

Objections Sustained! (2001)

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Introduction (2001)

At a recent family gathering the issue of my atheism was raised, though not for the first time, and I professed that I was as staunch an unbeliever as ever. Afterwards, an aunt of mine (who has recently become an evangelical Christian) pulled me aside and handed me a book. The book was, of course, Lee Strobel's *The Case For Faith*. Apparently it is being hailed by evangelicals as a great "witnessing tool," especially for spiritual skeptics. I hadn't read the Christian apologists in depth for a couple of years, so I was interested to take a stroll down memory lane. Needless to say, they're still plugging away. I felt compelled to inform my aunt just why I don't buy into the Christian position or their apologetics. The next thing I knew I was hammering away at a page-by-page review of the book, and sending the chapters to her via email as I completed them. Here I have presented the critique in its entirety. Naturally, I have done a bit of editing so that it is more tailored for publication. However, if the review is personal or direct at times, please bear in mind its email roots.

Strobel has decided that there are eight major objections to Christianity which act as stumbling blocks on the path to spirituality. Strobel has decided to pose these objections to eight prominent Christian apologists and let them make "the case for faith." The meat of the book consists of eight chapters, each one essentially an interview with a particular apologist dealing with one of Strobel's "Big Eight" objections. Similarly, I will deal with each of the eight objections in separate sections. For ease of reference, the sections in my review will be divided into subsections bearing the same title as those found in each chapter of the book. Of course, I will include paraphrasing and quotes so that a copy of the book is not necessary for readability.

Objection #1: Since Evil & Suffering Exist, A Loving God Cannot (2001)

(Interview w/ [Peter John Kreeft, PH.D.](#))

A Bear, A Trap, A Hunter, And God

The idea here is that God must allow some short term suffering in order to achieve a greater good. The analogy employed by professor Kreeft involves a hunter who is trying to free a bear from a trap, but cannot because the bear is liable to react violently, incorrectly perceiving the hunter as a threat. The hunter must therefore use tranquilizer darts and the like, which also would seem to the bear as harmful, in order to achieve what is ultimately best for the bear, i.e. freedom from the trap. The analogy is, of course, Hunter = God, Bear = Human (pp. 31-2).

Problems:

For starters, if God is omnipotent, couldn't he still achieve the long term good without the short term suffering? If he cannot, he is not omnipotent. To suggest that there are things God absolutely cannot do, is to suggest that there are laws which operate over and above God, that even He can't transcend. I have no problem with this, but most Christians, including Kreeft, do. Thus the analogy is a false one, because no matter how sophisticated a human being might appear to a bear, the human is not omnipotent and therefore cannot conjure up a completely painless solution to the bear's plight, whereas God, if he is indeed omnipotent, could achieve good without the suffering. This is but one of many reasons such attempts at answering this objection fail. For more, see the Secular Web's library on the [Argument from Evil](#).

The fundamental issue at stake here though is defining "good and evil." Why are certain things good and others evil? To a Christian the answer is, more or less, because God says so. But then, if we are to say God is "good," what standard are we judging him by? The only standard a Christian has is that which God has ordained. But with his Hunter/Bear argument Kreeft wants to say this standard can't be used, because it is for humans, and God plays by his own set of rules. However, Kreeft assures us that God will eventually bring about the ultimate good. Why? Because He is all-good, silly! Wait a minute, though. Then the argument is: God is good because God is good? Unfortunately, it doesn't amount to much more than that tautology. If we, as humans, can't judge God by his actions (or inactions) that cause suffering and evil, then how are we to know that he is good? We're not to know. We are to presuppose. But even presupposing that god may be good, how do we know there are justifying reasons for him to refrain from freeing people from the many traps they do fall into? Or even to lay those traps in the first place, given the inherent dangers found throughout nature? The issues here are far more complex than Strobel and Kreeft let on. For instance, see the Secular Web's library on moral arguments under [Arguments for Atheism: Logical Arguments](#), and [Moral Argument and Divine Command Theory](#).

Faith and Prejudice

Here Kreeft says there is evidence both for and against God. But, he claims the Christian's evidence is prejudiced in favor of God by his personal experience (33-4).

Problems:

At first glance, I failed to see how this is an argument in favor of God. However, after a second reading, I think I see where Kreeft is coming from. The reason I didn't catch it the first time around is that Kreeft and I have different standards for 'evidence'.

Once again we have a problem of definition. What counts as 'evidence'? My standard is that of the scientific method. Much can be said on that subject but I will sum it up as curtly as possible. Evidence must be:

- 1. Empirically verifiable: Confirmable by sensory perception, e.g. sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste, etc. This includes perceptions made via instruments such as telescopes, radars, microphones, etc.
- 2. Predictable: It must be possible to make predictions based on the evidence that can be verified as either true or false. The easier and more accessible this confirmation, the better.
- 3. Corroborated: Results from the majority independent researchers must agree.

Kreeft, I suspect, has a rather different standard. For him I think visions, dreams, personal feelings of joy in prayer, and a sense of direction under God all count as "evidence" for God. In light of this, I believe Kreeft's argument is that Christians are prejudiced, and rightly so, in believing in God because while there is evidence (of the scientific variety) both for and against God, there is also evidence (of the broader, personal variety) for God.

The thing is:

- (1) If there is scientific evidence for God, I have yet to hear of it. The best attempts to invent such evidence actually fail to produce anything conclusive, as shown, for example, in the Secular Web's library on [Science and Religion](#) (as well as the [Argument to Design](#) and the [Cosmological Argument](#)).
- (2) If you accept Kreeft's standard for personal evidence then yes, you have evidence for Christianity. But you also have evidence for Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zeus, UFOs, telekinesis, ESP, ghosts, and well, just about anything. This is an old problem of the difference between faith and evidence, and Strobel and Kreeft hardly touch on the real issues, as one can see in the Secular Web's libraries on [Faith and Reason](#) and [Religious Experience](#).

A minor point of note: Kreeft says, "If we had absolute proof instead of clues, then you could no more deny God than deny the Sun" (33). Firstly, there are still people who deny that the Earth is round [1], so even when absolute proof is available people will sometimes reject it. Secondly, I fail to see how it would be bad (especially for Christians) if people had no reason to deny God's existence. Why is it better to play a cosmic game of hide and seek?

Evil As Evidence For God

Kreeft claims that humans have standards of good and evil and those must have their origin in God. He also claims that impersonal evolution, if it was true, would have created a perfect universe by now. He says that atheism snobbishly disregards the fact that the majority of people believe in God, and robs life of value (34-6).

Problems:

Lots to talk about here. We'll start with standards of good and evil. Kreeft says, "...if there is no God, where did we get the standard of goodness by which we judge evil as evil?" (34). If all you are saying is that "we humans have standards" then it is not a valid jump to say "therefore God had to have made up those standards." This is also annoying because Kreeft is deliberately ignoring a number of easy alternatives. How about the easiest one: We humans made the standards up. In fact, since many different human cultures have had many, wide-ranging sets of standards, I think the "human origin" fits the facts much better. Sure, there are some "nearly-universal" standards found in civilized cultures, but isn't it possible (even likely) that those are the result of what is necessary for human civilization to endure?

But even if you decide that it is impossible that humans made the standards up (although I don't see how such a position could be conclusively reached) is the Christian God the only alternative? Could the Jewish or Islamic Gods have been the originators? And why a single God? Why not a Council or Pantheon of Gods? A Cosmic Congress, if you will. I don't see how these alternatives can be discounted. Also, sound atheistic alternatives cannot be simply ignored, as one can see from the Secular Web's library on [Morality and Atheism](#), and theistic attempts to make a god necessary actually fail, as is shown in the Secular Web's library on [Moral Argument and Divine Command Theory](#).

Next up, we have Kreeft's claim about the evolution of the universe. He says:

If there is no Creator and therefore no moment of creation, then everything is the result of evolution...There would have been plenty of time for evolution to have finished and evil to have to have been vanquished. But there is still suffering and imperfection - and that proves the atheist is wrong about the universe" (35).

I don't know whether to laugh or cry at Kreeft's blatant misunderstanding of evolution. He is anthropomorphizing it, assigning the process the goal of creating a human utopia devoid of evil. But, evolution is not a human being and has no sense of morality. It has no goals or motivations or endpoint. Most of all, it has no special care for humans. Even some scientists fall prey to the idea that humans are the ultimate achievement of evolution. But the fact of the matter is that when it comes to evolutionary value, there is only one currency: survival. By that token, while humans are good, they pale in comparison to the ant or the cockroach. Furthermore, if you want to look at something as the ultimate achievement of evolution, look to the ultimate survivor: the virus. This may not be comforting, but the truth is not always what we want to hear. Ironically enough, evangelicals usually make the opposite argument from Kreeft (who is actually Catholic so perhaps that explains it). They argue that there has not been enough time for evolution to progress as it has. Those arguments are also faulty and handled in the Secular Web's section on [Creationism](#).

Kreeft says, "How is it possible that over ninety percent of all human beings who have ever lived...could believe in God?" (35). This is the classic argument from popular assent (a.k.a. the fallacy of [argumentum ad numerum](#)), which is about the weakest kind one can muster. One doesn't take a poll to determine truth. Almost every human on the planet at one time thought that the earth was flat and the center of the universe around which the sun revolved. So they can be wrong.

Kreeft also says, "...just by looking at the balance of pleasure and suffering in the world, would not seem to justify believing in an absolutely good God. Yet this has been almost universally believed" (35). This is another stab at the argument from popular assent, but beyond that it is just plain wrong. There has never been such an 'absolutely good god' in Chinese, Hindu, Shinto, or Buddhist belief, not to mention the traditional religions in Africa or the Americas, and they have among them always comprised around half the world's population, and still do. Even the God of the Old Testament, while I am assured He is one and the same with that of the New, does not seem to display these absolutely good and loving attributes.

Finally Kreeft attacks atheism by saying, "...it [atheism] robs death of meaning, and if death has no meaning, how can life ultimately have meaning?" (35). I have never understood this argument. It seems fairly obvious that if my life means something to me then it has meaning. Furthermore, if it means something to my family and friends then that meaning is deepened. But maybe people think their life has to mean something to a supernatural entity beyond the grave in order to *truly* have meaning. Why this would be, I am not sure. Certainly, atheists at large have

no trouble finding life has real meaning and value, as the Secular Web library on [Secular Humanism](#), for example, demonstrates, and one might also start by reading Richard Carrier's essay [Our Meaning in Life](#).

Kreeft also takes an unwarranted shot at atheism by asking us to, "...look at the results of communism, the most powerful form of atheism on earth" (36). As if atheism was why an entire centralized economic-political system didn't work. It should also be noted that communism was not based on atheism; rather a Marxist's atheism is based on communism, being derived from political-historical analysis, not the other way around. Besides, state sponsored atheism is no different than state sponsored religion, and people who are atheists because the state told them so, are the equivalent of people who are religious because their parents told them so.

A Problem of Logic

Kreeft is called upon to answer the following problem. "Christians believe in five things: First, God exists. Second, God is all good. Third, God is all powerful. Fourth, God is all knowing. Fifth, evil exists. Now how can all of those statements be true at the same time?" (36). This is the classic "argument from evil" which can be formulated as follows:

1. If the Christian God exists, he knows about all evil and has the power to stop all evil.
2. If the Christian God exists, he is all good.
3. If the Christian God is all good, he should stop all evil and it should not exist.
4. Evil exists.
5. Therefore, the Christian God does not exist.

Kreeft tries to answer this by dealing with each of God's three attributes in turn (albeit not in the order suggested) and so shall I. Note that while this particular problem only deals with how God's attributes are incompatible with extant evil, there are a lot of other compatibility problems with the five attributes besides apparent evil, discussed in the Secular Web's library on [Arguments from Incoherence](#).

Problems:

First: God Is All Powerful

Kreeft surprises me here by deviating from the Christian hard line stance and admitting that there are certain things God cannot do, i.e. create a contradiction or make himself cease to exist. But then he invokes a spurious logic to justify this position with an all powerful God. He claims that contradictions and the like would be mistakes and, "He can't make mistakes" (37). But a mistake is defined with regard to the intent of the creator. They would only be mistakes if God didn't mean to create them. What if he wanted to? Could he? Kreeft is silent on the issue.

Then we jump headfirst into the old free will argument. I'm surprised it took us this long to get here. This is the classic idea that God had to create the potential for evil so that humans could freely choose good. Kreeft says, "It's a self contradiction - a meaningless nothing - to have a world in which there's real choice while at the same time no possibility of choosing evil" (37). I don't know about that. It seems to me that we live in a world where our choice is limited in many ways. No matter how much I may wish to fly in the sky unaided, teleport millions of miles with a blink of my eyes, or blow up someone's head with a thought, these things are beyond my abilities

as a human being. Yet, I may choose among the abilities I have. God shorted us with plenty of abilities we could have theoretically had, so why didn't he short us with the ability to do evil?

Kreeft answers this almost immediately with, "Real love...must involve a choice. But with the granting of that choice comes the possibility that people would choose instead to hate" (37). But this is a false dichotomy I think. Why must the spectrum run from love to hate? Why not from love to like? Or even from love to ignore? Would love be less potent without the possibility of hate? I think not. In a way, everybody develops their own little spectrum of good and evil within their life. That is why a starving beggar can have a happy day because he found a loaf of moldy bread and a dry place to sleep, yet a multi-millionaire can be miserable because he dropped a couple hundred thousand in the stock market. Based on what you are accustomed to as a "standard," things have subjective value to you in reference to how much they deviate from that standard. Even if humans were incapable of anything but love, there would still be degrees of value within that spectrum of love. And there are many other reasons why the free will defense doesn't hold water, as demonstrated in the Secular Web's library on the [Argument from Evil](#).

Near the end of this section, Kreeft comes out of nowhere with, "No, the evidence is that God *is* all powerful" (38). What the hell? I scrambled back through the pages looking for this evidence, but either Kreeft didn't mention it, or (as I really suspect) he thinks the freewill defense proves his point. However, the freewill defense (if valid) may provide an excuse for God's inaction, but this only makes omnipotence compatible with lack of evidence for that omnipotence, it does not demonstrate that omnipotence exists.

Second: God is All Knowing

Kreeft returns to his point that God can operate using short term suffering for long term good. He claims the clearest example of this is to be found in the crucifixion of Christ. Concerning the crucifixion, he claims, "...the very worst thing that has ever happened in the history of the world ended up resulting in the very best thing that has ever happened in the history of the world" (39). This is obviously an opinion, and a highly debatable one at that. Crucifying a man is a pretty awful thing to do, but is it worse than the holocaust? Is it worse than Stalin's pogrom that murdered 20 million? Is it worse than the streets of modern day India? I have a hard time buying that. Maybe I'm nitpicking by harping on Kreeft's hyperbole, but it is important to point out these apologists' tendencies for ridiculous exaggeration.

Of course, none of this seems to have anything to do with God's omniscience, which is what Kreeft is supposed to be addressing. One would think an all knowing being could devise a more coherent path to eternal salvation that didn't involve torturing his son. I guess we should just have faith that God knows what he is doing.

Third: God is All Good

Once again we return to Kreeft's thesis - that short term suffering can result in long term good, that we sometimes must survive hardships to become better people. But, one can surely dispute that all forms of evil are making people better. Are the former citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki better people for being atomized? Or, to use an example from a debate between atheist Edward Tabash and evangelist William Lane Craig, do we really want to tell holocaust survivors that the most powerful being in the universe had to let them suffer and torturously murder all their friends and relations to make the world a better place?

And we must consider what Kreeft's argument boils down to: the end justifies the means. This is certainly a dubious ethical principle. Is it really okay to torture billions of people so that some

people can go to heaven or otherwise be improved somehow? That is, is this *ever* moral? Compassion, it seems to me, would make me incapable of torturing even one person for any greater good, no matter how great the good was.

And the question remains: how are we to know the difference between a God who allows us to suffer for reasons He withholds and a cold, uncaring universe that allows us to suffer indiscriminately? Of course the answer is that there is no way to tell. You must simply assume/hope for God (if that's what you want to believe).

Another point of interest: At the end of this section, Kreeft declares that a human trying to devise a utopia might create a precise world adored by engineers but, "...one thing's for sure: you'll lose the kind of world that a Father would want" (42). I find it curious that theologians will claim it is impossible to know the mind of God when it gets them out of a jam, as in the case of short term suffering/long term good, yet in many other instances, like the quote above, they seem to be so sure of God's mind.

The Megaphone of Pain

Kreeft makes the points here that evil is ultimately punished, and humans are inherently bad and in need of redemption (42-4).

Problems:

In discussing God's eventual reckoning Kreeft says, "...the Bible says one reason He's delaying is because some people are still following the clues and have yet to find Him" (43). Yet, if God is omniscient, doesn't he already know whether those people are going to find him or not? If so, what's the hold up? Besides, this whole tactic is flawed: if we can believe something for which we have *refuting* evidence, merely by making all the necessary excuses for why that refuting evidence exists, then we would be justified in believing anything we want.

The claim that humans are inherently bad, "defaced masterpieces", as Kreeft puts it, sells humans short I believe. But beyond that, as Gene Roddenberry once said, "We must question the story logic of having an all-knowing all-powerful God, who creates faulty Humans, and then blames them for his own mistakes."

Bearing The Pain

Kreeft once again harps on good arising from suffering. He declares that a compassionate deity can endure the suffering of the world because he did. He suggests that life's suffering will seem fleeting compared to the joys of heaven (45-8).

Problems:

Kreeft praises God for his willingness to overlook our sins, which are "our fault" (as I stated above, this point is dubious) and instead take all of our suffering upon himself. Once again, I must note that while crucifixion is certainly a terrible and painful way to die, I'm not sure it is commensurate with all the suffering of all time in all the world.

Also, we must question how much Christ really suffered. If indeed he was God, how can the suffering of a being, who is all-wise and all-powerful, who has the greatest willpower and strength and fortitude of any possible being, and who knew perfectly well beyond even a shadow of a doubt that he would not really die anyway, be compared to the suffering of a mortal who shares none of these traits? God is literally incapable of experiencing suffering as humans are capable of knowing it.

As far as the joys of heaven outweighing the pain on earth, what can be said? It's certainly a nice idea, and I can understand the psychological appeal. But there is no way of knowing such things, and besides, you might suffer all through your earthly life in a poor pagan African desert village and then be consigned to hell for being a heathen.

The Power of God's Presence

Kreeft points out that usually, the more people suffer, the more dedicated believers they become. He also says that God's presence is the ultimate answer to the Problem of Evil (48-51).

Problems:

It is true that often times those in the most destitute conditions are the most faithful. You might think such people would give up hope for God. And some do. But, humans have a survival instinct, and I imagine that if you have no hope for this life or the next then you might not survive long. So, I think it is much more human to hope for better things to come. An interesting psychological phenomenon, to be sure, but just because people want there to be a point to their suffering doesn't mean that there is.

To illustrate his point about God's presence alleviating the Problem of Evil, Kreeft uses the Book of Job. He says, "He (God) could've written the best book on the problem of evil ever written. Instead, he shows himself to Job" (50). I fail to see how this magically whisks away the Problem of Evil. Certainly, the act of God manifesting himself to me would solve the issue of God's existence. But I still wouldn't know much about him. Is he all good? If so...well, you know the rest.

Besides, is the story of Job supposed to demonstrate God's benevolence? By citing this awful biblical tale, Kreeft implies that God is causing people to suffer in order to increase or test their belief in him. Aren't there far better, kinder ways to gain the same result? Is increasing belief even a morally acceptable excuse for doing evil? After all, that was the point of the Inquisition--so were inquisitors acting morally?

Every Tear, His Tear

Kreeft says the answer to suffering is Jesus. Because Jesus will stick with you through thick and thin (51-2).

Problems:

I think Kreeft is trying to deftly skirt the issue here. First off, we must question the quality of Jesus' friendship. When I say my friends stick with me through thick and thin, I mean they actually do things for me, protect me, talk to me, not that they follow me around and do nothing no matter what happens to me, all the while hiding in the bushes every time I turn around...that would be a dispassionate stalker, not a friend. But ignoring that, it might be great that Jesus will love you and walk with you no matter what happens, however, that is just a way for suffering and evil to be tolerable. The central issue at hand (how can an all good God and suffering exist simultaneously?) remains inadequately answered.

Drawing Good From Evil

Strobel highlights the heartbreaking tale of a father who lost a child and, as a result, became a minister. Naturally, only through Jesus was he able to persevere (52-4).

Problems:

I won't argue that Christ gives purpose and meaning to a lot of people's lives. I won't argue that the notion of Christ is comforting and can be enormously helpful in combating trying times. But other religions, like Buddhism, work just as well in just the same circumstances. And many

atheists endure the same and even worse things without Jesus - does that mean atheists are stronger people? Most importantly, none of these pragmatic considerations have anything to do with whether it (religion, Christianity, God, etc) is true or not. Christ could be equally useful, even if he was made up.

Objection #2: Since Miracles Contradict Science, They Cannot Be True (2001)

(Interview w/ [William Lane Craig, Ph.D.](#))

Craig is quite notorious on the Secular Web. If you are interested in the transcript of a debate between Craig and (atheist) Dr. Douglas M. Jesseph on the existence of God, it may be found here ([The Jesseph-Craig Debate: Does God Exist?](#) 1996). Before I launch into my actual review, I'd like to take issue with the phrasing here. I think Objection #2 is phrased particularly weakly - the easier for Craig to refute. Strobel is suspect of lobbing softballs to his interviewees, so they can feed him the answers he wants and expects. I will criticize Strobel's journalism in greater detail in my [Conclusion](#). I don't think most scientists would argue that, "miracles contradict science, therefore they cannot be true." Science rarely says things "cannot" be true. It's more like "based on all the evidence we have gathered, the universe seems to operate in this fashion, therefore, until we see some counter evidence, we are going to assume that's the way it is." The problem with miracles is that they are notoriously "one time only" events, or completely unpredictable. No one seems to ever be present to scientifically document the "one time" variety, and no one can be scheduled to record the "unpredictable" kind. The other thing is that reported miracles can be explained naturalistically. To me, when any event is reported by a witness, we have 4 possibilities (which may even be combined):

1. The person is telling the truth and such an event really happened.
2. The person is telling the truth but they were mistaken about the event they thought they witnessed.
3. The person is telling the truth but they were delusional and/or hallucinated the event.
4. The person is lying.

We know of and can document innumerable cases of #'s 2, 3 and 4. But in the case of a miracle, we cannot say that about #1. When these natural, well-known possibilities are available, it is hard to buy into the miraculous. I think a more fitting, albeit lengthy way of stating this chapter's objection would be: "Miracles are not backed by scientific evidence, therefore, until such evidence emerges, they should be treated with severe skepticism." And this is exactly what atheists really argue, as shown in the Secular Web's library on the [Argument from Miracles](#).

The Virgin Birth

Craig notes the virgin birth was a stumbling block on his way to belief. He claims that miracles are only absurd if you take God out the equation (59-61).

Problems:

A note on the virgin birth: Matthew 1:23 [\[2\]](#) is the source of the virgin birth, however Matthew is referring to Isaiah 7:14. But Isaiah's use of the word "virgin" is a translation error. The Hebrew word used by Isaiah means simply "young woman" and can apply to virgins and non-virgins alike. Furthermore, Isaiah's prophecy in no way relates to Jesus. The birth of a son, "Immanuel" is prophesied. And this is a sign that in a few years, before the child knows right from wrong, Israel and Syria's kings will be defeated in their attack on Judah (Isaiah 7:15-17). Not only does this perfectly fit the political climate of the time, but considering that Isaiah was providing a sign to King Ahaz of Judah, it is unthinkable that he was referring to an event seven centuries in the future. Worse yet, Isaiah's prophecy isn't even Messianic! Nobody attributed Messianic significance to it before Matthew, and if not for him, nobody ever would have. The Secular Web library contains several good essays on this matter, including [Prophecies: Imaginary and Fulfilled](#) by Farrell Till, [The Fabulous Prophecies Of The Messiah](#) by Jim Lippard, and [The Virgin Birth and Childhood Mysteries of Jesus](#) by James Still.

Craig's claim that miracles are absurd only sans-God is telling of his entire position. Craig has already decided to believe in a God who can do anything, so any miracle ascribed to Him is easily swallowed, and if some evidence can be dug up to support it, well that's nice too. Not a very scientific attitude - and science, after all, is what this chapter is supposed to be about.

Miracles versus Science

Craig defines miracles and speaks of "theistic science." Craig suggests miracles can fit with the laws of nature (61-4).

Problems:

Craig defines miracles as, "...an event which is not producible by the natural causes that are operative at the time and place that the event occurs" (62). I don't take too much issue with this, except for the word "natural." I think it should have been replaced by the word "known." A cause is a cause. The only reason you would put "natural" in front of the word is if you had already decided there were such things as "supernatural" causes. Which, of course, Craig has. Craig mentions the work of William Dembski and Michael Behe, calling it "theistic science" and claiming, "...from a rational and scientific perspective, they're concluding from evidence that there must be an Intelligent Creator" (62-3). Both Dembski with his Intelligent Design Theory, and Behe with his "irreducible complexity" argument in *Darwin's Black Box*, have been heavily criticized by the scientific community for their poor and erroneous science. The Secular Web library has entire sections dedicated to [Michael Behe](#) as well as [William Dembski](#), not to mention the entire intersect between [Science and Religion](#), and the concept of 'theistic science' is criticized in the essay [Moreland's "Christian Science"](#) by Richard Carrier.

I agree that miracles must fall within the province of natural law. This is not because of a dogmatic contention that the natural laws are indisputable, but rather the idea that natural law, by definition, governs the universe, i.e. "anything that is possible." Therefore, if something contravenes the law then that thing is obviously "something possible" and the law needs to be reworked so that it fits the facts properly. An example of what I mean is Newtonian physics. At a certain point, reality began to deviate from the laws of Newtonian physics. Rather than deem these deviations miracles though, Einstein reworked the laws of physics so that they fit the universe correctly (as far as he could tell anyway). So the issue is far more complex than Craig lets on, and the Secular Web library on [Naturalism](#) gives a peek at why the findings of science make miracles dubious.

Real Acts of God

Craig defines "real" acts of God. Michael Behe is brought to the table again. Craig attacks David Hume as fallacious in his skepticism (64-5).

Problems:

Craig notes (quite accurately) that, "...superstitious people use miracles as an excuse for ignorance and sort of punt to God every time they can't explain something" (64). Couldn't have said it better myself. However, he then defines "real" acts of God as, "...events, by which, in a principled way, you could legitimately infer that there was a supernatural agent intervening in the process" (64). What I would like to know is just how would you legitimately infer that? Since it's "supernatural" I assume we are not going to have any scientific evidence at hand. So the only way we can infer a supernatural agent is if it is the explanation that is most likely. However, as I stated earlier, there are three, entirely plausible, natural explanations for any reported event. How can one discount those and decide a supernatural agent is more likely? Even if you could somehow discount all three explanations, does that make God the correct inference? I'd say at that point we simply don't know, and Craig is guilty of what he himself characterized as "an appeal to ignorance." He is punting to God that which he can't explain.

Craig specifically brings up Michael Behe's book to exemplify his "real" acts point, saying, "His conclusions are based on solid scientific analysis" (64). Not too solid, however, given the fact that his peers are punching holes in it left and right. Craig brushes off Hume's criticism of the resurrection that, "We have thousands of years of uniform evidence that men simply do not return from the dead." Craig says that Hume's argument doesn't work because the contention is that "Jesus was raised" not "all men are raised" (65). I think he is missing Hume's point (perhaps deliberately?). Hume isn't saying resurrection is impossible, but rather: since God isn't in the habit of raising anyone from the grave at all, when we suddenly hear of a resurrection, do we assume that it must be true, or that perhaps it is more likely people are mistaken or fibbing? Craig also notes that while a "natural" resurrection of Jesus is highly improbable, "...that's *not* the hypothesis. The hypothesis is that God raised Jesus from the dead" (65). Well that's great. But a hypothesis needs to be testable, and this is not. So it's an assumption. Once again, it is indicative of Craig's presupposition-riddled thinking which goes something like this:

1. Okay, we've got this guy, God, who can do anything.
2. Could he have raised Jesus from the dead?
3. Of course!

Extraordinary Evidence

Craig suggests that the Resurrection is the best explanation of the evidence for its occurrence. He complains that skeptics are closed-minded towards the supernatural (65-7).

Problems:

Craig has a whole argument about probability, but it is summarized by Strobel who says, "As improbable as the Resurrection might seem to skeptics, this has to be weighed against how improbable it would be to have all of the various historical evidence for its occurrence if it never actually took place" (66). There is much to say on this issue. I will delve into some of it later in this chapter. Suffice to say for now that I think there are a couple of alternatives that are a more probable fit for the evidence. A fantastic essay on this very topic is Richard Carrier's [Why I Don't Buy the Resurrection Story](#).

Craig talks about how logicians have a body of data and then draw from a pool of live options for the option that best explains the data. He begrudges them the fact that, "Some skeptics, however, will not allow supernatural explanations even to be in the pool of live options...if there is no natural explanation for an event, they're simply left with ignorance" (67). There's a good reason for this. The problem with supernatural explanations is that they can be used to explain *anything*. So, if none of the other options worked, they could always invoke God or whatever. But they are still left with ignorance - they have just renamed it. There are also good reasons to disbelieve in the possibility of miracles, as noted in the Secular Web essay [The Problem with Miracles: the Shaky Groundwork of Corduan and Purtill](#) by Richard Carrier.

The Miracles of Jesus

Craig claims that, unless you decide that miracles are impossible, their historicity is indisputable (67-8).

Problems:

Once again, Craig completely glosses over an issue with the statement, "the historicity of the events [miracles of Christ] is not in doubt" (68). Well, if you accept the Gospels as accurate history and the divine word of God, then I guess not. Unfortunately, doubt is cast upon the Gospels as an accurate historical source because:

1. They were written between 30 and 70 years after the death of Christ [3]. So they weren't exactly eyewitness accounts - at best, they were remembrances. Anyone who has played the "telephone" game knows how easily stories can be elaborated in a matter of minutes, much less decades. And despite the tradition of the apostles' authorship, there is in actuality no clear mark of authorship on the Gospels, so they are not even necessarily first hand accounts.
2. The Gospels were written by members of the early Christian movement. Not exactly the most objective of reporters. This argument is along the lines of "history is written by the victors" - there is always a slant.
3. The Gospels have undergone revision and editing from their original forms - not to mention translation. Scholars are still attempting to put together a "most original" version, but the true originals are likely lost forever.
4. Historical standards were not exactly what they are now. Fact-checking and corroborating sources weren't required. Elaboration was acceptable, and even expected. Homer's *Iliad* is a history of the Trojan War, however, nobody presumes his blow by blow description is accurate (not to mention the intervention of the Gods).
5. Skepticism wasn't what it is today. Someone who tells you today that a demon jumped out of a tree, or a giant sea monster devoured a ship is likely to be ridiculed or sent to the Daily Sun. However, such tales were quite common and widely accepted with little question in Christ's day. Notably, most Christians put little stock in these stories, outside of the feats of Christ [4].
6. The Gospels disagree on several material points, and John diverges wildly from the three synoptic Gospels [5].

The bottom line: there are many reasons to be skeptical of the reports we have, as is noted at length in the Secular Web's libraries on the [Resurrection](#) and [Historicity of Jesus](#).

Miracles and Legends

Craig notes that many of the same miracles are described in all the Gospels. He says that there is no good reason not to believe in those miracles, especially the Resurrection, and blows off the idea that the Gospels grew exaggerated with time (68-70).

Problems:

Craig contends that the Gospels comprise "independent, multiple attestation to these events [miracles]" (68). But this is dishonest. Modern scholarship agrees that Luke and Matthew borrowed heavily from Mark. And John appears to be written very late, is filled with more exaggeration than the others, and has Jesus take on a more philosophically argumentative stance, suggesting the intent of settling doctrinal disputes in the early church. So we really have one good source in Mark, and then some off shoots, none of which are independent. Once again, we get a taste of Craig's true flavor when he argues, "...if you believe God exists, then there's no good reason to be skeptical about these events" (69). In other words, if you believe in the Christian God whose son Jesus performed miracles, then there's no reason to doubt Jesus performed miracles. Concerning the Resurrection, Craig points to, "...a wealth of data concerning the empty tomb, the Resurrection appearances, and the origin of the disciple's belief in the Resurrection" (69). By "a wealth of data" I guess he means the Gospels. And even if accepted as historically accurate, those are still dubious.

One possibility for the empty tomb is that Christ's body was never placed there at all. It was turned over to Joseph of Arimathea who might have, for whatever reasons, given a false location.

Another scenario involves Jesus having survived the crucifixion. Sure, he looked dead, but what if he was simply in a near death comatose state? Did anyone on hand (or at all in those times) have the necessary medical expertise to make such a judgment? Perhaps he came to on the way to his tomb or in it and managed to live consciously for a few days before expiring. This would explain both the empty tomb and appearances (see, for example, [The Evidence Casts Suspicion on the Event being a True Resurrection](#) by Richard Carrier). Another possibility for the appearances is that they were not physical appearances, and were not intended as such. That the disciples believed in solely a spiritual resurrection is entirely possible from the Gospels (see, for example, [The New Testament Casts Suspicion on Jesus Actually Appearing After Death](#) by Richard Carrier). If any of these ideas seem wild to you, just think if they are any more wild than Christ being raised from the dead: no matter how improbable, they are not improbable enough to be ruled out. And there are better theories than these, which are not wild at all, as is shown in "[Historical Evidence and the Empty Tomb Story: A Reply to William Lane Craig](#)" by Jeffery Jay Lowder, "[The Historicity of the Empty Tomb Evaluated](#)" by Peter Kirby, and "[Craig's Empty Tomb and Habermas on the Post-Resurrection Appearances of Jesus](#)" by Richard Carrier.

As to the exaggeration of the Gospels as they proceed in time, Strobel sets up Craig with an easy nitpicking word change. He compares Mark 1, which says *all* were brought to Jesus and *many* were healed, to Matthew 8, which says *many* were brought and *all* were healed, to Luke 4, which says *all* were brought and *all* were healed. This is a classic straw man argument. Strobel picked perhaps the easiest example to refute. A much better example would have been Christ's appearances which range (in the chronological order in which they were written) from none at all in the original Mark, to a vague account in Matthew, to a later addition to Mark, to Luke with a proto-Thomas story, then to John with his elaborate Thomas story.

We might also consider Matthew's description of the miracles surrounding the death of Jesus, which include a couple of earthquakes, the appearance of a mighty angel, and legions of the undead rising from their graves and walking the streets of Jerusalem (Mat 27: 51-2, 28: 2-4). Contrast with the gospel of Mark, which contains none of those events. Since Matthew followed hard on the heels of Mark, this clearly refutes Craig's contention that such legendary developments could not have occurred so quickly.

The "Miracles" Of Muhammad

Craig argues that the supposed miracles of Muhammad and Joseph Smith aren't a valid comparison with those of Christ because the former's arose hundreds of years after his death, and the latter's were a complete fraud (70-1).

Problems:

Craig will get no argument from me regarding the validity of those miracles. However, it should be noted that this is another case of the straw man. Muhammad and Smith aren't good comparisons to Christ because they take place in wholly different historical contexts. Yet, reports of pagan miracles abound in Christ's day [4]. What are we to think of these? Unfortunately, Craig doesn't answer because Strobel doesn't ask. Also, I find it interesting that Craig is sure that Joseph Smith is a fraud, yet doesn't even broach this possibility with Christ. Is it reasonable that millions of people in the educated, modernized, skeptical 19th and 20th centuries America could be defrauded yet simple, backwater, desert people living in the Middle East 2000 years ago could not?

The Personal Side of Miracles

Craig discusses a personal neuromuscular disease, and expresses contentment that his prayers for healing haven't been answered because God has directed his life wonderfully despite the disease. Under God, everything works out for the best in the end (71-3).

Problems:

It's too bad when anyone suffers from a disease, and it's good that Craig has adopted a healthy attitude of acceptance towards his ailment. Yet, I feel compelled to mention this as an example of why I don't buy into the "power of prayer." If Craig had prayed and been healed he would have certainly attributed it to God. Yet, when he prays and isn't healed, it's because God knows what's best in the long run and there's a good reason for the affliction. So God can't go wrong no matter what happens. Hence, prayer is untestable and no one can know whether it really works or not. Incidentally, I wonder what God's long term reasons are when a child is mauled and killed by a rabid dog.

Faith in a God Of Miracles

Craig suggests faith is compatible with reason and intellectual exploration. Strobel asks, "Can you give me some solid reasons for believing in a divine Creator and the validity of Christianity?" (75). Craig gives five reasons, which I will enumerate and criticize below.

Problems:

Before we start hitting stride, I'd like to take exception with Strobel's description of the Resurrection as "a miracle of unprecedented proportions" (73). Raising a guy from the dead is pretty impressive as far as parlor tricks go, but "a miracle of unprecedented proportions"? I think not. Just going by the Bible I'd have to say flooding the entire Earth and thereby engineering a mass near genocide of every living species is many times more astounding. Similarly, parting the Red Sea or even maintaining Jonah alive inside the belly of a whale for three days beats out the Resurrection. Beyond the Bible, I have seen David Copperfield perform feats more dazzling than the Resurrection. I'd like to see God raise the Titanic. I'm not saying the raising of a dead person is petty, but a resurrection of one man observed by a handful of others in one tiny spot on one tiny planet in one tiny corner of the universe doesn't measure up to "unprecedented proportions."

Craig's defense of faith is that many Christians have intellectually investigated the claims of their faith. The problem is that their investigation techniques are suspect. I'm not saying the following is true of all Christians, but it seems to entail the majority. Basically, they start with the conclusion that "the Christian God exists" and sometimes further "The Bible is the inspired word of God." They already *know* these things to be true in their heart, without a doubt. Therefore, when they investigate they are only searching for evidence which supports that which they already know is true. When evidence crops up contrary to their position, they discard it quickly since it must be in error. In fact, I have often coaxed the admission out of Christians that nothing could convince them that their core beliefs about God and the Bible are wrong. This is not a scientific way of proceeding.

On to the five reasons:

Reason #1: God Makes Sense of the Universe's Origin

This is the age old "First Cause" argument. Craig summarizes it as follows: "First, whatever begins to exist must have a cause. Second, the universe began to exist. And, third, therefore, the universe has a cause" (76). This argument hasn't been convincing to anyone for about 300 years. Alas, I will go through the motions. The obvious refutation is the question, "So what caused God?" The theist's response is naturally that God is eternal and uncaused. And the atheist in turn notes: now that we have allowed for the possibility of eternal existence, we might as well attribute it to the universe instead of God. Case closed. Craig tries to avoid this trap by claiming the Big Bang assures us that the universe *began to exist* approximately 14 billion years ago. But it does no such thing. The Big Bang tells us the universe *began to expand* approximately 14 billion years ago. But it *existed* prior to expansion in a form of unbelievably condensed matter

and energy. When did this incredible ball of matter/energy come into being? For all we know, it could've been eternal.

So we decidedly do not know that the universe had a cause. But suppose it did. How is it a reasonable move from "the universe has a cause" to "God was that cause"? It could've easily been some unconscious, eternal mechanic. The possibilities are numerous and Craig's response doesn't even begin to address the matter, as can be seen in the Secular Web's library on the [Cosmological Argument](#).

Reason #2: God Makes Sense Of The Universe's Complexity

This is the almost equally well-known argument from design. The concept here is that the universe bears the mark of an intelligent designer, not random chaos. The main problem here is that Craig is laboring under the false assumption that a natural universe, unguided by an intelligent being, would be a place of chaotic disarray. There is really no reason to suppose this. There is a concept called "spontaneous order" which applies to all kinds of things. The example most familiar to the majority of people is the free market economy. In an unregulated, decentralized market, you might expect a complete lack of order. But rather the opposite is the case. Competition drives prices down for consumers, supply and demand balance out, and the most people are able to buy and sell goods and services. This high level of order (which has never been replicated by a command economy with "intelligent design" in charge) occurs despite the fact that each person is only out for himself without any regard for others. Another good example in nature is that of animals and ecology. The animals which we observe have often meticulously carved out ecological niches. It is tempting to think they must have been designed just so. But then, think what happens if an animal isn't able to find an ecological niche. It becomes extinct. So, it should come as no surprise to us that those animals which are alive have struck a balance with nature. If they had not, we wouldn't be seeing them. The precarious nature of these niches is evident when the encroachment of humans often disturbs the balance and precipitates the extinction of a species.

We begin to realize that the universe is a not a perfect first draft. Think about all the planets, and stars, and galaxies that didn't form. Think about all the animals and plants that didn't survive. It becomes apparent that the universe is more like a giant process of trial and error--not what we would expect from an omniscient Creator. It seems likely then that the things which exist, exist precisely because they have struck a balance (at least temporarily) with nature. This is why all those mathematical improbabilities of the universe coming together at "random" are invalid. I admit that such an argument is convincing if you imagine the universe being dumped out of a cup and falling perfectly into place all at once. But our model of the universe allows for billions of years of blind alleys and dead ends on the way to order.

Another point to consider: while the complexity of the universe would certainly be impressive if it were the work of an intelligent being, is it consistent with the Christian God? I mean, if the focal point of God's universe is humans on Earth (especially the last 2000 years since the coming of Christ) why the ridiculously unnecessary prelude? Why bother creating millions of galaxies, billions of stars and planets, and millions of living species, and developing the whole process through 15 billion years of evolution to reach this point? While it is possible to create an inordinately complex system of gears and clasps in order to hold sheets of paper together, a paper clip is a much more elegant device. In fact, it is what we'd expect an "intelligent" person to use. Can we expect any less from an intelligent Creator?

For all the ways order can be accounted for without appealing to an engineer, see the Secular Web's libraries on the [Argument to Design](#), [Physics and Religion](#) and [Creationism](#).

Reason #3: God Makes Sense Out Of Objective Moral Values

Craig declares that without God, you cannot have objective moral values. I struggled with this very issue for a long time. Ultimately, I'd have to agree with Craig. Without God, we don't have objective moral values. And that's the end of that. But not for Craig. Because according to him we *do* have objective moral values. And here is the sum of his argument: "We all know deep down that, in fact, objective moral values *do* exist" (81). Wow. This is, of course, not an argument at all but rather an appeal to feelings. This is not an intellectual position - it is a cheap rhetorical trick of the variety common to politicians. Craig further solidifies the politician comparison by bringing up the universal disapproval of the torture of children as his example of an objective moral value. Notice that any time a politician gets a chance he will trot out alleviating the suffering of children as the reason to support him.

The bottom line is this: Does most everybody agree that child torture is wrong? Yes. Does that mean there is a God who ordained it as such? No. It does not follow that because people tend to share certain moral convictions, God is the source of those convictions. I think Craig realizes this since he doesn't even really try to deflect an obvious alternative: morality arose as a sociological advantage. All he says is: in that case, things aren't "really" right and wrong. As to why moral actions are "really" right and wrong in the case of a Cosmic Daddy who says so, I am not sure.

Also, not all atheists agree with me that there are no objective moral values: many believe they exist and can be accounted for without positing anything supernatural; and even if moral values are ultimately subjective it is not the end of the world: see the Secular Web's libraries on the [Moral Argument and Divine Command Theory](#), [Morality and Atheism](#), and [Secular Humanism](#).

Reason #4: God Makes Sense Of The Resurrection

Craig recognizes this argument only really works if we accept that Jesus was miraculously raised from the dead. So why should we think so? Naturally, Craig provides us with the Gospels. And I can't consider them reliable for the reasons outlined above. Furthermore, even based on what the Gospels tell us I don't think Craig's certainty is warranted. He claims as fact that "on multiple occasions and under varied circumstances" (82) Jesus appeared alive, in the flesh, after death. His main support for this seems to be Paul's list of eyewitnesses to the Corinthians. This is a highly dubious source, however. Historian Richard Carrier examines that scripture far better than I could, so I'll let him take over for a minute:

Paul claims there are hundreds of eye witnesses, many alive at the very time of his writing (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). Doesn't that make invention as well as delusion unlikely? Paul, remember, includes himself among the witnesses (15:8). Yet we know that Paul was not an eye-witness. He only saw a light and heard a voice, well after Jesus had already been "taken up." So this passage cannot mean anything more than that hundreds have seen Jesus in visions, not necessarily in person. The verb "appeared" used several times in this passage is *ôphthê* (from *horaô*), which is as vague in Greek as in English. Used in the passive voice, as it is here, it means only "was seen" or "appeared" and frequently means "appeared in a vision" (as in the case of Paul's vision, cf. Acts 9.17). But above all, one second-hand report of over 500 unnamed people, being sent to men in Greece (too far from Palestine to have any chance of checking the account), who may have seen a vision no more material than that of Paul himself--a man who all but declares that he is willing to fib, at least a little, to save lives by winning converts (1 Cor. 9.19-27)--is the flimsiest of evidence. Stories were apparently exaggerated over time in order to win an audience: see for example Acts 22.9, which is the exact opposite of 9.3-8, and suspiciously elaborated again at 26.13-19; compare these three accounts with Paul's own at Galatians 1.7-24. This shows that Christian writers like Luke, and even Paul himself, if what he said is accurately recorded in

Acts, were ready to do this. And a vague, unconfirmable, hyperbolic assertion is just the sort of claim all men ought to suspect as rhetorical.

Note also that Paul does not name any one of these witnesses, except Peter and James [literally, 'Jakob'] (though he does mention "the twelve" even though there were only eleven disciples when Jesus supposedly appeared, according to all the Gospels). These are not new witnesses being reported, but the same ones (or rhetorically invented ones). For all we know, Paul could have been including men who had an experience that was like that of Stephen in his list of witnesses (a martyr whose death he watched), even though we have no reason to believe Stephen was an eyewitness to any appearance of Jesus in the flesh. Paul could also have been reporting hearsay, which I think is most likely--after all, I seriously doubt he interviewed over 500 people, and so should you. [[section 3c](#) of [6](#)]

Craig also tries to impress us with the fact that, "the original disciples came to believe so strongly that God had raised Jesus that they were willing to die for that belief" (83). But do we know this to be true? After all, apart from very late legends, we have no record of any of the twelve disciples being martyred - with the exception of Peter. And even he is a poor example since he was killed for his politics, not his religion. Stephen is the first real martyr, but he was a convert - not an eye witness. It annoys me that Craig dismisses possibilities that Jesus survived the crucifixion or that his body was never placed in the tomb to start with. He treats these suggestions as far fetched and unworthy of consideration. Yet he wants us to consider that a man was raised from the dead. Again, the issues are far more complex than we are led to believe, as is shown in the Secular Web's library on the [Resurrection](#).

Reason #5: God Can Be Immediately Experienced

Craig comes right out and admits this is not a rational argument, which is good, because it's not. Undoubtedly there are millions of people who "feel" one with Christ and "experience" Him in their hearts. However, I think that Christians (especially!) must admit that these feelings are poor indicators of actual truth. After all, hundreds of millions of people, in the past and present, have experienced powerfully religions contrary to Christianity. So, if Christianity is true, their feelings must have been unreliable. Naturally, it is not fair to suggest non-Christians' feelings are unreliable while Christians' experiences are right on the money.

Objection #3: Evolution Explains Life, So God Isn't Needed (2001)

(Interview w/ [Walter L. Bradley, Ph.D.](#))

This objection is extremely poorly phrased. From a reading of the chapter, it is clear that Strobel's phrasing, "Evolution Explains Life" means more specifically, evolution explains the *origin* of life or how evolution was able to give rise to life from non-life. Unfortunately for Strobel, this is a non-issue because evolution explains no such thing, nor does it purport to. Strobel smugly points out that Darwin, "didn't really have a good idea of how life arose," (94) and didn't look into the issue with much depth. This is because the problem of how the first life began is totally irrelevant to Darwin's theory of natural selection. Evolution and natural selection explain how organisms change over time. As far as origins are concerned, the only thing that is important to evolution is that life, somehow or other, did in fact begin. The issue of how life arose from non-life is called "abiogenesis" and should be treated separately from evolution.

So "Objection #3" really isn't an objection at all, but rather an excuse for Strobel to argue: "Since we can't account for the origin of life, God must've been behind it." But this is just an appeal to ignorance, attributing that which we can't explain to God and converting Him into a three letter word meaning "I don't know." Almost the entirety of the chapter is devoted to the problem of abiogenesis, and I will discuss that a bit more in short order. But first, there are a few actual evolution criticisms to address, as well as an issue of Strobel's journalistic integrity.

Throughout the chapter Strobel and Bradley beset us with implications that are made explicit near the end with this quote from Bradley: "Today it takes a great deal of faith to be an honest scientist who is an atheist" (111). Thus he has painted a picture of a scientific community where all reasonable and honest scientists have conceded the existence of an Intelligent Creator, while a few rebels desperately hang on to outmoded naturalistic explanations out of sheer stubbornness. This is completely disingenuous and Strobel should be ashamed of such a misrepresentation. The fact of the matter is that there are tons of honest men and women recognized for excellence in their scientific fields who reject the notion of God. Furthermore, the vast majority of scientists who *do* believe in God consider creationism to be complete rubbish. This is why creationists are forced to always bring up the same people (Behe, Denton) and either misquote or quote out of context everyone else, from Einstein to Asimov, to support their position [7]. Of course, the most important point of all is that what specific scientists say or believe does not determine truth. On this bogus tactic, in fact, see Richard Carrier on [The Fallacy of Appeal to Authority](#) and [The Fallacy of Appeal to Reverence](#).

Strobel does launch a couple meager attacks on evolution. Before I address them specifically, it is vital to note three points: (1) *The Creationist's False Dichotomy*: Virtually every aspect of "creation science" involves mounting an attack on evolution. What I think they fail to realize is that, even if these attacks were wholly substantiated and evolution was demonstrably false in every way, it would do nothing to uphold the validity of creationism. Even if evolution is false, it's not as if the Bible's creation story is the only alternative. (2) *God And Evolution Aren't Incompatible*: If you recognize evolution as true, it doesn't mean you have to toss God out on the front stoop. Just because evolution occurred, doesn't mean God isn't behind it all. As a matter of fact, there are millions of Christians who believe the existence of God and evolution both are true, and it causes them no problems whatsoever. (3) *Scientific Debate is Not a Weakness*: Creationists are pleased by nothing more than when scientists disagree on some evolutionary issue or when new evidence overturns an old conclusion. They seem to perceive this as a weakness, when in fact it's one of science's greatest strengths. The fact that science has an error-correcting machinery built into its method, allowing even the most strongly supported issues to be open to debate, and old conclusions to be repeatedly tested in the light of new evidence,

should inspire great confidence in science's ability to determine the truth.[8] On the other hand, religion's dogmatic assertion that it has a special privilege to the one and only changeless truth, which cannot be tested or questioned, should at least raise your eyebrow, if not scare the living hell out of you.

As for his attacks on evolution: Strobel regurgitates the tired old creationist argument that there is "a paucity of fossil evidence for the transitions between various species of animals" (91). This is blatantly false. When Strobel couldn't find any transitional fossils, I guess he overlooked these:

Transition from primitive jawless fish to sharks, skates, and rays:

Cladoselachians (e.g., *Cladoselache*).
Hybodonts (e.g. *Hybodus*)
Heterodonts (e.g. *Heterodontus*)
Hexanchids (e.g. *Chlamydoselache*)

Transition from primitive bony fish to holostean fish:

Palaeoniscoids (e.g. *Cheirolepis*); living chondrosteans such as *Polypterus* and *Calamoichthys*, and also the living acipenseroid chondrosteans such as sturgeons and paddlefishes.
Primitive holosteans such as *Semionotus*.

Transition from holostean fish to advanced teleost fish:

Leptolepidomorphs, esp. *Leptolepis*, an excellent holostean-teleost intermediate
Elopomorphs, both fossil and living (tarpons, eels)
Clupeomorphs (e.g. *Diplomystus*)
Osteoglossomorphs (e.g. *Portheus*)
Protacanthopterygians

Transition from primitive bony fish to amphibians:

Paleoniscoids again (e.g. *Cheirolepis*)
Osteolepis -- one of the earliest crossopterygian lobe-finned fishes, still sharing some characters with the lungfish (the other group of lobe-finned fish). Had paired fins with a leg-like arrangement of bones, and had an early-amphibian-like skull and teeth.

Eusthenopteron (and other rhipidistian crossopterygian fish) -- intermediate between early crossopterygian fish and the earliest amphibians. Skull very amphibian-like. Strong amphibian-like backbone. Fins very like early amphibian feet.

Ichthyostegids (such as *Ichthyostega* and *Ichthyostegopsis*) -- Terrestrial amphibians with many of *Eusthenopteron*'s fish features (e.g., the fin rays of the tail were retained). Some debate about whether *Ichthyostega* should be considered a fish or an amphibian; it is an excellent transitional fossil.

Labyrinthodonts (e.g., *Pholidogaster*, *Pteroplax*) -- still have some

ichthyostegid features, but have lost many of the fish features (e.g., the fin rays are gone, vertebrae are stronger and interlocking, the nasal passage for air intake is well defined.)

Transition from amphibians to reptiles:

Seymouriamorph labyrinthodonts (e.g. *Seymouria*) -- classic labyrinthodont skull and teeth, with reptilian vertebrae, pelvis, humerus, and digits; amphibian ankle.

Cotylosaurs (e.g. *Hylonomus*, *Limnoscelis*) -- slightly amphibian skull (e.g. with amphibian-type pineal opening), with rest of skeleton classically reptilian.

The cotylosaurs gave rise to many reptile groups of tremendous variety. I won't go into the transitions from cotylosaurs to the advanced anapsid reptiles (turtles and possibly mesosaurs), to the euryapsid reptiles (ichthyosaurs, plesiosaurs, and others), or to the lepidosaurs (eosuchians, lizards, snakes, and the tuatara), or to most of the dinosaurs, since I don't have infinite time. Instead I'll concentrate on the synapsid reptiles (which gave rise to mammals) and the archosaur reptiles (which gave rise to birds).

Transition from reptiles to mammals:

Pelycosaur synapsids -- classic reptilian skeleton, intermediate between the cotylosaurs (the earliest reptiles) and the therapsids (see next)

Therapsids (e.g. *Dimetrodon*) -- the numerous therapsid fossils show gradual transitions from reptilian features to mammalian features. For example: the hard palate forms, the teeth differentiate, the occipital condyle on the base of the skull doubles, the ribs become restricted to the chest instead of extending down the whole body, the legs become "pulled in" instead of sprawled out, the ilium (major bone of the hip) expands forward.

Cynodont theriodonts (e.g. *Cynognathus*) -- very mammal-like reptiles. Or is that reptile-like mammals? Highly differentiated teeth (a classic mammalian feature), with accessory cusps on cheek teeth; strongly differentiated vertebral column (with distinct types of vertebrae for the neck, chest, abdomen, pelvis, and tail -- very mammalian), mammalian scapula, mammalian limbs, mammalian digits (e.g. reduction of number of bones in the first digit). But, still has unmistakably **reptilian** jaw joint.

Tritilodont theriodonts (e.g. *Tritylodon*, *Bienotherium*) -- skull even more mammalian (e.g. advanced zygomatic arches). Still has reptilian jaw joint.

Ictidosaur theriodonts (e.g. *Diarthrognathus*) -- has all the mammalian features of the tritilodonts, and has a **double** jaw joint; both the reptilian jaw joint and the mammalian jaw joint were present, side-by-side, in *Diarthrognathus*'s skull. A really stunning transitional fossil.

Morganucodonts (e.g. *Morganucodon*) -- early mammals. Double jaw joint, but now the mammalian joint is dominant (the reptilian joint bones are beginning to move inward; in modern mammals these are the bones of the middle ear).

Eupantotheres (e.g. *Amphitherium*) -- these mammals begin to show the complex molar cusp patterns characteristic of modern marsupials and

eutherians (placental mammals). Mammalian jaw joint.

Proteutherians (e.g. *Zalambdalestes*) -- small, early insectivores with molars intermediate between eupantothere molars and modern eutherian molars.

Those wondering how egg-laying reptiles could make the transition to placental mammals may wish to study the reproductive biology of the monotremes (egg-laying mammals) and the marsupials. The monotremes in particular could almost be considered "living transitional fossils". [see Peter Lamb's suggested marsupial references at end]

Transition from reptiles to birds:

Lisboasaurus estesi and other "troodontid dinosaur-birds" -- a bird-like reptile with very bird-like teeth (that is, teeth very like those of early toothed birds [modern birds have no teeth]). May not have been a direct ancestor; may have been a "cousin" of the birds instead.

Protoavis -- this is a **highly controversial** fossil that may or may not be an extremely early bird. Not enough of the fossil was recovered to determine if it is definitely related to the birds, or not. I mention it in case people have heard about it recently.

Archeopteryx -- reptilian vertebrae, pelvis, tail, skull, teeth, digits, claws, sternum. Avian furcula (wishbone, for attachment of flight muscles), forelimbs, and lift-producing flight feathers. *Archeopteryx* could probably fly from tree to tree, but couldn't take off from the ground, since it lacked a keeled breastbone (for attachment of large flight muscles) and had a weak shoulder (relative to modern birds).

"Chinese bird" [I don't know what name was given to this fossil] -- A fossil dating from 10-15 million years after *Archeopteryx*. Bird-like claws on the toes, flight-specialized shoulders, fair-sized sternal keel (modern birds usually have large sternal keel); also has reptilian stomach ribs, reptilian unfused hand bones, & reptilian pelvis. This bird has a fused tail ("pygostyle"), but I don't know how long it was, or if it was all fused or just part of it was fused.

"Las Hoyas bird" [I don't know what name was given to this fossil] -- This fossil dates from 20-30 m.y. after *Archeopteryx*. It still has reptilian pelvis & legs, with bird-like shoulder. Tail is medium-length with a fused tip (*Archeopteryx* had long, unfused tail; modern birds have short, fused tail). Fossil down feather was found with the Las Hoyas bird.

Toothed Cretaceous birds, e.g. *Hesperornis* and *Ichthyornis*. Skeleton further modified for flight (fusion of pelvis bones, fusion of hand bones, short & fused tail). Still had true socketed teeth, which are missing in modern birds.

[note: a classic study of chicken embryos showed that chicken bills can be induced to develop teeth, indicating that chickens (and perhaps other modern birds) still retain the genes for making teeth.]

Now, on to some of the classes of mammals.

Transitional fossils from early eutherian mammals to primates:

Early primates -- paromomyids, carpolestids, plesiadapids. Lemur-like clawed primates with generalized nails.

Notharctus, an early Eocene lemur

Parapithecus, a small Old World monkey (Oligocene)

Propliopithecus, a small primate intermediate between *Parapithecus* and the more recent O.W. monkeys. Has several ape-like characters.

Aegyptopithecus, an early ape.

Limnopithecus, a later ape showing similarities to the modern gibbons.

Dryopithecus, a later ape showing similarities to the non-gibbon apes.

Ramapithecus, a dryopithecine-like ape showing similarities to the hominids but now thought to be an orang ancestor.

Australopithecus spp., early hominids. Bipedal.

Homo habilis.

Homo erectus. Numerous fossils across the Old World.

Homo sapiens sapiens. This is us. (NB: "Cro-magnon man" belongs here too. Cro-magnons were a specific population of modern humans.)

Homo sapiens neanderthalensis (not on the direct line to *H. sapiens sapiens*, but worth mentioning).

[I haven't described these fossils in detail because they're fairly well covered in any intro biology text, or in any of several good general-interest books on human evolution.]

Transitional fossils from early eutherian mammals to rodents:

Paramyids, e.g. *Paramys* -- early "primitive" rodent

Paleocastor -- transitional from paramyids to beavers

[yick. I was going to summarize rodent fossils but *Paramys* and its friends gave rise to 5 enormous and very diverse groups of rodents, with about ten zillion fossils. Never mind.]

Transitional fossils among the cetaceans (whales & dolphins):

Pakicetus -- the oldest fossil whale known. Only the skull was found. It is a distinct whale skull, but with nostrils in the position of a land animal (tip of snout). The ears were **partially** modified for hearing under water. This fossil was found in association with fossils of land mammals, suggesting this early whale **maybe** could walk on land.

Basilosaurus isis -- a recently discovered "legged" whale from the Eocene (after *Pakicetus*). Had hind feet with 3 toes and a tiny remnant of the 2nd toe (the big toe is totally missing). The legs were small and must have been useless for locomotion, but were specialized for swinging forward into a locked straddle position -- probably an aid to copulation for this long-bodied, serpentine whale.

Archaeocetes (e.g. *Protocetus*, *Eocetus*) -- have lost hind legs entirely, but retain "primitive whale" skull and teeth, with forward nostrils.

Squalodonts (e.g. *Prosqualodon*) -- whale-like skull with **dorsal** nostrils (blowhole), still with un-whale-like teeth.

Kentriodon, an early toothed whale with whale-like teeth.

Mesocetus, an early whalebone whale

[note: very rarely a modern whale is found with tiny hind legs, showing that some whales still retain the genes for making hind legs.]

Transitional fossils from early eutherian mammals to the carnivores:

Miacids (e.g. *Viverravus* and *Miacis*) -- small weasel-like animals with very carnivore-like teeth, esp. the carnassial teeth.

Arctoids (e.g. *Cynodictis*, *Hesperocyon*) -- intermediate between miacids and dogs. Limbs have elongated, carnassials are more specialized, braincase is larger.

Cynodesmus, *Tomarctus* -- transitional fossils between arctoids and the modern dog genus *Canis*.

Hemicyon, *Ursavus* -- heavy doglike fossils between the arctoids and the bears.

Indarctos -- early bear. Carnassial teeth have no shearing action, molars are square, short tail, heavy limbs. Transitional to the modern genus *Ursus*.

Phlaocyon -- a climbing carnivore with non-shearing carnassials, transitional from the arctoids to the procyonids (raccoons et al.)

Meanwhile back at the ranch,

Plesictis, transitional between miacids (see above) and mustelids (weasels et al.)

Stenoplesictis and *Palaeoprionodon*, early civets related to the miacids (see above)

Tunguricits, transitional between early civets and modern civets

Ictitherium, transitional between early civets to hyenas

Proailurus, transitional from early civets to early cats

Dinictis, transitional from early cats to modern "feline" cats

Hoplophoneus, transitional from early cats to "saber-tooth" cats

Transitional fossils from early eutherians to hoofed animals:

Arctocyonid condylarths -- insectivore-like small mammals with classic mammalian teeth and clawed feet.

Mesonychid condylarths -- similar to the arctocyonids, but with blunt crushing-type cheek teeth, and flattened nails instead of claws.

Late condylarths, e.g. *Phenacodus* -- a fair-sized animal with hoofs on each toe (all toes were present), a continuous series of crushing-type cheek teeth with herbivore-type cusps, and no collarbone (like modern hoofed animals).

Transitional fossils from early hoofed animals to perissodactyls:

[Perissodactyls are animals with an **odd** number of toes; most of the weight is borne by the central 3rd toe. Horses, rhinos, tapirs.]

Tetraclaeonodon -- a Paleocene condylarth showing perissodactyl-like teeth

Hyracotherium -- the famous "dawn horse", an early perissodactyl, with more elongated digits and interlocking ankle bones, and slightly different tooth cusps, compared to *Tetraclaeonodon*. A small, doggish animal with an arched back, short neck, and short snout; had 4 toes in front and 3 behind. Omnivore teeth.

[The rest of horse evolution will be covered in an upcoming "horse fossils" post in a few weeks. To whet your appetite:]

Orohippus -- small, 4/3 toed, developing browser tooth crests

Epihippus -- small, 4/3 toed, good tooth crests, browser

Epihippus (Duchesnehippus) -- a subgenus with *Mesohippus*-like teeth

Mesohippus -- 3 toed on all feet, browser, slightly larger

Miohippus -- 3 toed browser, slightly larger [gave rise to lots of successful three-toed browsers]

Parahippus -- 3 toed browser/grazer, developing "spring foot"

'*Parahippus*' *leonensis* -- a *Merychippus*-like species of *Parahippus*

'*Merychippus*' *gunteri* -- a *Parahippus*-like species of *Merychippus*

'*Merychippus*' *primus* -- a more typical *Merychippus*, but still very like *Parahippus*.

Merychippus -- 3 toed grazer, spring-footed, size of small pony (gave rise to tons of successful three-toed grazers)

Merychippus (Protohippus) -- a subgenus of *Merychippus* developing *Pliohippus*-like teeth.

Pliohippus & Dinohippus -- **one**-toed grazers, spring-footed

Equus (Plesippus) -- like modern equines but teeth slightly simpler.

Equus (Hippotigris), the modern 1-toed spring-footed grazing zebras.

Equus (Equus), the modern 1-toed spring-footed grazing horses & donkeys. [note: very rarely a horse is born with small visible side toes, indicating that some horses retain the genes for side toes.]

Hyrachyids -- transitional from perissodactyl-like condylarths to tapirs

Heptodonts, e.g. *Lophiodont* -- a small horse-like tapir, transitional to modern tapirs

Protapirus -- a probable descendent of *Lophiodont*, much like modern tapirs but without the flexible snout.

Miotapirus -- an almost-modern tapir with a flexible snout, transitional between *Protapirus* and the modern *Tapirus*.

Hyracodonts -- early "running rhinoceroses", transitional to modern rhinos

Caenopus, a large, hornless, generalized rhino transitional between the hyracodonts and the various later groups of modern & extinct rhinos.

Transitional fossils from early hoofed animals to some of the artiodactyls (cloven-hoofed animals):

Dichobunoids, e.g. *Diacodexis*, transitional between condylarths and all the artiodactyls (cloven-hoofed animals). Very condylarth-like but with a notably artiodactyl-like ankle.

Propalaeochoerus, an early pig, transitional between *Diacodexis* and modern pigs.

Protylopus, a small, short-necked, four-toed animal, transitional between dichobunoids and early camels. From here the camel lineage goes through *Protomeryx*, *Procamelus*, *Pleuarchenia*, *Lama* (which are still alive; these are the llamas) and finally *Camelus*, the modern camels.

Archeomeryx, a rabbit-sized, four-toed animal, transitional between the dichobunoids and the early deer. From here the deer lineage goes through *Eumeryx*, *Paleomeryx* and *Blastomeryx*, *Dicrocerus* (with antlers) and then a shmoo of successful groups that survive today as modern deer -- muntjacs, cervines, white-tail relatives, moose, reindeer, etc., etc.

Palaeotragus, transitional between early artiodactyls and the okapi & giraffe. Actually the okapi hasn't changed much since *Palaeotragus* and is essentially a living Miocene giraffe. After *Palaeotragus* came *Giraffa*, with elongated legs & neck, and *Sivatherium*, large ox-like giraffes that **almost** survived to the present.

So, there's a *partial* list of transitional fossils. And this really only scratches the surface, since it doesn't include all groups that have no surviving relatives, didn't discuss modern amphibians or reptiles, left out most of the birds, ignored the diversity in modern fish, didn't discuss the bovids or elephants or rodents or many other mammal groups.... I hope this gives a taste of the richness of the fossil record and the abundance of transitional fossils between major vertebrate taxa [9].

Strobel then takes up the "irreducible complexity" argument espoused by Michael Behe (the same guy, yet again). This is nothing more than the antiquated argument from design wrapped up in the raiment of modern molecular biology. The problem with Behe's irreducibly complex systems is that their irreducibility is based on the assumption that a particular molecular component's function has not changed over time. But we have every reason to suspect that component functions can and do change. There is a wealth of criticism for Behe available: see the Secular Web's library on [Michael Behe](#).

Before I totally let Behe off the hook, I'd like to point out another of Strobel's spurious journalistic tactics. He describes Behe's book, *Darwin's Black Box*, as "award-winning" (92). Now, he doesn't explicitly say what kind of award this was, yet I believe he expected the reader to presume this was an award for scientific merit from a scientific organization--and I think most readers probably did. However, the distinction was actually bestowed upon *Darwin's Black Box* at the *Christianity Today Book Awards* [10]. Shouldn't Strobel have mentioned that little fact?

The Building Blocks Of Life

The entire Bradley interview itself is concerned with abiogenesis, which, I would again like to note, is irrelevant to evolution. Nevertheless, this interview is also flawed. Bradley informs Strobel that the initial conditions were assumed in the famous Miller-Urey Experiment in which amino acids were created by simulating earth's early environment and adding electrical energy to the system. Strobel makes a great to-do of Bradley's revelation (to him) that Miller assumed an environment rich in the elements which he used for the simulation. They then dismiss the entire experiment (95-7).

Problems:

Firstly, just because Strobel couldn't recognize that the experiment is based on a hypothesis, doesn't mean everyone else is so blind. I don't believe Miller attempted to hide the fact that he was guessing as to the composition of the early earth's atmosphere. Secondly, we still have an experiment where the building blocks of life formed spontaneously from non-life conditions. Even if those were not early earth's conditions, it still says something about the possibility of abiogenesis.

Assembling A Cell

Bradley extols the complexity of the cell and declares the origin of life to be an unsolved problem. He then goes on to refute six theories of abiogenesis (95-106).

Problems:

Bradley is right that the cell is complex and the origin of life unknown. As for the six theories, I am not qualified to discuss them specifically. However, there are several considerations to keep in mind when evaluating abiogenesis theories (and refutations):

To begin with, to actually calculate the 'odds of life evolving by chance' one must calculate the odds of the first living (i.e. replicating) organism arising by chance. But no one knows what that first organism was, for it naturally had no bones and thus left no fossils, and it certainly would have been vastly overpowered and driven to extinction by its more advanced children who were born after successive mutation and selection. It is not even known if this first life was DNA-based, much less how complex it was. But even if we could estimate the simplest possible biochemical replicator, the task would only be beginning. The odds of such a replicator forming by chance would not be based on its complexity alone. The chances would have to be calculated based on the number of materials available (e.g. more than one different molecule may serve the same purpose at any given point in a chain), the probability that they will form into collectives (e.g. amino-acids naturally chain, water molecules do not), and the number of tests (e.g. the number of chemical reactions that occur in a given environment, and the number of times any kind of chain or collective is formed in the population). In other words, to actually calculate the odds of 'life' developing from inanimate matter, one must be acquainted not only with a vast arrangement of data and know how to estimate all the statistical relationships involved, but one must even know things that no one on Earth presently knows, or ever may know.[\[11\]](#)

Therefore, any one who claims to be able to tell you about the likelihood (on unlikelihood) of a particular abiogenesis theory should be treated with the utmost suspicion.

The Most Reasonable Inference

Bradley suggests that an Intelligent Designer is, indeed, the most reasonable inference (107-9).

Problems:

Bradley says, "If there isn't a natural explanation and there doesn't seem to be the potential of finding one, then I believe it's appropriate to look at a supernatural explanation" (108). But this solves nothing, because Bradley is simply handing off the problem to God, who can explain anything. It is not a reasonable inference because it is based on ignorance. To Bradley's credit, it should be noted that he claims, "what I've found is absolutely overwhelming evidence that points to an Intelligent Designer" (109). To his detriment, it should be noted that he fails to produce any such evidence.

Reasoning By Analogy

Bradley would have us believe that, "we can legitimately use analogical reasoning to conclude that the remarkable information sequences in DNA...had an intelligent cause" (109-11). He trots out a couple of analogies for just this purpose.

Problems:

Analogical reasoning is useful as an explanatory tool, allowing us to understand more complex issues by their comparison to simpler ones. However, because analogies do, by nature, simplify an issue, their conclusions are often specious. If a Christian doubts this, I invite them to examine the following:

1. David Koresh claimed to be God, therefore he was a lunatic.
2. Jesus Christ claimed to be God, therefore he was also a lunatic.

Objection #4: God Isn't Worthy Of Worship If He Kills Innocent Children (2001)

(Interview w/ [Norman L. Geisler](#), Ph.D.)

I would broaden this to include not only children, but any innocent person. I also do not think the extreme case of "killing" is necessary to void God's worshipful status. The simple cause of needless suffering and pain is enough for me. Geisler contends God is innocent of cruelty in either Testament, as he is one in the same perfect God (115-8).

Problems:

Right from the start, Geisler alleges, "The Bible doesn't have any cruel and torturous executions God commanded" (117). Really? Is drowning humane then? How about drowning (almost) every living creature? Admittedly, God doesn't command this - he enacts it with his own hand. I'm not sure, but I think that makes it worse. Speaking of the hand of God, what about incinerating entire cities (Gen. 19:24)? I imagine burning to death is at least a little cruel. But as for God's commands, what of Ex. 22:18? "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" sure sounds like a death order to me (made worse by the fact that there are no witches, so instead it has resulted in the countless deaths of frightened old women). How about Lev. 20:13? Referring to homosexuals, it says "they shall surely be put to death." There's not much getting around that one--*how can it mean* anything but an execution? And it is immediately followed by the command that a man who sleeps with his wife's mother shall be burnt to death - along with the mother. Just read all of Leviticus if you need more examples.

Geisler then attempts perhaps the most pathetic argument I have ever seen. He counts the number of times the words "love" and "mercy" appear in each Testament. This is a rather meaningless endeavor. I might as well conclude that Hitler is a great man based on the number of times he uses the word "great" in Mein Kampf. It's called context. Then again, even if this word-counting wasn't totally worthless, it is misapplied. Geisler notes, "the word 'love'...occurs 322 times in the Bible, about half in each testament. So you have the same emphasis on love in both" (117). Except that the Old Testament is about three times as long as the New, so we have nowhere near the same emphasis. Geisler then suggests, "you could make a case that God is more judgmental in the New Testament than the Old" (117). This is due to the New's emphasis on eternal punishment, which is all but absent from the Old. He immediately follows that comment with a denial that there is any evolution in God's character. Hmm...which is it, Geisler?

Gods Orders To Kill

Geisler shrugs off God's death orders, excusing them because: (a.) The people deserved it; (b.) We're all sinners, after all; (c.) God made us, and he can unmake us (118-9).

Problems:

Strobel only highlights a few of the instances in which God orders killing, and Geisler addresses less. I suppose a Christian reader is supposed to walk away satisfied that all the troubling incidents have been answered, but a quick read of the Bible will reveal otherwise. In this section, Geisler focuses on the Amalekites, whom God wants the Israelites to wipe out. Geisler defends this first by asserting that, "they [the Amalekites] were totally and utterly depraved" (119). I don't believe the Bible makes this point clear, but even if it did, are we really to believe every ounce of the culture is pure evil and rotten to the core? Especially coming from the biased view of the Israelites who were their bitter enemies? This is not an accurate portrait, but a cartoon, and should be recognized as such. Even when a nation commits great evil, such as Nazi Germany, it's citizens aren't in totality (or even in majority) wicked, or even that much different from how anyone would be in the same circumstances.

Geisler then condemns the Amalekites as a "vicious and warring people" (119). And just what were the Israelites? Engineers of countless raids, sieges, and battles throughout the Old Testament - if we are going to be fair, they must be condemned as well. Best yet, Geisler would have us believe that the Israelites needed to be saved because of "the Messiah who was to be born among them" (119). What kind of impotent and unimaginative God is this? Consider: (1.) He is omnipotent, yet he couldn't bring about Jesus except through the Israelites? (2.) He can't think of a better way to save the Israelites than the wholesale genocide of the Amalekites? (3.) The Israelites must be the instrument of God? Why does God need help, or, as Captain James T. Kirk so eloquently phrased it in [Star Trek V](#)

But there is a more fundamental concern with God's orders to kill. A God who commands murder opens a horrific set of floodgates. Suddenly, you've got any number of wackos who can claim as a motive for murder: "God told me so." In fact, whole nations channel this concept into "holy wars." Of course, almost everyone considers these people psychopaths but is that really a fair attitude for Christians to have? After all, how do they know God didn't command the slayings? He's done it before. Surely, an omniscient being would've recognized that setting such a dangerous precedent was pure folly.

Geisler then expresses the notion that "people [incorrectly] assume what's wrong for us is wrong for God" (119). Basically this is an excuse for God to get away with anything. It renders God above our judgments of evil. What I think most theologians fail to understand is that, if we render God above judgment for evil, then he is above judgment for good as well. We cannot consider Him anything but amoral.

What About the Children?

Geisler assures us that the Amalekite children's deaths were the best thing for them. He suggests that the cultures God sent the Israelites to war with had plenty of time to repent - and those who did were saved. Plus, the women and children probably got out (for the most part anyway!) and Israel always first offered peace to the cities they besieged (120-2).

Problems:

Geisler tells us, "In that thoroughly evil and violent and depraved [Amalekite] culture, there was no hope for those children" (120). Thus, it's good the kids died young, before "the age of accountability" so they could go to heaven, whereas "if they had continued to live in that horrible society...they undoubtedly would have been corrupted and thereby lost forever" (120). Wait a minute, now. Why couldn't the Jews raise the children instead of killing them? And is Geisler suggesting that even if left where they were, societal circumstances would've shaped the kids irrevocably? What happened to free will? Or is that one of the many concepts Christians use when it supports their purposes, but ignore when it conflicts with them?

Likewise, Geisler says, "[abortion is] contrary to the teachings of the Bible" (120). I think it's worth noting that the Bible is actually completely silent on the issue of abortion. There is not one scriptural passage dedicated to the issue. You can argue that "thou shalt not kill" encompasses abortion, but why then doesn't it cover the killing of the Amalekite children? Or war or capital punishment?

Geisler tries to build a case for God's mercy that is summed up by the following: "whoever has repented, God has been willing to save" (121). He suggests that those whom God ordered destroyed had plenty of time and opportunity to repent. But let us realistically examine the religio-historical context of this portion of the Bible. Yahvism (we can't call it Judaism yet) was hardly the dominant religion. There were scores of Gods and religions (which the Bible openly refers to) [12]. In many cultures, they probably had little knowledge of Yahvism, if any. With all

these religions, none proving to be particularly stronger than another, is it reasonable to expect everyone to recognize Yahvism as the one true religion and repent? Realize that their own God (in which they most likely believed) was apt to be just as jealous and petty as Yahveh, and *just as likely* to order death to those who worshipped "false" Gods.

Once again trying to escape the issue of death to the innocents, Geisler informs us, "...most of the women and children would have fled in advance before the actual fighting began..." (122). Is that supposed to be comforting? They couldn't exactly stay at the Holiday Inn while the war was going on. Even if Geisler were right (and the Bible doesn't say such a thing--he's just making it up), they could only have fled on an ill-prepared trek into the harsh and unforgiving desert where many no doubt suffered and died anyway. But the Israelites were fair! Or so Geisler would have us believe. They always made an offer of peace when they invaded an enemy city. "The people had a choice: they could accept that offer, in which case they wouldn't be killed, or they could reject the offer at their own peril" (122). I think what Geisler fails to mention that if the offer was accepted, sure, they wouldn't be killed - *but they would be subjugated into a life of slavery!* (cf. 1 Chronicles 5:20-22 for instance). This is a choice that hardly vindicates God.

Strobel says, "What about the children?" but I have another question: "What about the Israelites?" I mean, even if you buy into the notion that the Amalekites and their ilk were corrupt through and through and God needed the Israelites to destroy them, why must Israelites die fighting them? After all, they are doing the work of God! It's bad enough that God is too lazy to take care of the problem himself, but furthermore, he is so facile that he can't even manage to protect the righteous fathers and husbands he sends to do his dirty work!

Cosmic Overkill

Geisler defends the bear rampage God unleashes on little children who poke fun at Elisha's baldness (122-5).

Problems:

I have rarely seen a better example of an apologist desperately trying to twist matters in God's favor. First, Geisler contends that the KJV translation "little children" is in error and should be "youths." He then says, "As best we can tell, this was a violent mob of dangerous teenagers, comparable to a modern street gang" (123). I must've laughed for a good two minutes at that one. Even with the damning "youths" correction, a quick reading of 2 Kings 23-24 will reveal absolutely no basis for this wild characterization. In fact, as best we can tell, they were a bunch of kids. Geisler tries to convince us "they were assailing Elisha - a man of dignity and authority as a prophet of God..." (123). But no matter how you spin it, God had two bears tear 42 "youths" to pieces because they called Elisha a "baldhead," *and for no other apparent reason*. Geisler suggests this was a "...preemptory strike to put fear into the hearts of anyone else who would do this..." and "...The disastrous fall of Samaria would have been avoided had the people repented after the bear attack" (124). I would again like to question the wisdom of a god who launches a preemptory strike while armed with the omniscient foreknowledge that it will fail. And if God is so concerned with protecting the dignity of his representatives, how come those who launch far more scathing attacks than "baldhead" at his representatives today aren't struck down? For instance, I might say the Pope looks like a walking corpse with arthritic hands clenched around a crazy Skeletor Power Sceptre, yet I am unharmed.

The Pain Of Animals

Geisler rejects the predator/prey nature of animals as a criticism of God since this was not the way God intended things in the Paradise of Creation. Only Adam & Eve's fall led to this state of affairs (125-6).

Problems:

Firstly, there is the obvious doubt that such a Paradise ever existed. But, even granting that it did, it raises the issue of God's accountability once again. I hate to beat a dead horse, but Christians have consistently failed to provide me with an answer to this conundrum: How can you say God didn't intend for the Fall to occur, when he created every aspect of the universe with precise knowledge of how it would unfold? When you possess ultimate power combined with ultimate knowledge, you cannot escape ultimate responsibility. And why should the sin of two humans cause the suffering of billions of innocent animals anyway? What did they do to deserve that? Can't God hit the right target?

Geisler also tries to justify the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament by saying they, "pointed ahead toward the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ..." (126). Of course, the scripture itself provides absolutely no basis for this conclusion and it is clear that the sacrifices served an important role in and of themselves whose roots lie in the barbarism of idolatry. Here again we see scripture can be twisted to fit any set of conclusions. The fact of the matter is, there are so many atrocious things in the Bible (see Don Morgan's "[Bible Atrocities](#)," for example) that it soon looks absurd when someone tries to explain them all away like this. And why is so much work needed by mere mortals like Geisler to explain these things? Couldn't God have inspired a much clearer, nobler book to begin with?

Can The Bible Be Trusted?

Obviously Geisler thinks it is the inspired word of God, so he answers in the affirmative. He gives two reasons for saying so, both of which are discussed below (127-31).

Problems:Reason #1: Confirmation by Archaeology

Geisler reels off a list of archaeological finds that support the Bible. Because I have encountered so much dishonesty in Fundamentalist propaganda, I wouldn't be surprised if Geisler is reading more into some of these discoveries than is warranted. But no matter, for I will give him the benefit of the doubt. The problem is that these discoveries do little more than point toward a conclusion which is undisputed: namely, the Bible is a historical document. No one questions that the Bible (especially the Old Testament) records a history. Secular people simply recognize that this is a history written and edited by people with very limited knowledge, based much on hearsay, where events were free to be interpreted in terms of superstition. It should not be greatly surprising that there was, in fact, a King David, or a Temple of Solomon. What is in doubt is the contrived hero-making tale of David slaying Goliath, or certain dimensions in the Temple that give pi a value of 3.

To compare with the Iliad once again, we do not doubt that a war between Greece and Troy took place - but we do doubt Homer's details. Actually, Geisler isolates the problem right at the beginning. He says, "if we can trust the Bible when it's telling us about straightforward earthly things that can be verified, then we can trust it in areas where we can't directly verify it in an empirical way" (128). But this is exactly what we cannot do. The reason we can't verify many of the Bible's claims is because neither could the authors. That is why they attributed them to God. And the fact of the matter is, there is a lot that discredits the Bible, as is shown in the Secular Web's libraries on [Biblical Errancy](#) and [Biblical Criticism](#).

Reason #2: Evidence of Divine Origin

There is really nothing here other than the assertion that God created the Universe, so he could certainly do anything else too. But using The Bible's account of Creation to support the validity of the Bible is circular and invalid, and even if a god created the universe this has no bearing at all on whether any book has a divine origin, much less whether the Bible is that book. I suppose Geisler is aware of this because he immediately launches into the argument that, "...the Bible is miraculously confirmed by the fulfillment of predictive prophecies, and...by the miracles performed by those who purported to be speaking for God" (131). We shall see.

Confirmation By Prophecies

According to Geisler, "The Bible...has precise, specific predictions that were made hundreds of years in advance and that were literally fulfilled" (131). This is grossly overstating his case.

1. The Bible prophecies (like most all prophecies) are often vague and undefined. This allows them to be ascribed to a wide variety of events, which they may very well have not been intended to predict.
2. Considering that Biblical scholars now have 2000 years of human history to scour for anything that resembles a particular prophecy, it would be surprising if they could *not* find a close fit for most of them.

To really grasp these points, one must see the Secular Web's library on [Prophecy](#). For brevity's sake, here is only one criticism of a specific "supposed" prophecy. For many more, see Drange's essay [\[13\]](#), from which I draw this quote:

(I) Bethlehem

Consider, first, Micah 5:2 (or Micah 5:1 of the Tanakh), which is supposed to prophesy that the Messiah will be born in the town of Bethlehem. According to the New Testament, Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Mt 2:1) and that was a fulfillment of the Micah prophecy (Mt 2:5-6, John 7:42). However, there are many problems with that:

(1) The verse in Micah may not be referring to a town at all, but a clan. David had been from old times described as "the son of the Ephrathite of Bethlehem" (1Sa 17:12). The verse in Micah states, "out of you [i.e., the clan, Bethlehem Ephrathah or Bethlehem of Ephrath] will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel." It may be that all Micah intended there was to affirm that the Messiah will be a descendant of David.

(2) Jesus was claimed to be a (bodily or blood) descendant of David (Ro 1:3), but it is unclear how that could be. According to both Matthew and Luke, Mary's husband Joseph was a descendant of David (though they disagree about the exact genealogy, as discussed below). However, both Matthew and Luke deny that Joseph was Jesus's father, so their genealogies of Joseph (Mt 1:2-16, Lu 3:23-38) should not be regarded as genealogies of Jesus. Matthew erred when he called it that (Mt 1:1).

(3) The prophecy seems further not to apply to Jesus, for it says that the Messiah "will be ruler over Israel." Jesus was not any ruler over Israel. In fact, he himself is supposed to have denied that his kingdom was of this world (John 18:36). Also, the ruler is to make Israel a secure place to live (Mic 5:4), but that certainly did not happen. It is understandable why Jews, reading Micah, believe that their Messiah has not yet come.

(4) Even if the prophecy were taken to refer to the town of Bethlehem, there is room for doubt as to whether Jesus really was born there. The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are inconsistent

with each other at various points. Furthermore, both stories contain dubious elements. Matthew's story of the magi who followed a star (2:1-10) seems far-fetched. And the story in Luke 2:1-5 about Mary and Joseph's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem to participate in a Roman census seems contrived.

For these reasons, the alleged fulfillment of the Micah prophecy by Jesus is quite doubtful. It certainly cannot be taken to be evidence of the divine inspiration of the Bible.

The claim that the Bible has 100% predictive accuracy is simply false. Here is a sampling of 5 unfulfilled prophecies. For many more, see [14].

1. According to Ge 2:17, Adam will die the same day that he eats the fruit, but that did not come about, since, according to Ge 5:5, Adam lived to age 930. [Note that the same Hebrew word for "die" is used as elsewhere in the Old Testament, standing for physical death.]

2. According to Ge 4:12,14, Cain will be a fugitive and a vagabond, and constantly subject to assassination, but that did not come about, for, according to Ge 4:16-17, Cain had a wife and family, and lived in the same area all his life, and built a city.

3. According to Jos 17:17-18, Ephraim and Manasseh will drive out the Canaanites, but according to Jg 1:27-29, they did not drive out the Canaanites.

4. Jer 34:5 prophesied that Zedekiah will die in peace, but according to 2Ki 25:7 and Jer 52:10-11, that did not happen. Instead, he saw his sons killed, was carried off in chains, blinded, and eventually died in prison.

5. Am 7:17 prophesied that Amaziah's sons will die by the sword, but according to 2Ch 26:1,21, Amaziah's son Uzziah died of leprosy.

Confirmation By Miracles

Geisler proceeds to list miracle workers in the Bible. I don't know if he lost the thread of his argument or what, but he originally said, "the Bible is miraculously confirmed...by the miracles performed by those who purported to be speaking for God." As Geisler well knows, he can't use miracles contained in the Bible to authenticate the validity of those same miracles. This is a complete failure as far as arguments go, as one can see in the Secular Web's library on the [Argument from Miracles](#).

Coping With Contradictions

Geisler notes, "...I haven't found one single error in the Bible" (137). For example, he raises the question of the number of angels at the tomb in John (2) vs. Matthew (1). He says, since there were two, mathematically there was one, so they are both correct.

Hmmm. No contradictions? Here are some:

At what time in the morning did the women visit the tomb? At the rising of the sun (Mark 16:2), or when it was yet dark (John 20:1)? Was the tomb open or closed when they arrived? Open (Luke 24:2). Closed (Matt. 28:1).

Who came? Mary Magdalene alone (John 20:1), or Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Matt. 28:1), or Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 16:1), or Magdalene, Joanna, Mary, the mother of James, and other women (Luke 24:10)?

Did Mary Magdalene know Jesus when he first appeared to her? Yes, she did (Matt. 28:9), or no, she did not (John 20:14).

The "Annunciation" took place after Mary was pregnant (Matt 1:18-21), or the "Annunciation" took place before Mary was pregnant (Luke 1: 26-31).

Jesus was born during the reign of Herod, who died 4 B.C. (Matt. 2:1), or Jesus was born at the time of Quirinius, in 6 A.D. (Luke 2:2).

Jesus was crucified when it was the third hour (Mark 15:25), or it could not have been the third hour since he was still before Pilate (John 19:14).

At the hearing before Pilate, Jesus answered no charges (Matt. 27:14), or Jesus responds directly to all of Pilate's questions (John 18:33-37). [\[15\]](#)

As for the angels, I assume that angels weren't just popping up everyday. Therefore, it seems reasonable that if there were two, this would have struck Matthew as quite amazing and he would have mentioned as much. But, ignoring that - since mathematics were mentioned, let's consider them. I can think of no more glaring challenge to the Bible's infallibility than 1 Kings 7:23. In the verse, Solomon is constructing a Temple for the Lord. Part of its construction is described as follows:

And he made a molten sea, ten cubits from the one brim to the other: it was round all about, and its height was five cubits: and a line of thirty cubits did compass it round about.

These dimensions give pi the startling value of 3. One can hardly suggest the "figurative language" excuses this, or that the author was just rounding off, since the various dimensions and details of temple construction are otherwise described in mundane and exacting detail. The only real possibility is that the author is ignorant of basic geometry. While Geisler is blind to any errors in the Bible, others find hundreds, as one can see in the Secular Web's libraries on [Biblical Errancy](#).

Why Is It Hard To Believe?

Of course, Geisler contends that it is not difficult to believe as the evidence is all around us. He criticizes famous philosopher Bertrand Russell who said, "Well, if I heard a voice from heaven and it predicted a series of things and they came to pass, then I guess I'd have to believe there's some kind of supernatural being." Geisler responds, "Mr. Russell, there *has* been a voice from heaven; it has predicted many things; and we've seen them undeniably come to pass" (141). On the deceased Russell's behalf, I'd like to point out that he would first take issue with the word "undeniably." Then, he would note that he said, "If *I* heard a voice..." not "If I read a book about people who heard voices..."

Objection #5: It's Offensive To Claim Jesus Is The Only Way To God (2001)

(Interview w/ [Ravi Zacharias](#), D.D., LL.D.)

For someone who is of a non-Christian religion, I suppose the claim of Jesus as a sole source of salvation is offensive. But maybe not. If your goal is not to become close to God, I don't suppose you care very much where his path lies. I can't imagine pantheism, animism, or even Buddhism is particularly concerned with this exclusive notion. And, of course, atheists do not find it offensive *per se*, since a belief in God is necessary before one can be offended about the way to reach him. I *would* say that this exclusivity is petty and dangerous. Many people do get upset when told their religion is not as good as the next guy's -- this is why Jews, Muslims and Christians have been slaughtering each other in Palestine for centuries. So it occurs to me that exclusivity runs contrary to the general moral character of Christ, as people tend to portray him at any rate, and I can't imagine him being particularly happy with his followers preaching it with such vehemence.

This brings up the point: is this exclusivity something Jesus actually taught -- or is it a doctrine adopted later by his followers? The main support for Christ teaching this idea seems to be passages like John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." But the context of John 14 does not *directly* support the concept that one must worship or believe in Christ in order to ascend to heaven. In fact, it seems to me that this scripture could easily be interpreted to mean that one must only live a Christ-like life in order to reach God. However, I will assume the standard "exclusivist" interpretation for the sake of argument in this section.

The Arrogance Of Christianity

Zacharias argues that Christianity isn't alone among religions making exclusive truth claims. He contends that truth is, by definition, exclusive. He admits some Christians spread the message in a non-loving manner (148-51).

Problems:

I can't say I disagree much with this section. There certainly are other religions which make exclusive claims to the truth. In fact, they have to. Any time someone makes a claim which runs contrary to another claim, it is exclusive. Which leads us right into the definition of truth. If something can be said to be true, then it's opposite can be said to be false. A is true entails not-A is false. It is elementary logic, and Zacharias recognizes this. Concerning Christians spreading their message negatively, I think we can isolate the problem to some degree. I don't think the exclusivity is really the hang up here, but rather the lack of tolerance. Christians who spread their ideas with an air of intolerance and superiority tend to turn off their listeners. Of course, it should be noted that many Christians are gentle and open in sharing their message, and, not surprisingly, they are often more effective in winning converts.

Origin, Meaning, Morality, Destiny

Zacharias tells us that we should consider Jesus the path to God because he answers the fundamental questions of religion (enumerated in the title of this subsection) coherently, while other religions fail in this regard (151-3).

Problems:

Zacharias assures us that, "There is a coherence among his (Christ's) answers unlike those of any other religion" (151). This is really an opinion. Ravi doesn't do much to substantiate it other than take a couple of weak stabs at Buddhism and Hinduism. And even these are more telling of Zacharias' misunderstandings than of any religious incoherence. For instance, Zacharias says,

"Buddhism is technically nontheistic...if there was no Creator, where does one arrive at a moral law?" (151). Once again, it seems plainly obvious that a moral system could be deemed wise and worthy of following even if it wasn't handed down from on high. Regardless, in Buddhism morality is not at all about a law, but about escaping the suffering caused by desire, and one who purges desire and replaces it with love not only escapes suffering, but ceases to have any reason to do bad things, while good things become second nature. Zacharias seems totally ignorant, in other words, of just what Buddhists teach about the very question he raises.

Concerning origins, Zacharias argues that, "Since we were created in His image, this accounts for human beings having a moral point of reference" (152). I'm not sure this makes any sense, especially in light of the fact that Zacharias next launches headlong into the Adam & Eve fable. Until they ate the forbidden fruit, humanity had no concept of good and evil, and therefore no moral point of reference. But aside from Zacharias' bumbling argument, his point is essentially that God explains morality. He says, "Even naturalists have no explanation for humanity's moral framework" (152). But they do, and, oddly enough, Zacharias points it out in his very next sentence: "...this moral framework corresponds to the reality of human experience" (152). Which is exactly why it exists as it is. Common human experience gives rise to human codes of conduct. See the Secular Web's libraries on [Morality and Atheism](#) and [Secular Humanism](#). Indeed, Zacharias's whole position is flawed, since it can be turned on its head, and is weak to begin with, as is evident when one examines the Secular Web's libraries on [Atheistic Moral Arguments](#) and the [Moral Argument and Divine Command Theory](#).

As for the issue of meaning, I can't really make heads or tails of Zacharias' ramblings. His sentences read like a series of non-sequiturs. For example, Zacharias says, "Only something greater than pleasure can provide meaning, and that is the perpetual novelty of God himself in worship" (152). This might make sense as the conclusion of an entire essay, but not as a stand-alone sentence. There are two huge assumptions inherent in it that Zacharias doesn't make any attempt to prove or even recognize. They are:

- (1.) Only something greater than pleasure can provide meaning.
 - (1.1.) Why can't pleasure provide meaning?
 - (1.2.) If it can, can something lesser than pleasure provide meaning?
- (2.) Worship of God is a perpetual novelty.
 - (2.1.) Is perpetual novelty really greater than pleasure?
 - (2.2.) If so, is there something other than perpetual novelty that is greater than pleasure?

Zacharias "coherently" explains Christian morality by noting that its root can be found in, "...an eternal, moral, omnipotent, infinite God who is inseparable from his character" (153). But this raises many questions. Is God subject to his own moral law? If so, why can't humans be subject to their own? If not, is God actually good? Can he be judged by a standard that he is above? Why should humans follow God's moral law? What if they see some of his laws as evil? Should they still follow them out of fear? Is this moral? Etc. So I wouldn't say Christian morality is entirely "coherent." Regarding destiny, Zacharias points out that Christ's resurrection, "...opened the door to heaven for everyone who will follow him. Where else do you have anything that comes close to claiming this?" (153). Just off-hand, I would say Mormonism, which claims not only to open the door to heaven but promises the possibility of godhood, at least equals, if not surpasses, stock and trade Christianity for pure destiny-appeal.

As is becoming clear, this whole section is little more than a collection of Zacharias' opinions. This is further clarified by his assertion that "No man spoke like Jesus. No one ever answered questions the way he answered them..." (153). I believe Socrates' (among others) oratorical

abilities eclipse those of Christ. And the Secular Web library on the [Character of Jesus](#) reveals that Zacharias' opinion can certainly be easily challenged.

[Note: The alleged historicity of Christ's resurrection is brought to bear a couple of times in this chapter, and probably in chapters to come. I feel I have dealt adequately with this contention in prior chapters, so I will say no more on the subject here. Again, if you want an in depth discussion of the issue see the Secular Web's library on the [Resurrection](#)]

Of Elephants And Faith

Zacharias denies that the world religions teach the same fundamental tenets. He also rejects the idea that different religions have a "piece" of the truth, with different cultures perceiving God differently (154-5).

Problems:

Again, I find little to take issue with in this subsection. I agree that the major world religions are often contradictory in their fundamental aspects. But I can't say I would necessarily disagree with the idea of different religions perceiving God differently -- if I were a theist. But, since I don't believe in God, I don't imagine anyone is perceiving Him at all.

One small point: Zacharias argues against the notion of different religions perceiving God in different ways with the question. "...does the atheist have a piece of the truth, or is the atheist marginalized here?" (155). It should be noted that atheism is not a religion, and should not be grouped with religions. There is no body of positions or unity among atheists. Simply put, atheism is the lack of a belief in god(s) -- no more, no less. Rather, one must focus on specific atheistic worldviews like [Metaphysical Naturalism](#), [Secular Humanism](#), or [Objectivism](#), to give only three examples among many. And Zacharias seems to have no coherent idea of what he means by "truth" here -- A piece of which truth? About what? How can he say no religion has any truth to it when all religions agree in at least some respects with Christianity? Certainly, Judaism overlaps a great deal with it. So all this is a rambling, pointless contrariness.

Redemption, Righteousness, Worship

Zacharias suggests that belief is more important than conduct. He tells us Jesus' purpose was not morality. He knocks various philosophical ethical systems and is questioned on the probable destiny of Gandhi (155-7).

Problems:

Zacharias' answers continue to be heavy on speculation, and light on coherent content. It's hard to critique "arguments" that don't really follow any thread, and that are more assertion than argument anyway. Zacharias says moral living is well and good, but belief is what really matters. "Jesus Christ didn't come into this world to make bad people good...he came...to make dead people live" (156). Is this really what Christ taught? It's what his disciples and the early church taught certainly, but can this focus be observed in Jesus himself? I think not. Zacharias criticizes several ethical systems because "they are reduced to mere survival" (156). He indicates that when constructing a moral paradigm, "life and death, spiritually, is where you begin" (157). But isn't this just reducing it to mere "spiritual" survival? He is describing a purely mercenary religion, where Christians would gladly follow even an evil God if it got them into heaven. Is he really supposed to be making Christianity look good here?

And even supposing morality was moot and only eternal survival mattered, just how are we supposed to decide if a system behooves our spiritual existence? It's kind of hard to tell until we are dead, and then it's a bit too late. And for those of us who don't believe in a spiritual existence, it is a useless starting point. Zacharias notes that, "...anyone spending eternity with God in

heaven is there because of the grace and provision of Jesus Christ, which the person trusted and received" (157). This brings up another interesting question never adequately answered by Christians. What about the 40,000 years or so of pre-Christ human (*Homo sapiens sapiens*) history? Are those people stuck in purgatory? Are they just plain out of an afterlife? Even if you insist on the literal Bible and the Ussher calculations, you've still got to account for a couple thousand years.

So What About Gandhi?

Strobel resumes the issue of Gandhi's fate which Zacharias previously dodged. He, more or less, avoids it again. He claims David Berkowitz has been saved if he has truly repented because murder is not the worst thing one can do (158-60).

Problems:

It was asked: so did Gandhi go to hell because he was an unbeliever? Zacharias basically says: I don't know, but God will always do what is right. That is very comforting. When asked again, Zacharias says "that will have to be determined by God" (158). This is a perfect example of how ludicrous people become when trying to adhere to doctrine. The bottom line is that Zacharias doesn't want to admit Gandhi was good because he was an unbeliever. How can an unbeliever truly be good? Everyone knows you must believe in Christ to go to heaven! Yet, it is plainly obvious that Gandhi's moral character outstrips innumerable Christians so that the idea of him suffering in hell is problematic. This is a Christian at his most pathetic. If Zacharias was truly moral, he would have the courage to stand up and say that any God who judges Gandhi unfit has worthless standards: *such a God could not be deemed good Himself*. Zacharias says salvation is possible for serial killer David Berkowitz if he has accepted Christ, but everything he has said also entails that it was not possible for a righteous man like Gandhi. Zacharias knows this discredits his religion, so he refuses to admit that this is indeed the inevitable conclusion of his own argument. After all, he says murder is not so bad because, "The worst thing is to say to God that you don't need him" (159). Therefore, since he effectively said this, Gandhi was more immoral than a serial killer. How twisted is this religion? Maybe I'm biased, but I have a hard time buying into an ethical system that places someone like Gandhi below a serial killer in virtue.

What Of Those Who Haven't Heard?

Zacharias suggests that those who don't live in heavy Christian areas will still find God if they seek him. He gives a couple of examples (160-3).

Problems:

In grappling with the problem of condemning those not raised within Christianity, Zacharias cites Acts. 17:26-27. "From one man he made every nation of men, that should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us." Whew. I am certainly glad God chose to place me in wealthy, 21st century America. I wonder how the third world peasant, or medieval serf toiling endlessly in the fields feels about his placement though. And it's nice that those who seek God may find him, but why would many non-Christians seek him? From Hindus to atheists, non-Christians often feel that they can explain the universe just fine with god(s) of their own - or none at all. God is very inefficient if he allows billions of people to have less a chance to find him than billions of others. As for the examples of personal revelatory experiences of converts, these are useless beyond emotional value (see the Secular Web library on [Religious Experience](#)). But ignoring that, there is another problem. What of the millions who have had such experiences in favor of non-Christian religions? Are all their experiences invalid while Christians always get it right? And

what of the former Christians who have converted to other religions? Might they be on to something? See the Secular Web's library on [Arguments from Confusion](#).

Why Not Jesus?

When asked why Christianity doesn't win many converts today, Zacharias says it is because of the level of commitment required - Christianity is hard. He then tells his personal conversion story (163-6).

Problems:

I don't think it's the difficulty of following Christ that is holding Christianity back. The real problem is twofold: (1.) They don't have a well oiled conversion machine; (2.) Most of the world is already aware of Christianity. Consider the Mormons again. They are converting at a startling pace because they have a built-in conversion apparatus. Nearly every 19-year-old male in their Church spends two years of his life doing nothing but selling the religion in used-car-salesman style. This is very effective and must create nostalgia for Catholics who harken back to the good old days of world expansion into areas suffused with unbaptized heathens. Which is the second problem. Christianity has now spread worldwide and is one of the most popular religions on the planet. It's hard to make much progress (percentage wise) when you have converted more than a billion already (economists call that "market saturation"). Zacharias' personal conversion story again highlights a point that this book is making quite clear: the real explanation for people becoming Christian (or religious at large) is grounded in emotion, not reason.

Objection #6: A Loving God Would Never Torture People In Hell (2001)

(Interview w/ [J.P. Moreland](#), PH.D.)

Tackling Templeton's Challenge

Moreland insists hell is not a torture chamber. He says hell is really a separation from God. He stresses that God is loving, but also just (172-4).

Problems:

Right away, Moreland wants to reword the objection. He realizes that there's no way to justify torture, so he alters the conception of hell. But I'm not sure this is valid. He details his hell concept in the next few sections, and I will deal with it further there. In describing God's virtues, he says, "People today care only for the softer virtues like love and tenderness, while they've forgotten the hard virtues of holiness, righteousness, and justice" (174). Or maybe people are finally starting to learn from centuries of religious tyranny that holiness, righteousness and (divine) justice are not virtues at all - but serious vices.

God's Fall-Back Position

Moreland describes hell as a "separation from God" that is the natural consequence of an unholy existence. He contends that hell was not created along with the rest of the universe, but only when sin created the need for it. He says hell is a place, yet it's not. Moreland makes clear that "hell is not torture." He declares it, "...a separation from the most beautiful being in the world - God himself" (174). Well, that certainly takes the sting out of it. I mean, that doesn't sound half bad - especially to an atheist. But is Moreland justified in this interpretation? I don't think it is shared by the majority (or many at all) Christians - including ministers. And I don't really think it's scriptural either (to be discussed in greater detail in the next section). This is akin to pronouncing as doctrine that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were lovers. You can believe that if you want, but I don't think you can speak for the Christian world at large.

Moreland informs us that, "hell was not part of the original creation...hell is something God was forced to make because people chose to rebel against him..." (175). Once again, I can't help but shake my head at the stunning lack of foresight displayed by an omniscient God. Shouldn't he have known of the coming rebellion that would necessitate a hell? When asked whether hell is a physical place, Moreland answers, "Yes and no...hell is not a location, but it's a real part of the universe. It's like you go through a door into another kind of existence" (175). Anytime someone starts in on this kind of metaphysical babble, you should reread their sentences and realize that despite correct grammar, they are talking pure nonsense.

Flames, Worms, And Gnashing Teeth

Moreland claims that a biblically accurate version of hell understands all the imagery of torture, burning, flames, etc., to be figurative. He claims that the people in hell are those who wouldn't want to go to heaven. Moreland responds to a list of Strobel's 9 personal objections to hell (176-91).

Problems:

According to Moreland, "the flames (of hell) are a figure of speech" (176). Is this really how the Bible authors understood hell though? It's certainly not how the majority of churches throughout 2000 years of Christianity have understood hell. And even if all the flames, gnashing teeth, worms, etc. are mere imagery, what do they stand for? They signify great pain and suffering. And not just sorrow and loss from lacking God's presence, but real, visceral anguish. I just don't believe Moreland's watered-down hell is what the scriptures intended, and that is why mainstream Christianity buys into the traditional fire and brimstone approach.

Moreland desperately tries to make a case for his hell when he says, "...hell is described as a place of utter darkness and yet there are flames. How can that be?" (176). But if we accept that we are speaking figuratively, might it not be the darkness which is figurative? And besides, couldn't an omnipotent God produce non-light bearing flames? Searing heat can exist in total darkness, while if light does not exist in Hell (or eyes to see it), then darkness can easily coexist with flame. His case is further weakened by his next assertion, which is that, "...hell is primarily a place for people who would not want to go to heaven" (178). But now, the scriptural hell makes even less sense when compared with Moreland's interpretation. Moreland wants us to believe that all the torture imagery is meant convey longing for opportunities lost, but if those in hell aren't being literally tortured and don't want heaven, what are they longing for?

Now, Strobel jumps into his personal list of objections to hell. Here we go:

(1.) How Can God Send Children to Hell?

More or less, Moreland says children won't go to hell. I don't think there is much of a Biblical stance on the issue, but perhaps that is because children were considered so innocent that they got a free pass to heaven. "...there will be no one in hell who, if they had a chance to grow up to be adults, would have chosen heaven. No one will go to hell simply because they needed a little more time and died prematurely" (179). Note that quote for future reference as Moreland contradicts himself a bit later.

(2.) Why Does Everyone Suffer the Same In Hell?

Moreland pulls out Matthew 11:20-24 to support his contention that people do not suffer the same hell. "There will be degrees of separation...in hell" (180). I can understand degrees of suffering in a torment-style hell, but does this really makes sense in Moreland's absence-of-God hell? Either you are separated from God or you are with him. The only reason proximity matters is as a factor of how long it takes to make contact with an object. But since judgment in hell is final and eternal, one is never going to be with God. It is as if you are out of oxygen under water: does it really matter whether you are one foot below the surface or two hundred? Yet another reason for concluding Moreland has the Biblical account of hell all wrong.

(3.) Why Are People Punished Infinitely for Finite Crimes?

Moreland really avoids answering this objection. He tries to build an argument by analogy that "...the degree of someone's just punishment is not a function of how long it took to commit the deed; rather, it's a function of how severe the deed itself was" (181). This is no answer at all, especially since I'm fairly sure the word "finite" in this objection was referring not to time, but to severity. So the problem stands. How can even the most heinous deeds (which according to Moreland are acts of unbelief) warrant an eternity as punishment?

But there are more serious concerns at hand. Let us ponder *why* we punish people. When you punish your children, is it because they are wicked beings and deserve to suffer? I certainly hope not. The reason most parents punish is to teach the children a lesson. To reform them to the correct path. The same is true of a prison and justice system (even if it rarely works). The bottom line is that all wise punishment is directed towards the purpose of reforming an individual. But hell fails miserably in this regard. Because it is eternal, there is no chance for progress or reform. It is punishment for its own sake, which is nothing more than sadism.

(4.) Couldn't God Force Everyone to Go to Heaven?

Strobel knows full well that Moreland will simply invoke the free will defense against this objection, and undoubtedly Strobel already feels that to be valid. So this isn't really one of Strobel's objections at all, but just a set-up for Moreland. If Strobel is being dishonest here, one wonders about his whole list (or his whole book for that matter). I'm not going to even bother getting into it because it breaks down like this: (1) If you are a determinist, there is no good answer, since God is ultimately forcing you to go wherever you end up; (2) If you believe in free will, then there is an easy and obvious out. But since God can easily turn people to the right path by providing more evidence, the free will defense fails outright. It is not my free choice that I have so little proof that Christianity is true. I did not choose the evidence that would exist. Nor can providing that evidence violate anyone's free will. For if it did, the entire purpose of Strobel's book, indeed of the whole concept of Christian apologetics and witnessing, is criminal, violating the free will of everyone who is exposed to it.

(5.) Why Doesn't God Just Snuff People Out?

Sometimes apologists do an unbelievable job of twisting and squirming in order to be consistent with their beliefs. Moreland is a perfect example here. When speaking of annihilation he says, "The only way that's a good thing would be the end result, which would be to keep people from experiencing the conscious separation from God forever. Well, then you are treating people as a means to an end" (183). Give me a break. By his reasoning, if I see a starving child on the street, I should not feed him because the only good thing would be the end result, which would be to alleviate his hunger. Well, then I'd be treating the child as a means to an end. Can Moreland possibly believe this? No, of course not. No sane person could. But, when faced with such an irreconcilable challenge to his faith, the apologist will grasp madly for any straws available, no matter how frail. Indeed, doesn't the very virtue of mercy compel one to annihilate those who are otherwise doomed to suffer eternally? Isn't God merciful? He cannot be if Moreland is right about Hell, so why should we praise and worship a merciless deity? Moreland also goes on to refute the claim that the Bible supports this idea of annihilation. I agree with Moreland that the Bible supports no such thing.

(6.) How Can Hell Exist Alongside Heaven?

I see no reason why it could not. I think this is another of Strobel's paper objections that he likes to toss in for pure volume. It looks more impressive if Moreland knocks down 9 objections, than, say, 5. A better objection would be: if heaven is better than earth, why bother with earth in the first place?

(7.) Why Didn't God Create Only Those He Knew Would Follow Him?

Moreland would have us believe that "...once God starts to create more people, it becomes more difficult to just create the people who would choose him and not create the people who wouldn't" (186). He also asserts that, "...the only way God could make me is if my entire ancestral lineage had preceded me" (187). Uh, Mr. Moreland, need I remind you that your God is omnipotent? The words "difficult" and "only way" don't apply to him and therefore all of Moreland's arguments are moot. Or does Moreland believe in a deity that is less than all powerful? If so, he should be honest and say so.

(8.) Why Doesn't God Give People a Second Chance?

Right off the bat, Moreland says, "God does everything he can to give to give people a chance...there will be nobody who needed just a little more time or who died prematurely who would've responded to another chance to receive Christ" (188). Remember Strobel's hell

objection #1 now? There Moreland said, "there will be no one in hell who, if they had a chance to grow up to be adults, would have chosen heaven." But this implies that people do die prematurely. Which is it? If God does give everyone the chance they need, are we to suppose that every baby who has died of SIDS would've not chosen Christ? And if some of those babies would've chosen Christ, then God doesn't give everyone a chance.

Upon dying and discovering one is in hell, might that not be motivation for repentance? Yes, but Moreland makes an interesting point when he says, "Any apology would not be a real apology...they'd be making a prudent 'choice' to avoid judgment only" (189). But isn't that just as true in life? After all, isn't the whole point, as Moreland said, to avoid Hell because it is so bad? How is the decision to follow Christ now any less 'prudent' than later?

In contrast, if I died and found out that the conservative Christians were right about God, I would not be sorry for how I have lived my life. I believe I made good moral decisions, and the moral man does not change his convictions in the face of threats from a tyrant.

(9.) Isn't Reincarnation More Rational Than Hell?

Another straw objection. Reincarnation might be preferable to hell, but it's not any more rational. There is basically the same amount of evidence in favor of either position - that is: zero. This objection should've been stated: "Isn't Death Without an Afterlife More Rational than Hell?" Most people are greatly disturbed by this suggestion, but as Moreland himself says, "Remember, we don't decide what's true based on what we like or don't like" (190).

The Truth About Hell

Moreland admits that he is still uncomfortable with hell sometimes. He insists on keeping perspective (191-2).

Problems:

Moreland's perspective is that via the doctrine of hell, God says two important things. First, "I value my image-bearers so much that I will not annihilate them" (192) -- the missing end of this sentence is: "...but instead, I will allow them to suffer eternally." Thanks God, you're a pal. I wish all my friends valued me like you do. Second, "I respect freedom of choice enough to where I won't coerce people" (192). Yet God does coerce people. Consider that God was the Creator of everything and had a perfect foreknowledge of how everything would turn out. Free will becomes meaningless. What are people basing their "free" choices on? If they are basing them on anything which exists (genetic makeup, circumstances, essential self, etc.) then God is responsible, for he started the whole universe knowing exactly how everything would end up. If they are basing those decisions on nothing (say, they are randomly generated out of thin air), then I suppose they are free of God's province, but can people be held morally accountable for the purely arbitrary? Besides, no Christian (or human for that matter) really believes this.

"What Is God To Do?"

Strobel listens to a taped interview, where Christian apologist D.A. Carson makes some germane comments (193).

Problems:

Speaking of people in hell, Carson says, "They're consigned there...because they defy their maker and want to be at the center of the universe" (193). I presume this is directed mostly towards atheists. But, do atheists really set themselves at the center of the universe? Many atheists suppose that in the grand scheme of things, they are simply one of billions of humans, among millions of species, that will live out an existence in less than a blink of time's eye, on a

tiny speck of dust, revolving around one of billions of stars, billions of which then comprise billions of galaxies in a universe billions of years old. This does not sound like the dream of an egoist.

In contrast, Christians suppose that an all-powerful entity who can have anything his heart desires, actually cares for our brief and petty lives to the point of listening to our personal pleas for help and guidance, often acting to aid these pleas. They suppose that he would sacrifice his own son for their sake, on their planet (the most important salvific act in all time and space), and thus accord special importance to the last few thousand years of human beings on Earth. Now *that's* the definition of egocentric if I've ever heard it. No wonder for centuries Christians placed the Earth not only as the point around which the sun and other planets revolved, but at the center of the entire universe. Only under the inescapable weight of scientific progress and discovery did they grudgingly give up this notion--though, not without persecuting many early astronomers first.

Objection #7: Church History Is Littered with Oppression and Violence (2001)

(Interview w/ [John D. Woodbridge](#), Ph.D.)

This objection is a statement of fact, which cannot be avoided. Woodbridge acknowledges this, and instead tries to provide context to soften some of the tyranny. We will get to that in a moment, but let us ask: is this objection a good reason not to become a Christian? If we are strictly speaking of the Christian as a follower of Christ's teachings, then I don't see that this is much of an objection since Christ doesn't teach persecution. However, if one is planning to join an institutional church, then one should at the very least be wary of the tendency for authority to abuse power. But, the most important lesson to be learned from this objection is that we must do everything in our power to keep the state separate from religion, for it is when religion attains governing power that it becomes truly dangerous and evil.

Confessing The Church's Sins

The fact that the Catholic church has glossed over a number of atrocities throughout the years is brought to light. A distinction is made between *cultural* Christians and *authentic* Christians (200-2).

Problems:

While it is true that the Catholic church has been responsible for many atrocities in its history, there is something a bit suspicious about the way they are brought into the fray here. There is no explicit accusation, yet this is clearly an evangelical book, and I believe they would like nothing better than to plant the seed that it is the *Catholic* church that should bear the lion's share of the blame. But is this fair? An indisputable fact of human history is that whenever there has been a group with strength, they have oppressed those weaker than them. A people, no matter how bitterly persecuted, become enthusiastic persecutors as soon as the tables are turned. It appears to be an undeniable tenet of human nature that those in power will oppress those who are not. This is why limited governments and democracies have often been able to achieve a measure of personal prosperity and liberty for their citizens, while dictatorships are almost uniformly rife with atrocities and oppression. Adding religion to a dictatorship (theocracy) is possibly the worst of all worlds. Then you've got a situation where the rulers presume to speak absolutely, not just for their own government, but for all of the cosmos in the name of God. This, coupled with the dogma inherent in religion, is a sure blockade to progress.

Therefore, it should not surprise us that the Catholic church committed unspeakable acts of violence during its state-sponsored tenure. When did these acts begin to appear? After Constantine adopted Christianity as the official Roman religion. When did such acts begin to disappear? As the church lost power and the Age of Enlightenment took hold. These are not coincidences. Because Protestantism did not arise until the decline of Catholic power (also not coincidentally) those churches have a much briefer history, and thanks to forward thinking, Christianity never again became the dominant ruling force it once was. Of course, Protestant groups like Lutherans and Anglicans can claim a goodly share of evil, from the oppression of native peoples to burning or hanging so-called "witches" to supporting slavery. And if we were to substitute one of the Protestant churches for Catholicism during the Dark Ages, I'm sure the results wouldn't have been much different.

According to Woodbridge, "Some people are *cultural* Christians but not *authentic* Christians" (200). Of course, the idea is that cultural Christians are at fault in many instances of oppression, while authentic Christians are the real followers of Christ. This may get individual Christians off the hook, but it does nothing for the organization of the church. The fact is that churches create cultural Christians, and the churches themselves, if given any real measure of power, are unlikely

to continue acting "authentically" Christian. After all, Christ himself was persecuted. But what if he had been openly accepted as the King of the Jews and placed on a throne? Would he have begun acting differently? Of course, those who believe him to be the son of God will say no, but from a secular standpoint, I wonder.

Why Christianity Spread

Woodbridge enumerates several reasons for the initial spread of Christianity. Strobel lists 5 of Christianity's sins, and Woodbridge responds in turn (203-16).

Problems:

Sin #1: The Crusades

As Woodbridge points out, the first crusade was launched by Pope Urban II "when he gave a very famous sermon and the crowds responded by declaring, 'God wills it!'" (205). This is the first danger in religion - the sheep factor. Unfortunately, most people are more than happy to let someone else think for them, and that is an enormous power to vest in someone. But many people choose to do this with their ministers, and feel safe with such action, because after all - he's a man of God. If there is a higher moral crime than declining to think, I do not know of it. And unsurprisingly, people are at their most immoral when this declination occurs. Woodbridge tries to convince us that if we place ourselves in the crusaders' position, "we can understand that they thought they were doing something magnificent for Christ" by retaking the Holy Land (205). But I can only understand this if I posit that the crusaders were unthinking, illiterate goons, as was often probably the case. Indeed, the astounding illiteracy of the time can also be attributed to the church, which relied on its learned clergy's elite-access to the Bible as a great source of their power. If the crusaders actually thought about Christ's teachings, they would realize he would not endorse wars of any kind, much less in his name. Finally, speaking of Pope Innocence III's promise of salvation to those who went on crusades, Woodbridge declares, "It makes a mockery of the teachings of the Bible..." (206). Well, maybe the New Testament. But the Old Testament is chock full of Holy Wars fought by God's chosen people at his command (Deuteronomy 7:1-2 for example)...very consistent with the crusades.

Sin #2: The Inquisition

Woodbridge talks about the origins of the Inquisition with the Albigenses of Southern France who were accused of heresy. Woodbridge says, "Actually there's no question that the Albigenses were proponents of heretical teachings...traditional means of persuasion...didn't work. The Inquisition was an alternative approach...to try to prevent this heresy from spreading" (207). This is sickening and insulting. Woodbridge practically makes it sound as if the Albigenses deserved the Inquisition, and outrageously cheapens the whole travesty by calling it "an alternative tactic." What was so heretical about the Albigenses? According to historian Joseph McCabe:

...the meanest thing of all is that Canon Vacandard, and most of your modern Catholic apologists, raise over the bones of those hundreds of thousands of murdered men, women, and children the smug and lying inscription that they were "'dangerous to society." How? You will smile when you hear: like Christ, they advocated voluntary poverty and virginity! We know their ideas only from bitter enemies, and this seems to be the rock of offense. Yes, but how could society persist if there were no private property, no soldiers (they opposed war), no procreation of children. And the answer again is simple: these counsels of Christ were (exactly as the modern Catholic theologian says) for the elect few, the "perfect," as the Albigensians called them, and the great body of the "believers" could own what property they liked, marry when they liked, and bear arms when necessary. They were, as Professor Bass Mullinger says in an article in the same

Encyclopedia, men of "simple blameless life," and were not responsible for the brawls about the churches. Rome murdered a few hundred thousand real followers of Christ because they were not Christians. [16]

And as for the Inquisition itself, let us not understate its horror. It was not an "alternative method of persuasion." It was an absolutely evil bloodbath, plain and simple. McCabe describes the assault on the Albigenses:

The magnitude of the "heresy" can be guessed when we learn that after two years of the most brutal carnage the Albigensians were still so strong that, when the Pope renewed the "crusade" in 1214, a fresh hundred thousand "pilgrims" had to be summoned. Innocent boasts that they took five hundred towns and castles from the heretics, and they generally butchered every man, woman and child in a town when they took it. Noble ladies with their daughters were thrown down wells, and large stones flung upon them. Knights were hanged in batches of eighty. When, at the first large town, soldiers asked how they could distinguish between heretics and orthodox, the Cistercian abbot thundered: "Kill them all, God will know his own," and they put to the sword the forty thousand surviving men, women and children. Modern Catholic writers merely quibble when they dispute these things. It is the Catholics of the time who tell us. [ibid.]

Woodbridge notes that matters were further complicated because, "contemporaries often identified heresy with political sedition...Religion and politics were bound up together" (208). Yet another reason to keep religion as far from government as possible. Woodbridge wants to dismiss the Inquisition as an anomaly. He says, "It's too much of an extrapolation to say this kind of hateful activity is part of a pattern" (208). But it is not an extrapolation at all. The pattern is a clear and documented fact: whenever religion has become powerful (Christianity or otherwise) oppression and tyranny has quickly followed. This very list of "sins" proves that.

Sin #3: The Salem Witch Trials

The word "Salem" should've been dropped. These particular witch trials are quite familiar to most Americans because they took place in the colonies, but they are the last vestige of a European massacre beyond imagining. Some sources report that hundreds of thousands (some even estimate millions) of women over hundreds of years were tortured and killed as "witches," and even if one could dispute the numbers, this would in no relevant way diminish the injustice. They could be accused for any reason, and their "trials" were nothing of the sort, as they were presumed guilty with no possibility of proving innocence. If they admitted to witchcraft (under torture of course), then they were executed. If they denied witchcraft (even after extensive torture) well, that's exactly what a lying witch would say, so they were executed. One of the most popular accusations was sexual communion with the devil, and this led to mutilation of the women's sexual organs. [17]. There is no denying that the Christian church spearheaded these sadistic acts. And Protestants cannot slough the blame off onto the Catholics, for far more witches were burned in Britain after the Reformation than before it.

Next, Woodbridge utters the most disturbing argument yet. "...part of the problem in dealing with the Salem witch trials is the assumption that all of this was totally hokum, that there's no such thing as witches and witchcraft. The hardcore reality is that there are..." (210). This statement alone is enough to discredit the entire chapter. Woodbridge is apparently convinced of the existence of witches because he once heard a woman claim to be one. And the frightening implication is that witches (or as I like to call them, non-Christians) are deserving of persecution (indeed, torture, mutilation, and execution). People like Woodbridge reinforce my belief that if Christianity regains a position of real power, witch hunts will be as popular as ever.

Sin #4: Exploitation By The Missionaries

Woodbridge stresses many times that, while there was undeniable exploitation, there are missionaries who did praiseworthy acts. I don't doubt this, but how do we explain the exploitation? I think the answer lies in the fundamental arrogance of the missionary ideal. The missionary ideal assumes that any religion and spirituality other than one's own is wrong, or worse yet, evil. This, in and of itself, is perhaps excusable. But when coupled with the notion that adherents of these evil religions *need* the missionaries to enter their lives and set them straight, the ideal becomes ripe for exploitation. How can the chosen people armed with God's truth help but take advantage of the heathen savages? After all, they ought to get something for doing God's work and saving these poor bastards' souls. Religion is like a vacuum cleaner - it doesn't need to be sold door to door. If people are interested, they can come to the store.

Sin #5: Anti-Semitism

Woodbridge does his best here, but sputters out and breaks down in the middle of the section, admitting failure. "One would've thought - or, should I say, one would've *hoped* - that Christians by the Middle Ages on going up to Martin's Luther's day would have realized the teachings of Jesus absolutely forbade them from doing and saying some of the things that were said and done in his name" (214). One might've thought that - if religion were concerned with a thinking man's morality. But, once one realizes that religion has primarily been used throughout the ages as a tool to abuse power, channel fear, give orders, and justify prejudice - it is easy to see that there was no hope. Woodbridge discusses Hitler's ploy to associate himself with Christianity, declaring him an impostor "...who could not have been an authentic Christian..." (216). True as this may be, it is interesting to note that Hitler saw the value of Christianity as something that could easily be used for whatever nefarious purposes he desired.

A Portrait Of Christianity

Strobel avoids continuing the list of atrocities, and moves on to atheist crimes. Woodbridge lists the benefits of Christianity (216-9).

Problems:

Strobel starts out, "We could have gone on to discuss other historical blots on Christianity..." (216). We certainly could have. Strobel protests that he has grilled Woodbridge sufficiently, but undoubtedly he doesn't want to add any more fuel to this ever-growing fire of hatred. But it is not fair for Strobel to dismiss crimes such as the oppression of women, or Biblical support for slavery, with a cursory remark. The misogynistic nature of Christianity and its detriment to women over the centuries cannot be discounted. Women have consistently been made to suffer unjustly for the fairy-tale sin of Eve. And what was that sin? The acquisition of knowledge. That really shows you where Christianity stands.

And there are travesties unmentioned. Perhaps the greatest crime of Christianity goes undocumented: the war on critical thought. Make no mistake that Christianity was a leading cause in plunging most of western civilization into a thousand years of ignorance and illiteracy. The Dark Ages were the height of Christian power, yet that was when society found perhaps its most miserable condition. Strangling independent thought and opposing science at every turn, the church choked out any chance to improve human life. How many suffered and died from plagues and diseases that proper scientific knowledge could have prevented? How many babies perished due to the absence of knowledgeable medical care? How many people starved whose hunger economic progress could have alleviated? These are the uncounted casualties of Christianity.

And let us not make the mistake of thinking that Christianity's errors are all left behind in its dark and distant past, and that churches today have learned better. Today's Christianity often exerts its negative influence: promoting anthropomorphic conceit, unhealthy attitudes towards sex, superstitious prejudice, and worst of all, cutting off critical thought at the knees. *There are still people who kill abortion doctors in the name of Jesus.* We are most fortunate that Christianity doesn't have the power to extend this influence further than it already does. When asked if the world is better off because of Christianity, Woodbridge declares that there is "No question about it" (216). I am not so sure. Given Christianity's long-standing hand-in-hand relationship with oppression, it hardly seems we could be worse off.

Strobel and Woodbridge then try to pass the buck to atheism, suggesting that the world would truly be a terrible place if atheism was rampant. Addressing "...the role of atheism in trampling human rights..." Strobel cites Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Tse-tung (216-7). The pathetic frailty of this argument is multi-faceted.

(1.) Of the four "atheists" listed, one of them, Hitler, was most certainly not an atheist. Hitler was born and raised Catholic. "I am now as before a Catholic and will always remain so," Hitler himself told Gerhard Engel, one of his generals, in 1941. In *Mein Kampf* he says, "Therefore, I am convinced that I am acting as the agent of our Creator. By fighting off the Jews, I am doing the Lord's work." And at a Nazi Christmas celebration in 1926 Hitler declared: "Christ was the greatest early fighter in the battle against the world enemy, the Jews . . . The work that Christ started but could not finish, I--Adolf Hitler--will conclude." [18] So why should we possibly consider him an atheist? Because he was evil and killed millions? Undoubtedly this is why Strobel would like us to think so, but it is a bigotted and insulting lie.

(2.) The other three "atheists" all came out of the same fascist communist movement. Their atheism was not of philosophical reasoning or commitment to humanist and scientific values, but a dogmatic tenet of their political ideology. In fact, communism closely parallels religion in many regards. The religious intolerance of these men, their false worship of the collectivist state and blind faith in an inevitable communist paradise, should not be confused with secular or humanistic atheism, for the vast majority of atheists understand that freedom of religion includes freedom *from* religion, and will fight to their last breath for these freedoms.

(3.) Atheism has no position on oppression, or tyranny, or anything at all actually - except for the lack of belief in god(s). Atheism is not a comprehensive moral or philosophical system, nor does it pretend to be. To suggest that the aforementioned tyrants' actions were a consequence of their atheism is akin to suggesting that their actions were a consequence of their brown eyes.

Atheism *per se* has nothing to do with oppression, pro or con. Now, there is a movement widely known as [Secular Humanism](#) that is non-religious, mostly atheist, and that does provide a wider context for morality and philosophy. But Stalin, Lenin, and Mao Tse-tung were a far cry from secular humanists, and there are actually no Secular Humanist murderers on record--yet there are many Christian murderers who were nevertheless true believers. Can one then conclude that a Secular Humanist world would be any worse than a Christian one? Might one instead suggest the reverse?

(4.) Woodbridge and Strobel have just spent the entire chapter arguing that while particular Christians have acted tremendously evil at times, this should not turn us off to Christianity at large. Then they turn right around and try to use the same reasoning they have just assaulted against atheism. The hypocrisy is palpable.

(5.) I really don't think Christians want to start comparing atrocity scorecards with atheists. How many Christians vs. atheists are in prison for violent crimes? Admittedly, Christians outnumber atheists in society as a whole, so the same should be expected in prison, but even accounting for the correct proportion, I wouldn't be surprised if the atheist number is extraordinarily low.

Woodbridge lists some of the humanitarian accomplishments of Christianity including homeless shelters, rehabilitation programs, feeding the poor, etc. He claims that "Losing all of that...would be a devastating blow to the world" (218). But this assumes that if it were not for Christianity such things wouldn't exist and we would have a gaping humanitarian void. Of course, there is no reason to think this. Humanism existed prior to Christianity, and it exists outside of Christianity. There are many other religions with humanitarian impulses, and secular organizations with the same goals. I would argue that it is science, not religion, that has been the greatest ally of humanism. I don't see any reason why we couldn't have the benefits of Christianity without the actual religion. Woodbridge also points to Christians' "literary, musical, architectural, scientific and artistic contributions" (218). Once again, while there certainly have been many Christians who have made such contributions, are the contributions a result of their Christianity? If so, we would expect to see a lack of such contributions among other religions, and especially atheists. But we do not. If anything, we can argue that Christianity, at the height of its power in the Dark Ages, produced the most minimal of such contributions.

The Gifts Of Christianity

Strobel quotes some other Christian apologists about why Christianity is great (219-21).

Problems:

One quote in particular is really disingenuous. David Lyle Jeffery says, "In most of Europe, as in Africa, South America, and many parts of the world, the birth of literacy and literature essentially, not accidentally, coincides with the arrival of Christian missionaries" (220). Actually, it coincides essentially with the invention of the printing press, and only coincidentally with Christianity because the Bible was the most widely printed book. And of course, literacy, and above all literature, began centuries before Christ even walked the Earth, in many places around the world. In fact, the very notion of the literate, educated man and woman as the ideal began with the pagan Greeks and Romans, and was trampled underfoot by Christians for centuries before the rediscovery of pagan writings in the Renaissance stirred a renewed interest in this pagan humanist ideal.

Objection #8: I Still Have Doubts, So I Can't Be A Christian (2001)

(Interview w/ [Lynn Anderson](#), D.MIN)

This is perhaps the weakest objection of all. Since Christians often seem so damn sure of themselves, I can see where an outsider might think that doubters need not apply. However, any rational person realizes that there is no such thing as absolute certainty, and simple, doubt-free faith is not to be admired: it is unsophisticated and blind. The real measure of whether something can be considered true or not relies on the preponderance of evidence. Is the evidence sufficient to justify the conclusion?

The previous seven chapters of *The Case For Faith* have attempted to argue that the positions of Conservative Christianity are justified. But are they justified by the evidence? We can't tell from this book, because its approach lies not in the presentation of evidence, but in the refutation of objections. Apologetics does not equal evidence. Yet have the objections at least been adequately dealt with? As this critique makes clear, the answer is a resounding "No." And here is the crux of the issue: Can I have doubts and still be a Christian? Yes. Can I have doubts of the severity and grandness of scope actually warranted by Christianity and still be a Christian? No.

The Roots of Doubt

Anderson discusses doubts he had early in life (228-30).

Problems:

Anderson says he suppressed a lot of doubts because, "...I had an enormous need to be loved and accepted and have status in that believing community. I was scared that they'd think I was bad, they'd be angry, they'd think my parents were spiritual failures. I was afraid my parents would be disappointed or ashamed" (229). I think it telling that Anderson concedes fear was a prime factor in keeping the faith. As the late, great Bertrand Russell once said:

Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown and partly, as I have said, the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing -- fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand-in-hand. [19]

What Faith Isn't

Anderson alleges that faith is not to be equated with religious fervor or the absence of doubt (232-4).

Problems:

It's nice that Anderson wants to tell us what faith *is not*, yet, I can't help but think that it would be better for all concerned if he had started out by telling us what faith *is*. After all, has anyone ever heard a solid definition of faith? Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," or as Mark Twain more accurately translates it, "Faith is believing what you know ain't so."

Delving Beneath The Surface

Anderson points to several cases where supposed "intellectual" doubts were masking other reasons for unbelief (234-6).

Problems:

I'm sure there are cases where people harbor unbelief in order to avoid moral strictures that might

put a cramp in their lifestyle (or for various other invalid psychological reasons). But Anderson says, "I personally think all unbelief ultimately has some other [than intellectual] underlying reason" (234). This is going too far. The whole idea is predicated upon the idea that unbelievers are leading some sort of immoral lifestyle. But there is no reason to suppose that unbelievers, even according to a Christian system of ethics (discounting the mere sin of unbelief) are less moral than Christians. The evidence proves the point: see the Secular Web library on [Morality and Atheism](#).

Indeed, a conversion to belief would not require a radical lifestyle change for many unbelievers. I will use myself as an example. Measured against a system of fairly strict Christian morality: I do not drink, smoke, or use drugs, I do not steal, I do not lie, I do not cheat on my wife, I am passive and I try to be reasonably kind to friends and strangers alike. In fact, if I were to become Christian, the only real changes I would need to make are to attend church, and eliminate blasphemy from my speech. I don't think I'm holding out for those reasons. The truth is that Christianity is rife with intellectual pitfalls. There are innumerable cerebral reasons for unbelief. Besides, I could easily counter Anderson by claiming that all *belief* ultimately has some other, illegitimate underlying reason. Given that unbelief is far more frowned upon and socially punished than belief, and given that unbelief requires far more effort at investigation and thought, we should actually expect belief to exist for the wrong reasons far more often than unbelief.

The Decision To Believe

Anderson uses Abraham and Jesus to exemplify the idea of "deciding to believe," and talks about the difference between faith and knowledge (236-8).

Problems:

Anderson notes that "...one definition of faith is that it's the will to believe" (236). The unspoken but implied appendage to this sentence is "in spite of an absence of evidence." After all, if there were a wealth of evidence at hand, how much will would one need to believe? Regarding John 12:37, Anderson remarks that the Jews, "made a decision of the will to deny the message of the miracles...because they wouldn't pay the price, which would be their whole religious system being blown out of the water" (237). Admittedly then, it is a common human trait to stubbornly cling to an outmoded religious system despite evidence to the contrary. Could this not explain some religious people's insistence upon knowledge of the truth (especially creationists) despite overwhelming opposing evidence? Anderson defines knowledge as empirically verifiable, while faith is not. Speaking of empirical evidence, he says, "God, for his own reasons, has not subjected himself to that kind of proof" (238). Why? For his own reasons. In other words, Anderson can't think of a single good reason why an all powerful God would choose to play hide and seek with his subjects. So he employs a classic cop out, which actually erodes the rationality of Christian faith, as is shown in the Secular Web library on [Arguments from Divine Hiddenness and Nonbelief](#).

Dealing With Doubt

Anderson talks about dealing with (aka white-washing) doubt (238-40).

Problems:

We have another telling admission when it is stated that in order for people to ease doubts, "...initially they need to decide whether or not they really want to believe" (238). Notice the emphasis is not placed on what is true or false, but rather on what people *want* to believe. This is pure solipsism.

The Faith Experiment

Anderson contends that the best way to determine Christianity's truth is to dive in and experience it (240-1).

Problems:

Aside from personal experience being a poor measure of truth, we must consider the flipside to Anderson's suggestion. If one should make an attempt to experience Christianity in order to validate (or invalidate) it, shouldn't one extend the same courtesy to other world views? Does Anderson encourage people to try out the faith experiment as a Hindu or a Buddhist? How about experiencing life without the God crutch - as an atheist? Or better yet, as a sincere Secular Humanist?

Faith As A Verb

Anderson says to hell with intellectualism, personal experience is where it's at (241-3).

Problems:

The true nature of Anderson's case is revealed as he admits, "I don't care how many intellectual questions you have about why this can't be true" (241). For Anderson, personal faith is paramount. But it's also completely subjective and serves as absolutely no basis for anyone else to draw conclusions from, including the readers of this book.

Conclusion (2001)

A Suspect Approach

The Case For Faith suffers from dishonesty in its approach. The book fancies itself as "a journalistic investigation into the toughest objections to Christianity." But the aim of the author, Lee Strobel, is not an objective, journalistic investigation, but rather an apologetic refutation. Strobel is an evangelical Christian pastor, and writes this book with the clear intent of promoting the evangelical faith. Strobel's background in journalism doesn't justify identifying this book as having any journalistic integrity whatsoever. Let us consider the interviewees. Lo and behold, they are eight Christians. This is nice, but if one is investigating the objections to Christianity, it might be a good idea to actually interview some of the objectors. How about one objector and one Christian for each issue? Or would that be too even handed? Strobel plays the objector himself, but he is ill suited for this role. He seems to raise objections based mainly on what he has thought about or heard, with a handful of quotes from famous atheists tossed in for good measure. Unfortunately, this betrays the strength of many of the objections and causes them to be unnecessarily diluted or misrepresented - the easier to refute. Interviews conducted with non-Christians who actually raise the objections would have provided a much fuller and well-developed picture of those objections.

Another grave problem with Strobel is that he already agrees with (or really wants to agree with) his interviewees. Because of this, he lacks a killer instinct. He doesn't ask key follow-up questions, he ignores defects in the apologetic arguments, and he backs off of issues, declaring them resolved when they are anything but. Plus, Strobel himself admits he is acquainted with his interviewees ahead of time, either personally or through their literature. Therefore, he is well aware of their positions and arguments. As a result of this, I believe many of Strobel's ready-made objections are consciously-constructed straw men - he knows just how his interviewees will pick them apart. If we are going to interview only Christians, perhaps it would be better all around to have an atheist conduct those interviews. Of course, then the readers might actually be presented with two different positions and have to think for themselves.

The Fundamental Objections

Strobel raises eight objections to Christianity, some of which are relatively weak, others that are quite potent. And many more could be raised. But as fun as it might be to examine and discuss various objections to the details of Christianity, the heart of the matter lies in a broader perspective. To my mind, the most fundamental tenet of Christianity is that: *There is a God or Creator who is responsible for the universe and everything in it.* Without God, Christianity falls apart. Therefore, the most fundamental objection is: *There is no evidence for a God or Creator who is responsible for the universe and everything in it.*

Before Christians start whipping out their Bibles or regaling me with their personal experiences, let me make it clear that when I say "evidence" I mean the scientific variety, and that is the only sense in which I use the word here. The closest thing to scientific evidence for God are the philosophical arguments which imply the necessity of God - however, I have found these unconvincing, as has almost every serious philosopher of the last two hundred years. And that is that. However, let us suppose for a moment that these philosophical arguments were persuasive, or even that some scientific evidence was unearthed in favor of God the Creator. This still leaves us a far cry from the Christian conception. How to bridge the gap? There is really only one way to do so and that is to posit what I consider the second fundamental tenet of Christianity: *The Bible is divinely inspired by God the Creator.* Many issues can be raised in opposition to this tenet - from Biblical errors to contradictions to failed prophecies, etc. But the bottom line, and the second fundamental objection is: *The Bible contains nothing that is not explainable as the product of men.*

Until these two fundamental challenges to Christianity can be overcome, all other objections are just fun and games. By avoiding them, and packing a book with seemingly every objection but them, Strobel apparently hopes you won't notice, and that you will, instead, think he has actually made a Case for Faith.

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