nor is this statement aimed solely at atheists per se. The very next lines assert that "there is none who does good" and that they have all "become corrupt" (Ps. 14:1b-3; 53:1b-3). The apostle Paul quotes these lines to prove that all human beings are morally corrupt and deserve God's judgment (Rom. 3:9-12).

The folly or foolishness of atheism, then, is ultimately just one particularly overt expression of the universal impulse in human beings to turn away from the true and living God and to follow a path of their own choosing. If the Bible is right, atheism will fall into patent foolishness, not because atheists are intellectually challenged but because they are intellectually prejudiced against God. Moreover, in discerning the foolishness of atheism we will also be seeing the foolishness to which we are all prey apart from God's gracious revelation of himself to us.

Is God a Meaningless Word?

We have already noted the inconsistency of many atheists who claim that atheism is not a position and yet argue in defense of atheism. One of the main reasons given by atheists for defining atheism as a mere lack of belief in God is that they cannot *deny* what they do not even *understand*. Atheists routinely claim that the concept of God is meaningless, so that they don't even know what the theist is talking about when they use the word "God." George Smith, for example, complains that being asked to believe in a "God" is as meaningless to him as being asked to believe in "unies" or in a "blark." These are nonsense words, and offer nothing in which to believe. Likewise, Smith argues, the traditional concept of God is of an unknowable being about whom nothing positive can be said, so that there is nothing to affirm or deny.¹⁹

Although atheist philosophers have expended great effort to show that the concept of God is meaningless, it is clear from their own writings that they understand well enough what theists mean by the term "God." That is the reason, in fact, why atheists must work so hard to show that the concept of God is meaningless! What atheists are actually contending is that the concept of God as a personal infinite being is somehow

¹⁹ Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 43-44.

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“incoherent” or internally inconsistent. That is, they claim to have found certain logical problems with the concept of God that show, as we quoted Smith asserting earlier, that the concept of God has the same logical status as that of a “square circle.”

Many examples of alleged incoherence in the concept of God could be cited. One of the more interesting is that God cannot be omniscient (all-knowing) because as an infinite, incorporeal being he cannot know how to do something in a body. Michael Martin puts the argument this way:

If God is omniscient, then on this definition he would have all knowledge including that of how to do gymnastics exercises on the parallel bars, and He would have this knowledge to the highest degree. Yet only a being with a body can have such knowledge, and by definition God does not have a body. Therefore, God’s attributes of being disembodied and being omniscient are in conflict.²⁰

Martin’s argument assumes that to be omniscient one must have both “knowledge-that” (propositional knowledge of facts) and “knowledge-how” (practical knowledge of activities). Since “knowledge-how” means to possess a skill that cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge but must be rooted in experience, an incorporeal God cannot know how to do gymnastics exercises. Martin also argues that omniscience must include “knowledge-of,” that is, knowledge by experience, but that if God is morally perfect, he cannot know such feelings as lust and envy.²¹

It is not at all obvious that omniscience must include knowledge-how and knowledge-of in the way Martin has assumed. God can know how gymnasts do their exercises without having a body. Presumably as an omnipotent being God could materialize a body (since the traditional concept is that God is not essentially embodied, not that he cannot take bodily form) and in that body perform a perfect gymnastic routine on the parallel bars. It is even more contrived to insist that to be omniscient God must have direct personal experience of everything, including every evil feeling or behavior. This is a loaded definition that has nothing to do with the traditional concept of God’s possessing all knowledge. God understands everything involved in a human being’s experience of lust or envy without God himself having felt lust or envy himself.

Martin admits that the problems he has raised could be avoided by saying that God’s omniscience is of propositional truth only. He then tries to show that such a position leads inevitably to paradoxes. For example, he argues that he can know “I am Michael Martin” while God, who is not Michael Martin, cannot know this (even though he can know that

²⁰ Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 288.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 287–88.

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Michael Martin is himself). But this violates omniscience because “an omniscient being is supposed to have all knowledge that nonomniscient beings have.”²² But this statement merely revives Martin’s erroneous assumption that omniscience means possessing every *kind* of knowledge (including practical and experiential “knowledge”) that every kind of being possesses. Since no theist defines omniscience in this way, Martin is simply knocking down a straw man. And this is almost always the problem underlying atheists’ attempts to show that the traditional monotheistic concept of God is meaningless: they burden the concept with implications that do not follow from the traditional concept and which are unnecessary to that concept.

How Atheists Answer Arguments for God

Atheists claim that the traditional arguments for the existence of God are illogical and therefore cannot prove or support belief in God. While some atheists offer more sophisticated answers to the theistic arguments, the most common answers in the atheistic literature are surprisingly shallow. Atheists usually state the theistic arguments in a completely erroneous form and then triumphantly point out the logical holes in the arguments. Once again, this is the standard fallacy of knocking down a straw man.

Gordon Stein, for example, states the cosmological argument as follows: “Everything must have a cause. Therefore, the universe had a cause, and that cause was God.” He then points out the obvious problem: “If everything must have a cause, then God must have had a cause.”²³ Frankly, this is downright mischievous. To our knowledge no theistic philosopher or theologian has ever presented the cosmological argument in this way. Although some (not all) versions of the argument are based on causation, in these versions the premise is not that “everything” must have a cause, but that all finite, temporal, contingent, or mutable things must have a cause. In other words, everything that has the characteristics of an effect must have a cause. God does not need a cause, since he is infinite, eternal, necessary, and immutable. Atheists know this, yet they constantly construe the cosmological argument in this way in order to score a cheap point against theism.²⁴

Essentially the same problem invalidates Stein’s objection to the design or teleological argument. To the theistic claim that the evidence of design in the world proves a designer, Stein responds, “If the universe is wonderfully designed, surely God is even more

²² Ibid., 294.

²³ Gordon Stein, “The Existence/Nonexistence of God,” in *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*, ed. Gordon Stein, 56.

²⁴ See, for example, Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 239; Bertrand Russell, “Why I Am Not a Christian,” in *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon & Schuster—A Clarion Book, 1957), 6–7.

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wonderfully designed. He must, therefore, have had a designer even more wonderful than He is.”²⁵ This objection misses the same point as before, that there is a qualitative difference between the things of this world and God. The world exhibits design in that its numerous parts appear to be amazingly ordered in relation to one another in a complex and precise fashion to make life possible. But God, by definition in classic monotheistic thought, is not a complex entity composed of ordered parts, but an infinite, incorporeal being. Likewise Stein objects to the argument from the creation of life that if life needs to be created, then God, if he is alive, also needed to be created.²⁶ But what implies a creator is the complex, functionally intelligent structures of biological life. God’s life is infinite, incorporeal life.

Perhaps the most outrageous misconstrual of the theistic arguments offered by Stein is his handling of the argument from God’s self-revelation in Scripture. The issue of the Bible is so important that we will consider it at some length.

HAS GOD SAID ...?

Atheists recognize that for millions of Christians and Jews throughout the world, the rational arguments for God’s existence play only a secondary role in their belief in God. The primary and fundamental basis for believing in God is that he has revealed himself—in the written words of the Bible, and for Christians supremely and savingly in Jesus Christ. In order to make their “case against God” complete, they must discount the evidence from the Bible.

Stein’s handling of what he calls “the argument from revealed theology” or the “argument from the Bible” is to misinterpret the argument in especially glaring fashion. He summarizes the argument as follows: “The Bible says that God exists, and the Bible is the inspired word of God. Therefore, what it says must be true, and [therefore] God does exist.” But the fallacy is all too obvious: “this is a circular argument and begs the question” because calling the Bible “the word of God” surreptitiously “*assumes* the existence of the very thing we are trying to prove (God).”²⁷ Again, many atheists cannot resist pointing out the irrationality of assuming the Bible to be God’s word in order to prove that God exists. This argument is even enshrined as an example of the informal fallacy of begging the question in several logic and philosophy textbooks.²⁸

²⁵ Stein, “The Existence/Nonexistence of God,” 57; so also Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 259.

²⁶ Stein, *ibid.*; and again Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 269. Stein appears to be dependent on Smith for many of his arguments.

²⁷ Stein, *ibid.*

²⁸ E.g., Jerry Cederblom and David W. Paulsen, *Critical Reasoning: Understanding and Criticizing Arguments and Theories*, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1986), 110; Robert C. Solomon, *The Big Questions: A Short*

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Yet it is once again the atheists who are guilty of the informal fallacy of knocking down a straw man. Virtually no one, and certainly no Jewish or Christian philosopher or theologian, argues in the fashion imagined by the atheists. The claim is not that the Bible proves the existence of God merely because it *asserts* God's existence (with the question-begging assumption that it must be true because it is God's word). Rather, the claim is that the Bible reveals God's existence and nature to us through the many ways in which it evinces a divine origin. In other words, we believe in God because in the Bible we find abundant evidence that God is real. There is nothing illogical about this claim, and it is certainly not question-begging.

Stein gives one other general reason for rejecting the argument from revelation in the Bible: the Bible contains a number of contradictions and factual errors. This objection, of course, is more substantive, and if true would conflict with the claim that the Bible is an error-free revelation from God. While it is clearly unrealistic to offer here a rundown of the alleged contradictions and errors in the Bible and provide answers to each one, a couple of general comments may be made.

First, atheists and other critics of the Bible frequently neglect the positive arguments Christians have developed in support of belief in the Bible as a supernatural revelation from God. It is rare to find atheist or skeptical literature that interacts in a serious way with conservative Christian biblical scholarship and apologetics. It is extremely rare to find such skeptics considering in any depth the arguments, say, from fulfilled prophecy or the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Instead, atheists tend to focus their efforts on making a negative case against the Bible by identifying numerous alleged contradictions, historical and scientific errors, or other difficulties in Scripture.

Second, these same atheists also tend to ignore entirely the massive Christian literature that considers such alleged Bible difficulties and offers detailed, rational answers to the difficulties. George Smith, for instance, devotes eighteen pages of his book on atheism to the Bible, and does not cite a single Christian source written in defense of the Bible.²⁹ Paul Kurtz devotes nearly a hundred pages in a recent book to critiquing the Bible in general

Introduction to Philosophy, 2d ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 25 ("God must exist; the Bible says so").

²⁹ The only Christian sources cited by Smith in this section are two liberal biblical reference works and the neoorthodox theologian John Baillie, and none of these citations present any substantive content in support of the Bible. (Two of them are actually used *against* the divine inspiration of the Bible.) By contrast, Smith cites some eight different atheistic or skeptical writers in 25 footnotes. See Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 194–211, and the endnotes, 339–41 nn. 1–25.

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and the biblical presentations of Jesus and Moses in particular, and completely ignores Christian sources that defend the Bible.³⁰

Finally, the skeptics' neglect of Christian scholarship often shows in glaring factual errors of their own about the Bible. For example, George Smith claims that "most modern theologians would agree" that the Gospels, "or at least three of the four," were "written anywhere from 40 to 150 years after the death of Jesus." The reference to three of the four Gospels shows that Smith realizes that Mark is generally admitted to have been written no more than about 35 years after the death of Jesus (i.e., no later than about AD 68). But his figures are still wrong: most biblical scholars and theologians date Matthew, Luke, and John between AD 70–95, or no more than about 60 years after Jesus' death. The absurdity of suggesting that any of the Gospels might have been written 150 years after Jesus' death (i.e., about 180) is made clear when we note that a harmony of the four Gospels was produced by Tatian about 155!

Even those atheists who avoid making such a crude mistake try to push the dates for the Gospels to as late a time as possible. Michael Martin, for example, claims that "most biblical scholars date Mark around A.D. 80 and Matthew around A.D. 90," with Luke dated around 100 and John about 110, and thinks "it is possible that the earliest one [Mark] was not written until the beginning of the second century or about seventy years after the alleged death of Jesus."³¹ The fact is that many biblical scholars even of a liberal persuasion would date Mark before 70 and very few would date John after 100. Of course, we have not even mentioned the conservative biblical scholars who have argued with great erudition that Mark and Luke were probably written no later than about AD 60. Martin gives no indication that he is even aware of such Christian scholarship.³²

We just quoted Martin's reference to "the alleged death of Jesus." Martin, along with many atheists today, accepts the theory of G. A. Wells that there is no good evidence that Jesus ever existed. Wells's theory assumes the extreme late dating of the Gospels discussed, as well as a hypercritical reading of the Gospels as mythology with no historical interest or intent or foundation. While we cannot offer a detailed critique of the Wells theory here, a few comments will illustrate its foolishness. The theory that Jesus never existed is regarded as extreme and baseless even from the standpoint of the most

³⁰ Paul Kurtz, *The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986), 106–203. There are 50 footnotes in these two chapters; the only identifiably Christian sources quoted at all besides the Bible are the fourth-century church historian Eusebius (116 n. 7) and a few quotes from the third-century theologian Origen quoting the pagan Celsus (124–25, 134–35)!

³¹ Michael Martin, *The Case Against Christianity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 43, 44.

³² See, for example, Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

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radical and hostile biblical scholars (of which there are many). The Gospels contain a number of details that from the standpoint of their writers would have likely been somewhat embarrassing (such as the short time Jesus was on the cross, or the first witnesses to the risen Jesus being women), showing that the hypothesis that they are wholly fictional is without credibility. Indeed, the idea of a crucified Messiah was an oxymoron in Jewish culture, while the idea of a crucified God was equally an oxymoron in the Greco-Roman culture (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23).³³ The theory that the Christians saddled themselves with a central belief that seemed so absurd and superstitious to everyone in their society, for any reason other than its being an historical fact, is more incredible than the Gospel story itself! The Wells theory illustrates once again an irrationality that cannot be put down to lack of scholarly ability, but appears to be rooted in an antipathy to the biblical worldview.

WHAT MORE CAN HE SAY?

All atheists regard the reality of evil in the world as in some way disconfirming the belief in an all-powerful and all-good God. While some atheists frame this objection as the adducing of evidence against the existence of God, others assert that the concepts of God and a world with evil in it are logically contradictory, making the concept of God meaningless.

This so-called “problem of evil” is by far the most popular argument for atheism, and the argument which carries the most conviction or weight. But there is a logical problem with the problem of evil: the argument assumes a moral standard by which events or situations or persons in this world can be judged “evil.” But what does this mean, if there is no God? Atheism has great difficulty justifying the notion that we can judge anything to be evil. If there is no God and we are merely one of the many species of animals inhabiting this planet, then moral judgments of good and evil are mere human conventions or emotional responses. Plane crashes due to negligence, mass murderers of innocent women, children dying of starvation—these things may outrage us, but if there is no God they are just part of the purposeless process of the cosmos. They are not *evil*.

The anti-theistic argument from evil assumes that for evil to be a part of the world of an omnipotent God, that God must himself do evil. But this does not follow. Even assuming that, as the Creator, God is ultimately responsible for everything that takes place in his creation, that does not make him morally blameworthy for creating a world in which evil has a place. To use an analogy, Shakespeare was not guilty of evil because of the evil deeds done by the characters in his plays, even though he wrote the plays, “created” the

³³ On this point, see especially Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

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characters, and developed the stories in which they did evil. As long as the characters' evil is an expression of their own moral disposition, and not of Shakespeare's moral disposition, Shakespeare cannot be impugned with the evil that his characters "do."³⁴ Likewise, even if (as we believe) God is in some way ultimately responsible for everything that takes place in his universe, the evil things that his creatures do does not reflect adversely on his own moral perfection. As long as their evil is indeed their own, and as long as God is, as it were, "telling a good story," God is justified in creating a world in which evil is a part.

The attempt to make the reality of evil logically incompatible with the existence of God, then, cannot succeed. The question that remains is whether God is justified in creating this particular world in which there seems to be so much evil and in which so much of the evil seems senseless. To this question Christians may give at least two complementary answers.

First, what the balance of good and evil in the world will prove to be in the long run, and whether what seems senseless to us now will always seem so, are questions we are incompetent to answer using our own resources. There is nothing irrational about admitting that if there is a God, he might know better than we what he is doing.

Second, God has embraced this evil in the most intimate way possible through the abusive treatment his Son received when he was tortured and crucified by the Romans at the request of his own Jewish religious establishment. If torturing and killing a child is about the most heinous and senseless evil we can imagine, the Christian message is that God ordained that this seemingly senseless evil would happen to his own Child so that evil could be turned on itself and overcome by mercy. Thus the *real* "problem of evil" — not why God would allow it, but whether anything can be done to overcome it and bring good out of it—has been answered, and can only be answered, in the affirmative by God himself through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³⁵

³⁴ We realize, of course, that Shakespeare's characters are fictions, whereas God's creatures have a real existence. The analogy is still valid, though, since we have no trouble describing the villains of Shakespeare's plays as "evil" despite the fact that they are fictional.

³⁵ Boa, K. D., & Bowman, R. M., Jr. (1997). *An unchanging faith in a changing world: understanding and responding to critical issues that Christians face today* (pp. 86–104). Oliver Nelson.