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We seek to discover and share truths of God's creation and God's word, through ongoing scholarly research and debate, for the edification of the church and for the glory of God.

“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter,
but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.”

-- *Proverbs 25:2*

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1. The Testimony of the Cosmos in a Scientific Age

Darek Barefoot¹

ABSTRACT: Is it possible to see indications of God in the physical universe while at the same time taking seriously scientific theories about its origin? All scientific accounts of the cosmos rely on laws of nature in the form of mathematical statements. At the same time, scientists have disappointingly little to say about the ontological status of these statements, i.e., what, exactly, a law of nature is. The laws of nature, like the scientific laws design to approximate them, cannot be conceived of as physical objects, events, or states, despite the central role science accords them in understanding physical phenomena. Such laws, because they are abstractions, are inferred but not observed, and may be thought of as accessible in mental, not physical, space. A mental space containing the rules that give shape to the cosmos must be vaster and more powerful than the mental spaces of human beings, and coincides with traditional conceptions of God.

PAUL FAMOUSLY WROTE in Romans 1:20 that the invisible attributes of God are known from his creation. How does that claim fare at a time when scientists probe the universe with imposing technology, analyzing what they find in terms of esoteric theories? Can Paul's argument be taken seriously without dismissing, disputing, or simply ignoring the scientific understanding of nature?

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Contemplating creation

It helps in understanding Romans 1:20 to note that the Old Testament provides necessary background. For example, Romans 1:23, concerning worship of created things, paraphrases Psalm 106:20. Behind 1:20 are passages of the Hebrew Bible that refer to the creation's testimony to Israel's God. While the earthly landscape with its plants and animals is given this role (Psalm 104), it is the starry sky that bears witness most dramatically:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
and the firmament displays his handiwork.
Day to day utters speech,
and night to night shows knowledge.
There is no speech nor language
where their voice is not heard.
Their line is gone out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In them he has set a tabernacle for the sun,
which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber,
And rejoices as a strong man to run a race.
Psalm 19:1-5

“To whom then will you liken me, or shall I be equal?” says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, who brings out their host by number, who calls them all by name. By the greatness of his might, because he is strong in power, not one is missing.” Isaiah 40:25-26

In keeping with this emphasis on divine power and the breadth of creation, we ought to picture nature on its grandest scale when we read Romans 1:20. But when considering natural wonders large or small we are confronted by scientific accounts of origins, whether of animals and plants in biology, the earth's features in geology, or the stars and

galaxies in cosmology.

As can be seen from the contrasting opinions presented on the websites *AnswersinGenesis.org* and *Biologos.org*, it is a matter of interpretation whether scientific stories of origins clash irreconcilably with Genesis and certain other passages in the Bible. I will surprise some readers by saying that this issue has no direct bearing on Paul's statement that the invisible attributes of God are known from creation. What Romans 1:20 says is true on at least two levels, and in neither one is a scientific account of origins relevant.

The first level is that of intuition. Upon viewing the grandeur of the night sky, many observers are moved to acknowledge a profound yet invisible reality for which no other description but *God* is appropriate. To illustrate, imagine two people gazing up for the first time at Michelangelo's work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. One says, "What paintings!" while the other goes further by exclaiming, "What a painter!"

The impression that the cosmos is not only a work of art but the work of an artist is not a judgment about the value of astrophysics. Even a glance at the most recent photographs of spiral galaxies will arouse an emotional response distinct from whatever the scientific implications might be, and one comparable to an admiration of human artistry. In the moment of rapt appreciation, the visitor to the Sistine Chapel is unconcerned about whether Michelangelo took one year or twenty to complete it, or whether the paint was applied by a brush as opposed to a sponge.

The second level is that of analysis, which becomes important for those who are unmoved, or insufficiently moved, by intuition alone. Might the original testimony of nature be recovered by those who are infected by doubt but nevertheless willing to engage in thought and discussion? In what follows I will present one way that it can.

Laws of nature and scientific laws

Anyone who has taken a course in physical science is introduced to formulas such as New-ton's laws of motion and, even more famously, his law of universal gravitation. These formulas are called "laws" because they seem to prescribe rather than just describe; they tell us not merely the way objects behaved in the past but how they will behave under similar conditions in the future—how they in some sense must behave. It is as if objects from stars and galaxies to atoms and molecules obey invisible road signs.

As science has progressed, predictive formulas have more often been labeled theories than laws. Einstein's theories of relativity, which updated and corrected the laws of motion for large objects, still took the form of mathematical statements that predict observations. Quantum theory pertains to tiny particles such as protons and electrons, but although it contains an element of chance or probability, it too is defined by mathematical equations that predict the results of experiments.

I find it helpful in approaching this subject to reserve the term *scientific laws* for the mathematical formulations scientists use to predict the behavior of atoms, molecules, electrical and magnetic fields, etc. Laws of nature, for the purposes of this discussion, are the actual controlling influences at work in the physical world. Scientific laws are, in principle, provisional, always being subject to revision, correction, or in extreme cases, replacement. The necessarily provisional quality of scientific laws means that they can never, with certainty, be identified with the laws of nature as I have here defined them. Scientific laws are, however, our closest approximations to the laws of nature and may be thought of as standing in for those laws in practice.

Whether we call them laws or theories, the formulas that predict the general behavior of objects and forces amount to a set of rules. Let's analyze further the idea that nature is rule-governed.

Rules and patterns

It is often said that scientists look for patterns in nature. Observation of a pattern is followed by a guess at a rule that might generate it. The guess is called a hypothesis. Patterns, besides being generated by rules, may instead be generated by chance. Unlike patterns due to rules, those that owe to chance cannot be extended in order to generate reliable predictions.

Think of a die, that is, one of a pair of dice. Imagine that someone hands you a die and asks you to role it three times, and each time the die comes up “1.” Three die rolls in a row of the same number comprise a simple pattern that could be created by a rule or by chance. The die might be weighted or otherwise have some built-in mechanism that biases it toward 1. The pattern of rolls in that case would derive from the laws of motion and gravity in a controlled way, and we would be justified in predicting high odds of another 1 turning up on a fourth roll.

On the other hand, the pattern of three consecutive rolls of 1 might be due to chance. In that case, the odds of rolling 1 a fourth time would be no better than those of rolling any other number. The impression we might have that the previous rolls made a certain result more likely on the next roll would be an illusion.

Suppose we rolled the die a fourth time and again 1 came up. We would feel vindicated if we had assumed that a rule was creating the pattern. Even if we rolled a number other than 1, we could persevere in believing that a rule was at work. We might speculate that the pattern, and the mechanism causing it, was more complicated than it first appeared. The pattern could consist of three 1s, then another number, then three 1s again, or some other variation.

What we learn from die rolls can be extended to the whole of physical reality. If the patterns of nature are generated by rules, then science is realistic to assume that they are to some degree predictable. We can calculate the right speed and di-

rection to send a satellite into orbit on a rocket. We can combine chemicals in a prescribed way knowing that the product will be yet another chemical with known properties.

If the patterns of nature owe to chance, then all of science is an illusion. We delude ourselves that lucky accidents are predictive successes. We rationalize failed predictions as the result of not establishing the proper conditions or of allowing mistakes to creep into our calculations.

It is unnecessary to justify the claim that the patterns of nature are generated by rules. The reason no justification is needed is not that the reality of rules is self-evident or that the proof of them is well known. It is that rational people find the alternative – nothing behind the patterns but pure chance – impossible to believe.

Scientific reasoning, then, is the process of proposing rules that account for the observed patterns of nature. Note that it is patterns that are observed while rules are inferred. A rule cannot be observed the way we observe the spots on a butterfly's wing, the gathering of clouds on the horizon, or the distribution of stars in the Milky Way galaxy. Objects and patterns can be seen or detected, but rules cannot. Patterns and rules are related but distinct.

How does our tenacious belief in the rule-governed character of nature lead us toward God? That is what we will now consider.

Rules and mental space

Atheists often claim that the physical world (we might equally use the terms “nature” or “the universe”) is a brute fact. A brute fact is one for which no further explanation is needed or possible. The trouble is that a brute fact is impossible to distinguish from a circumstance that owes to chance.

Modern physics tells us that space and time are intertwined into a single fabric. Properly speaking, nature consists of events contained in this “space-time”—all events whatsoever, past and future. One cannot say that space-time is a

brute fact without implying that all events collectively are due to pure chance, as must be all the patterns we observe among those events. But, as we have seen, if patterns in nature owe only to chance then science is a mirage.

To put it differently, it is incoherent to claim that nature conforms to rules by chance. By chance nature might *appear to us* to conform to rules, but in this we would deceive ourselves.

Coming at the point from still another direction, if reality consists of nothing but the physical world then how can rules, in the form of laws of nature, be real? Physical objects, states, and events can be observed or detected, but as we just saw, rules cannot. If the laws of nature are fictions manufactured by our minds to explain the patterns among physical events, as a purely physicalist depiction of reality suggests, then once again we must conclude that scientists are building castles in the air.

The non-physical quality of rules is an important clue to moving forward from here. Humans invent rules. Consider the rules of chess. Where and how do these rules exist? Our first instinct might be to say that they exist in books and information storage systems. Reflecting further, we realize that printed marks or other artifacts merely *represent* the rules of chess, the way a printed numeral represents a number without being the number.

The rules of chess exist not as physical objects but as ideas in the minds of human beings. These ideas generate patterns of physical events, such as the movements of chess pieces as a chess game is played. We can say that the rules of chess exist not in *physical space* but in *mental space*. Mental space can to some degree be shared, which is why human beings can play chess with one another.

Shared mental space may be compared with our visual field. Several people can stand looking at a single object that is in their shared field of vision and agree on what the object is even though each of them sees it from a slightly different angle.

Physical objects, besides existing in physical space, can exist in mental space to the extent that they can be thought about. Abstract objects, including rules and mathematical formulas, exist in mental space only. Mental space is therefore larger than physical space, in the sense that it is more inclusive.

Abstractions can be inferred from physical patterns. Someone with no knowledge of chess might infer the rules of the game by watching the movements of chess pieces during play. Abstractions can also be represented by objects in physical space, such as printed words and numbers.

Laws of nature and the mind of God

If the physical world really does conform to rules in the form of laws of nature, then the rules must be real. To be real, the rules must exist in someone's mental space. How mental space could exist apart from one or more thinking beings is unclear if not inconceivable.

Could the laws of nature exist only in the mental space of humans? The philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that the concepts of space, time, and cause-and-effect are imposed on nature by the human mind.² However, earlier we noted that scientific laws are only approximations of the actual laws of nature, which can never be known with certainty. It is problematic, if not incoherent, to argue that humans can be projecting *upon* nature rules which they are, at the same time, trying to determine *from* nature.

To suggest that the orderly course of physical events is a creation of human thought is another way of turning the laws

2. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena* (1783), Pt. 1, No. 10. For English language text, see *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, with Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*, translated and edited by Gary Hatfield, (2004), 34-35; in *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy*, series eds. Kark Ameriks and D. M. Clarke (Cambridge: CUP, 1997, 2004). https://faculty.washington.edu/conormw/Teaching/Files/PhilMath/Winter_2017/Readings/Kant-Prolegomena.pdf.

of nature into fictions, undercutting science as a means to truth. Scientific laws are fictions only insofar as they are approximations, just as the rounded number 3.14159 is not, strictly, the ratio of a circle's diameter to its circumference. Approximations are not fictions, however, in the sense of being untethered to objective reality.

One explanation would be a great primary mind, God, whose mental space contains the physical world, the laws of nature, and the secondary mental spaces of thinking creatures. Unless there were a reason to do so we need not speculate about more than one primary mind. It is easy to relate this line of reasoning to specific passages in the Bible:

For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, "For we are also his offspring." Acts 17:28

And he is before all things, and in him all things consist.
Colossians 1:17

Who, being the brightness of [the Father's] glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.
Hebrews 1:3

To understand the last passage above, from Hebrews, note that in biblical language words in the mind, or thoughts, are not sharply distinguished from audible words. The sense in this passage must be that the orderly unfolding of nature is conditioned by divine intention—the "word" that upholds all things.

The divine mind is therefore implied by the rule-governed character of physical reality. Ultimately, predictable order flows from thought and not the other way around. Physical space must be secondary to, and dependent upon, mental space in its primary form.

The thinking Creator

If the laws of nature are thoughts in God's mind, according to which he sustains the universe from moment to moment, then it scarcely needs saying that the universe is his creative product. Scientific ideas about the expansion of the universe from a seed-like singularity or from an energy fluctuation in a quantum vacuum are grounded in mathematically-based theories of physics. Therefore, those ideas are not in themselves God-denying. To the extent that the scientists are correct, they have done no more than trace God's application of rules through cosmic time.

We would not expect to see, hear, or otherwise detect God's thoughts imposing order on energy and matter, any more than we would expect to detect a Euclidean circle or the number 5 exerting an effect on a rock or a tree.

Return for a moment to the example of chess. Given the right technology we could scan the brains of chess players and map their neural activity in fine detail, all the way down to reactions at the level of molecules. In none of this mapping would we observe an abstraction, such as the rule that bishops may only move diagonally on the chessboard.

The effect of the rules of chess on physical movements is something we experience from the inside out, so to speak. It is one aspect of the mysteriousness of mind, what has been called by modern thinkers the "hard problem" of how conscious experience is related to physical events in the brain.³

The effect of God's thoughts on nature, like the effect of the rules of chess on physical movements of chess players, must be inferred rather than observed. Because we as humans experience the effect of abstractions on our own physical behavior, we know such effects occur even though they cannot be observed.

³ See, for example, David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: OUP, 1996).

Mind without matter?

The only minds of which we have everyday experience are those of human beings. The human mind, moreover, is dependent in complex and specific ways upon physical processes in the brain. Even a minor change in the brain can interfere with a person's ability to think clearly, or otherwise affect their mind.

Our experience of predictable patterns as being generated uniquely by mental processes, pointing toward a primary mind, seems at odds with our observation that mental processes depend on physical events in the brain. If human thoughts depend on matter, how can matter depend on God's thought? Here we need to remember that even within the physical realm the same phenomenon is sometimes accompanied by different conditions.

As an example, consider the magnetic fields generated, respectively, by an electromagnet and a permanent magnet. An electromagnet is a composite device with a core wrapped in wire, and has a field only while electrical current is supplied from an outside source; a permanent magnet can consist of a single, continuous piece of material whose field requires no outside electrical current and persists over a long period of time.

Another example may be drawn from a comparison of mechanical waves with electromagnetic waves. The waves first identified as such were mechanical waves, including surface waves on water and pressure waves such as sound waves. Since all these waves consist of vibrations in material, it was once assumed that waves by their very nature require a material medium.

At the end of the nineteenth century, however, it became clear that electromagnetic radiation – including visible light, infrared rays, radio waves, etc. – consists of waves somehow capable of moving through a vacuum, absent any material medium whatsoever. There are fundamental differences between mechanical waves and electromagnetic waves, but

both share distinctively wave-like properties.

Waves and magnetic fields illustrate, usefully if roughly, that we cannot rule out a form of consciousness that is independent of matter. And insofar as nature conforms to rules, we have reason to believe that such a consciousness exists.

Further, to acknowledge that our own thoughts depend on brain processes is not to say that they depend *solely* on those processes. It is unclear why deep mysteries should attach to the human mind if the brain were simply another organ contributing to survival, different from the heart, kidneys, and immune system only in terms of complexity.

If, besides depending on brain processes, human minds are additionally supported on a deeper level by a primary mind, it is no wonder that thinkers have grappled for so long with the “other minds problem,” mind-body problem, problem of intentionality, problem of qualia, and similar puzzles.

Further implications

As far as we can tell, therefore, any intelligible universe, that is, any universe governed by rules, must be the product of thought. That includes universes whose laws exclude the formation of stars and planets, or anything larger than atomic nuclei forever caroming back and forth through a void.

The rules governing our own universe provide not only for large scale structures but for the richness of biological life. Presumably, the transcendent mind responsible for our cosmos orchestrated it according to laws of nature that are life-nurturing.

The natural cycles that sustain life are cited by Jesus and Paul as evidence, not merely for a Creator, but for one with a loving character:

“Behold the birds of the air. For they do not sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much better than they?” Matthew 6:26

[God] in times past permitted the nations to go their own way. Nevertheless, he did not leave himself without a witness in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.
Acts 14:16-17

These are not denials that birds and people occasionally starve or suffer cruel deaths in other ways. They are observations of the fact that the greater part of the earth overflows with life – though humans clumsily tend to extinguish it – and that human populations particularly have flourished until their expansion itself has posed challenges.

Undeniably, nature as it currently exists apportions plenty of suffering to higher life forms. Predation, parasites, disease, and deformity make up a catalog of horrors. Yet the value of life is such that not even a grotesque array of afflictions can obscure it.

Here is a question for those who disparage life due to the ubiquity of suffering: would an asteroid impact that ends life on earth be (a) a good event, (b) a bad event, or (c) a neutral one? People who are both sane and honest will acknowledge that the obliteration of earth's life and natural beauty would be, unquestionably, bad in every sense of the word. Why would the question be easy to answer if the defining features of life were senselessness and misery?

The dizzying variety of forms of earthly life is not the only measure of its richness. The more complex creatures enjoy some measure of a mysterious phenomenon we have already touched upon, conscious experience of sensations and emotions. We humans enjoy an especially deep conscious life that features imagination, reason, and conscience.

The most exalted sensations, such as love and joy, have a biological aspect. As with the workings of the mind, these responses are tied to chemical processes in the brain. Also, they seem related to behaviors that have adaptive purposes. Those associations do not justify equating love, compassion, and inner peace with mere chemistry, or reducing them to

behavioral patterns.

To illustrate, social insects exhibit a range of dutiful behaviors, including tireless work and willingness to sacrifice themselves in defense of their colony. Still, we don't picture ants as taking emotional satisfaction in their labors or bees pondering their responsibilities to their queen. We assume that insects need be motivated by nothing more than blind instinct, and carry on as automatons with little or no conscious awareness.

Why behavior in higher creatures is accompanied by an inner life, including emotions, reflections, and a sense of self, is an enigma. More than an enigma, it is a gift surpassing the rest of life's many wonders.

The transcendent intelligence behind the law-like regularities of nature must also be the source of love, joy, and virtue. We may wish these graces were more abundant, but it is hard to envision their originator not intending them eventually to predominate in creation. Can we reasonably imagine beauty's inventor being indifferent toward beauty's defilement?

God of the gaps?

We have seen that the ordered complexity of nature implies an organizing intelligence, God. While the vastness of the universe testifies to God's power, its life-nurturing properties bear witness to God's love and goodness. Far from being undermined by science, Paul's claim in Romans that the Creator's attributes can be seen from the creation is confirmed anew by each major scientific advance.

What I have presented here is formally called the Argument from Intelligibility. It is perhaps the deepest yet least familiar of the classical arguments for God's existence. For those interested in slightly different, more detailed presentations I recommend John Foster's book *The Divine Lawmaker: Lectures on Induction, Laws of Nature, and the Existence of God* (New York: Oxford, 2004) as well as *The Intelligible Universe: A Cosmological Argument* by Hugo Meynell

(London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1982).

A caution is in order, too. No argument amounts to a “proof” of God, if by proof we mean a statement with the logical force of a mathematical equation. In front of us lie clues pointing in a Godward direction, but any attempt to reach beyond our everyday reality can be resisted.

To be fair, often enough circumstances have been attributed to God’s miraculous action that were eventually explained by science. This is the so-called *god-of-the-gaps* fallacy. It is unwise to make a case for God from some open scientific question that future research, plausibly, may answer. Is the argument from intelligibility an example of this fallacy?

Science explains observations by placing them within a common, rule-governed framework. Even when science explains rules, it does so in terms of other rules, such as how the laws of optics are derived from more basic laws of physics. Therefore, we can never hope to find within science an explanation of the most basic rules, the laws of nature.

Science could only explain the laws of nature in terms of, well, themselves. Therefore, proposing a universal intelligence to explain the laws of nature is not a case of using God as a placeholder for a scientific discovery yet to be made.

An objection related to the *god-of-the-gaps* fallacy is to point out, correctly, that God is not a scientific explanation of anything. In the search for truth, we can indeed avoid God by insisting that all explanations be scientific ones. Understand, however, that the strategy of limiting rational explanations to those found within science comes at a steep price. If all rational judgments were scientific, then no rational case could be made for science as such.

Consider the claim that science is a source of knowledge about nature. Our ability to understand this claim, much less evaluate it, depends on our ability somehow to stand outside of science. On what ground are we able to do so other than that of reason? Or, entertain an argument that might be made in support of the claim, namely, that because science has resulted in useful technologies it must provide knowledge

about nature. This is an example of reason finding a way to pass judgment on science, not a hypothesis awaiting scientific testing. All rational explanations cannot lie within the bounds of science if rational thought is what tells us that science has value. God as an explanation, therefore, need not be scientific in order to be rational.

Belief and decision

Romans 1 tells us that people suppress spiritual truth by adopting false deities, which might take the form of ideals or causes that do little more than sanction human cravings. Without humility, moreover, no one will give God the least attention. According to the Scriptures, it is God himself who warns us that we are skilled at evasion even as he invites us to return to him.

The enlightenment philosopher and skeptic David Hume (1711-1776), whose devastating critique of religious gullibility has been echoed by secularists for two-and-a-half centuries, took up the question of the testimony of nature in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Near the end of the *Dialogues*, Hume concedes in the voice of the character Philo that the order of the universe points toward something like intelligence. Hume adds that the indication is too vague to give us a picture of God.⁴

Hume's primary objection to a personal Creator had been offered earlier in the *Dialogues*. There Hume had reflected on the fragility of living things in an uncaring cosmos. Hume insisted that if the universe were a house built by a sovereign architect, he would have made it a more comfortable, less dangerous abode for his creatures.⁵

⁴ See David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, No. 12. Project Gutenberg online text, p. 65. <https://homepages.uc.edu/~martinj/Philosophy%20and%20Religion/Atheism/Hume%20Dialogues%20Concerning%20Natural%20Religion.pdf>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 11. Online text, p. 49.

Left unmentioned in the *Dialogues* is the message of the Bible that at the cross God paid the ultimate price to provide for the renovation of nature, what the Apostle Paul referred to as the liberation of a creation that now groans (Rom 8:20-22). While, undeniably, contemplating such an outcome taxes the human imagination, it accords with the near-universal intuition that the world as we find it is wrong in some fundamental way, and that its variety and richness are tokens of unrealized potential.

Because any argument can be discounted, rationalized away, or simply ignored, individual human choice will play a role in how clearly nature's testimony to God is heard, or whether it is heard at all. Nevertheless, insofar as order, beauty, and grandeur are marks of the cosmos on the largest scale, Wisdom's voice continues to call out to every human heart (Prov 9:1-6).

2. Horrendous Evil and Christian Theism: A Reply to John W. Loftus

Don McIntosh¹

ABSTRACT: In his recent article, “God and Horrendous Suffering,” John W. Loftus argues that what he calls horrendous suffering is incompatible with traditional theism. The extent of horrendous suffering in the world, he says, “means that either God does not care enough to eliminate it, or God is not smart enough to eliminate it, or God is not powerful enough to eliminate it.” For Loftus, however, the problem is not simply *evil*, but horrendous suffering, a particularly acute form of evil which renders theism completely untenable. Here I will argue in reply, first, that because horrendous suffering is itself a form of evil, it cannot be easily reconciled with naturalism, since naturalism actually precludes the existence of evil. Then I will argue that horrendous suffering is not only compatible with theism, but is best explained in the context of Christian theism in particular. Finally I will suggest that because God’s work of creation is not yet complete, we have good reason for maintaining hope even in the face of horrendous evils.

IN HIS ARTICLE from the previous issue of this journal, “God and Horrendous Suffering,” John W. Loftus has argued that what he calls *horrendous suffering* is an absolute defeater for theism. As he describes it, horrendous suffering is plainly incompatible with the attributes of God in traditional theism; and yet the world we live in is shot through with the undeniable reality of horrendous suffering. Therefore horren-

¹ Don McIntosh, M.S., M.Div., Dr.Apol., is the Owner of Gerizim Publishing and Editor-in-Chief of the *TJNPT* journal.

dous suffering is “one of the most powerful refutations of the theistic God as can be found.”²

While he refers to the “evidential problem” of horrendous suffering, Loftus places horrendous suffering against the attributes of God and suggests a logical inconsistency among them. The extent of horrendous suffering in the world, he says, “means that either God does not care enough to eliminate it, or God is not smart enough to eliminate it, or God is not powerful enough to eliminate it.” In its basic form the above line of reasoning, commonly recognized as the traditional or logical argument from evil, has been both defended and debunked with various degrees of success by philosophers since Epicurus.

Nonetheless, for Loftus the problem remains not simply the reality of *evil*, but of *horrendous suffering*. So we will need to turn our attention from the logical problem of evil to the evidential problem of horrendous suffering. This is, as he defines it quite simply, “the kind that turns our stomachs.” As opposed, presumably, to everyday, run-of-the-mill suffering, horrendous suffering has the power to render theism incoherent. In other words, this kind of suffering is so revoltingly excessive, soul-crushingly painful and unjust that no argument could possibly warrant theistic belief in the face of it. But again this is not really a novel argument, and appears to be a less formal, if more rhetorically powerful, version of the “evidential argument from evil” first outlined by William Rowe some forty-five years ago.³

Essentially, then, Loftus has borrowed elements from each of the two most common versions of the argument from evil or suffering in order to create a sort of “double whammy”

² John W. Loftus, “God and Horrendous Suffering,” *Trinity Journal of Natural & Philosophical Theology*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring 2023), pp. 53-68. All further quotations by Loftus are from this same article.

³ See William Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (October 1979), pp. 335-341.

polemic against theism. Therefore in reply I will briefly address both versions of the argument from evil in light of horrendous sufferings. Rather than simply offer a “defense” along the lines of skeptical theism – suggesting the inscrutable logical possibility that theism might still be true even if horrendous evil and suffering appear to weaken it – I will first counter that to the extent that horrendous suffering is a form of *evil*, it presents a worse problem for naturalism than for theism, because naturalism actually precludes evil. I will then argue that the evil of horrendous suffering is not merely compatible with theism, but is specifically predicted by (and thus best explained by) Christian theism in particular. Finally I will suggest that because God’s work of creation is not yet complete, we have good reason for maintaining hope even in the face of horrendous evils.

Horrendous suffering and arguments from evil

Again, while Loftus for the most part prefers to address the problem in terms of *suffering* rather than *evil*, he invokes what students of philosophy and theology will recognize as the logical or traditional argument from evil – the idea that the attributes ascribed to God in classical theism are logically inconsistent with the reality of evil in the world. After reviewing the presumed incompatibility of horrendous suffering and the attributes of God, Loftus concludes: “The stubborn fact of horrendous suffering means something is wrong with God’s goodness, his knowledge, or his ability.”

Though many notable philosophers, from Epicurus in the fourth century B.C. to the late twentieth century logician J. L. Mackie, have found the logical argument from evil compelling, most observers these days would agree that from a technical standpoint the argument is a failure. That is, even given that there is an objective, identifiable reality of evil in the world, the presence of such evil does not, strictly speaking, *contradict* the existence of God as described in classical the-

ism (or entail a failure of his attributes). More often than not, Alvin Plantinga is credited with successfully refuting the logical argument from evil in his celebrated article, “The Free Will Defense.”⁴ There Plantinga first goes to some lengths to spell out the formal logical implications of the problem of evil. As he explains, the set of propositions

God is all-good.

God is all-powerful.

Evil exists.

is neither formally nor implicitly inconsistent – meaning those propositions are not logically incompatible. From there, and against Mackie’s claim that an omnipotent God could have (had he so desired) created morally free creatures who never actually committed moral evil, Plantinga rather ingeniously draws on modal logic and possible worlds semantics to demonstrate “that God, though omnipotent, could not have actualized just any possible world He pleased.”⁵

Now given the emphasis Loftus places upon *horrendous suffering*, it’s fair to ask what exactly this kind of suffering adds to the original logical argument. To that I would simply say: not much. It should be noted that in the traditional argument from evil, “evil” has always been meant to encompass

⁴ This is not to say there aren’t critics of various aspects of Plantinga’s position. According to Bruce Little, Richard Swinburne for instance rejects Plantinga’s argument because it depends on middle knowledge, and yet “it is logically impossible for God to know what the future decisions of his moral beings will be.” – *God, Why This Evil?* (Lanham, Maryland: Hamilton Books, 2010), p. 52. But Plantinga’s main contention, that the logical argument from evil itself is demonstrably unsuccessful, remains largely unchallenged.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, “The Free Will Defense,” from Michael Peterson, et al, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford, 2007), p. 330. Against Plantinga, I actually believe it *is* possible for God to create a world in which humans are substantially morally free and where no suffering occurs, but that such a world entails our present world (or one like it) being created first. More on that later.

extreme (horrendous) suffering, just as extreme suffering has always been associated with evil. Also an argument could be made that because many forms of suffering can be considered objectively good, or at least not evil – e.g. penalties imposed for criminal activity, consequences arising from immoral behavior, self-sacrificial service and heroism, and pains associated with growth, bodily exercise or learning a new skill – only suffering that appears excessive or unjustifiable (horrendous) can really be considered *evil* in the first place. Some would say that suffering is really the *consequence* of evil, rather than evil in itself.

For most observers, horrendous suffering is itself a form of evil. That evidently includes Loftus, who states that “there are two categories of horrendous suffering that must be adequately explained by apologists for God”:

- (1) Moral evils (that is, suffering caused by the choices of moral agents). Examples include: the Holocaust, the atomic obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, terrorist beheadings, childhood molestation, torture, slavery, gang rapes, wars, and so on. Then there’s (2)
- (2) Natural evils (that is, suffering caused by natural disasters). Examples include: pandemics, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, earthquakes, massive wildfires, and so on...

As the “and so on” implies, both of the lists above could unfortunately be greatly expanded.⁶

⁶ Adams, for example, includes among “paradigmatic examples” of horrendous suffering: “the rape of a woman and axing off her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of the personality, betrayal of one’s deepest loyalties, cannibalizing one’s own offspring, child abuse..., child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation, participation in the Nazi death camps...” – Marilyn McCord Adams, “Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelean Society*, Vol. 63 (1989), p. 300.

While all this suffering (evil) cannot be reconciled with traditional theism, says Loftus, it's entirely to be *expected* on an atheistic view of the world: "By contrast, for atheists who don't believe any God exists, the fact of horrendous suffering is not an intellectual problem at all. Suffering, even horrendous suffering, is what we expect to find in a world that evolved by natural selection." Atheism technically says nothing about evolution by natural selection, so let's instead say that the idea for which horrendous suffering is supposedly not an intellectual problem is really *naturalism*.⁷ So Loftus argues that horrendous suffering is expected on naturalism but not on theism. But is that true?

Given that horrendous suffering is considered a form of evil – as Loftus seems to acknowledge – and given that we can objectively identify instances of horrendous suffering in the world, the inescapable reality of horrendous suffering would presumably count among the observations that make "Evil exists" a true premise in the classical logical formulation of the argument from evil. But if "Evil exists" is a true premise, it could potentially give rise to other arguments, for example what I have called the argument from evil against naturalism, drawn from the premises:

Nature is all that exists.

Nature is amoral (neither good nor evil).

Evil exists.⁸

The above appears to be a genuinely inconsistent set. That is, for nature to be all that exists, and for nature to be non-evil,

⁷ "Naturalism" here means the philosophical or metaphysical view that the observable universe is a completely self-contained system, so that nothing outside the observable universe exists, or at least nothing outside the observable universe can affect or alter it "from beyond." Naturalism thus entails atheism, though atheism does not strictly entail naturalism.

⁸ Don McIntosh, *Transcending Proof: In Defense of Christian Theism* (San Antonio: Gerizim Publishing, 2021), p. 16-17.

evil cannot exist. Thus the reality of evil in the world appears to work pretty well as a premise in the service of arguments against naturalism. Moreover, the reality of evil arguably presents a greater problem for naturalism than for theism. While there is reason to doubt, as observers from Augustine to Plantinga have noted, whether good and evil strictly contradict – and thus whether a limitlessly good and powerful God cannot co-exist with evil in the world God is said to have created – it’s clear that the world cannot contain some evil and no evil at the same time.

Granted, naturalists could counter that what we *call* evil is really only an *epiphenomenon*, a sort of perceptual by-product of sentient organisms struggling to perpetuate their species in a world that emerged from strictly amoral forces of natural selection and physics. But theists could argue along similar lines that what we call evil is an epiphenomenon of a world created by a purely good God of unlimited power. In neither case would evil be a defining feature of the universe. From a Christian theistic perspective this “epiphenomenal” understanding of evil may further call to mind Augustine’s conception of evil as “privation of good,” where evil is not something that can really *exist* independently of an already existing good.

Even if Loftus were correct, and horrendous suffering were indeed the result of a “world that evolved by natural selection,” it would not follow that as organisms thus evolved we would “expect to find” such a state of affairs. In other words, there is no reason to expect that we, as the products of mindless natural processes, would come to *recognize* any moral or philosophical implications of horrendous suffering. Reflecting upon or bewailing the evil of horrendous suffering, or any other manifestation of evil, is the kind of activity more befitting spiritual beings created with a mind, a will and a conscience than evolved primates instinctively struggling for survival in a pitiless material universe. Again that’s be-

cause the reality of evil is not easily reconcilable with a strictly amoral, naturalistic view of the world.

An atheologian committed to the argument from horrendous suffering thus faces a dilemma: if evil is an objective reality, then it poses at least as much a problem for naturalism as it does for theism.⁹ If evil is *not* an objective reality (if there is no actual “evil” to speak of), then even the most horrendous of suffering provides no discernible grounds for a sound argument against theism, because there is nothing about *suffering* (to any degree) that contradicts theism. In the latter case the most we can say is that theism and horrendous suffering do not appear to match up well intuitively; and in that case the strongest argument the atheologian could make is that theism is *internally* inconsistent – not that it conflicts with any features of the world. But as Stump suggests, even if a set of beliefs *appears* inconsistent on generic theism, “our reinterpretation of them in light of a larger system of beliefs to which they belong may dispel the appearance of inconsistency.”¹⁰ We will examine one such “larger system” – Christian theism – shortly.

In response to objections (mainly Plantinga’s) against the logical form of the argument, many philosophers and skeptics have taken more stock in the *evidential* argument from evil, which stipulates not that theism *contradicts* the reality of horrendous, or seemingly gratuitous,¹¹ suffering, but that certain instances of horrendous suffering render theism highly improbable. While agreeing with most observers that “the

⁹ On similar grounds Loftus’ former instructor, William Lane Craig, has offered a positive argument for theism which basically says that if “objective moral values” exist, then God exists.

¹⁰ Eleonore Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Iss. 4 (1985), p. 398.

¹¹ An instance of gratuitous suffering is said to be one for which God does not have a greater, outweighing or compensating good. While thinkers like Michael Martin have argued that a single demonstrable instance of gratuitous suffering would be enough to falsify theism, William Hasker and others disagree.

existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of the theistic God,” William Rowe suggests the improbability of theism given the sheer scale of horrific suffering in the world:

It seems quite unlikely that all the instances of intense suffering occurring daily in our world are intimately related to the occurrence of greater goods or the prevention of evils at least as bad; and even more unlikely, should they somehow all be so related, that an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have achieved at least some of those goods (or prevented some of those evils) without permitting the instances of intense suffering that are supposedly related to them.¹²

Loftus agrees, saying that “in terms of probabilities, the more horrendous suffering that exists, the less probable an omniscient God exists...” This does seem reasonable at a glance. After all, there are some cases of horrendous suffering, such as the torture of small children, for which greater goods can scarcely be imagined. On the reasonable premise that scarcely imaginable concepts are also highly *improbable*, the probability of God having in store an outweighing good would seem to be pretty low. Taking a cue from Plantinga, Adams acknowledges that “where horrendous evils are concerned, not only do we not know God’s *actual* reason for permitting them; we cannot even *conceive* of any plausible candidate sort of reason...for human participation in them.”¹³

As skeptical theists like Stephen Wykstra have pointed out, however, the flip side to that argument is that the probability of our having sufficient knowledge to fully understand (or *imagine*, for that matter) God’s overall, long-term, eternal

¹² Rowe, pp. 337-338.

¹³ Adams, p. 304.

purposes for human souls would also seem to be pretty low.¹⁴ That is, the experience of *seemingly* gratuitous suffering is not unexpected given human epistemic limitations and divine omniscience, and therefore cannot be evidence against theism. In that case God may have in mind outweighing goods for all the instances of horrendous suffering in the world (or yet greater sufferings that would occur if the sufferings in question were not permitted to occur). And in that case the probability of his *not* having such factors in mind while seemingly “failing to act” could not be reliably estimated.

Horrendous suffering in Christian theism

But suppose God had no greater goods in store, and thus there were numerous instances of gratuitous suffering in the world. At this point I will turn my focus to *Christian* theism in particular, to suggest that because evil is the expression of disobedience to God’s commandments – the rebellious exercise of independent human wills – evil (as opposed to moral freedom itself) is directly contrary to God’s purpose; and because evil is directly contrary to God’s purpose, there’s really no reason to expect that God would *create* a purpose for each instance of evil.

The idea that humans can continually flout God’s commandments and behave as wickedly as they please, while God is obligated to continually supply “greater goods” to compensate for the horrendous sufferings that arise from human wickedness, may be consistent with some generic version of theism or other – but is completely foreign to Christian theology. It is not true on Christian theology, for example, that if a man in a foul mood shoots up an elementary school, God bears moral responsibility for the act and must create a greater good (or already have one in place) to justify

¹⁴ See Stephen Wykstra and Timothy Perrine, “Foundations of Skeptical Theism: Cornea, Core, and Conditional Probabilities,” *Faith & Philosophy*, Vol. 29, Iss. 4 (2012), pp. 374-399.

it. The greater good view appears incoherent, in that humans, by committing ever worse evils, can put God on the hook to create an ever greater world. As Johnson and Falconer have pointed out, “According to the greater good theodicies, God requires one evil in order to prevent another evil, making evil necessary for God.”¹⁵

If there’s any point to what we call pointless suffering, then, it may be just this: because evil is moral irrationality, evil is not and never was supposed to be rationally managed by anyone – least of all by God, who is morally pure and wants nothing to do with evil. Again and again the Bible records God warning the people of Israel that horrendous suffering would follow upon disobedience, the people disobeying anyway, and the unintended consequence of horrendous suffering following just as promised. A biblical-historical view of Christian theology thus entails the compatibility of God and horrendous, or even gratuitous, suffering.

Why then doesn’t God simply *eliminate* evil? The problem there is that on Christian theology, evil resides in the hearts and minds of sinful humans, which means that to eliminate evil would be to eliminate humanity. But to eliminate humanity entirely would appear to be an evil in itself. Christian or not, most of us would maintain that it is good for humans to *not* be eliminated (despite the evil in them), where good is understood to mean something like *grace*. So in one sense at least, it could be said that evil is allowed to persist precisely because God is good.¹⁶

Even if that is so, the question then remains why God would give such potentially destructive power to his people

¹⁵ Connie Johnson and Robert Falconer, “Creation Order Theodicy: The Argument for the Coexistence of Gratuitous Evil and the Sovereignty of God,” *Conspectus: The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary*, Vol. 27 (March 2019), p. 53.

¹⁶ Loftus suggests that “a heart attack could have killed Hitler” before he had a chance to commit his atrocities; but that would seem to mean Hitler dying of a heart attack while he was apparently innocent of any serious wrongdoing, and so would appear an instance of evil in itself.

in the way of such wide-ranging moral freedom. I believe part of the answer is that God has granted us tremendous responsibility as his image-bearers and as the appointed stewards of his creation. Along these lines Swinburne has developed what he calls the *argument from providence*, which suggests that “the enormous scope of the responsibilities possessed by humans” is evidence for, not against, the existence of a good God.¹⁷ One of the running jokes in our family is to cite Uncle Ben’s famous line from the first *Spiderman* movie – “With great power comes great responsibility” – whenever one of us has the TV remote and is searching for a program we can all enjoy. But as trite as that saying may seem, it does reflect an important spiritual and moral truth: that as God’s image-bearers, we unleash far more power upon the world by our decisions – for good *or* for evil¹⁸ – than we understand. “A God has the power to benefit or to harm,” says Swinburne. “If other agents are to be given a share in his creative work, they must have that power too...”¹⁹

At the same time it seems that most humans do not *want* this kind of responsibility, let alone the potentially devastating power that comes with it. Evil thus will remain a much greater problem than it needs to be so long as humans continue to abdicate their moral and spiritual responsibility before God. C.S. Lewis put it memorably: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”²⁰ – *deaf*

¹⁷ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (New York: Oxford, 2004), p. 219.

¹⁸ For perspective’s sake, we should bear in mind that experiences of *good* can also be powerful. Along with experiences of deep suffering, even horrendous suffering, our world also includes experiences of grace, healing, hope, compassion, generosity, heroism, love, friendship, beauty, inspiration, adventure, discovery, creativity, joy, laughter, and related pleasures, all of which tend to “make life worth living.”

¹⁹ Swinburne, p. 224.

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996; orig. 1940), p. 91.

here meaning not only to the reality of God's awesome power, but to the deadly power of sin and our own powerfully responsible place in God's created order. On this view, the more horrendous the suffering unleashed by human sin, the more desperately humans need to take responsibility for that sin, repent, and seek God's grace to forgive us and heal us.

Despite all this, Loftus seems to suggest that theistic defenses against the argument from evil, Christian or otherwise, fail to take a sufficiently hard and sober look at what horrendous suffering really entails and what it really means for theism. Here let me say that I fully agree with Loftus that the reality of horrendous suffering is stomach-turning. No amount of theologizing, philosophizing or apologizing can soften the hard reality of the evil that is horrendous suffering.

Though it's been some years now, I have suffered episodes of clinical depression that left me with no appetite (for food or anything else), unable to sleep or concentrate, overcome with sadness and dread, constantly feeling that I was losing my mind, trembling with anxiety, and susceptible to terrifying panic attacks. All this would continue for months on end. As a result I had to sometimes step down from leadership roles or complex tasks at work (and once got fired outright); at other times I had to try to explain to people why I had so rapidly dropped three pant sizes, or why I was so lethargic (yet nervously agitated), or why I looked like a zombie. On top of all that, friends and associates sometimes suggested that what most physicians consider a medical condition accompanied by a distinct set of symptoms was really just a failure to "pull it together" and face life's challenges squarely.²¹ The unrelenting pain, hopelessness and humilia-

²¹ This sounds a little like saying that Alzheimer's disease is just a failure to pay attention or care enough to remember things. But in both clinical depression and Alzheimer's, considerable evidence (like PET scans) indicates the main culprit to be physical changes in the brain itself. "Depression is debilitating, progressive and relentless in its downhill course, as worthy an opponent as any doctor might choose to combat." – Peter D. Kramer, *Against Depression* (New York: Viking, 2005), p. 7.

tion of it all sometimes tempted me to suicide. In short, my waking life was as terrible as my worst nightmare – which may explain why now I have a recurring nightmare in which I find myself sinking back into a major depression.

Others have suffered worse still, many of them believers. Job from the Old Testament is the paradigm example. Further examples span the history of the church, from the apostles and martyrs in the early church to Christians suffering violent persecution in present-day Nigeria, North Korea, and various nations where Islam is the official state religion and Sharia is essentially the law of the land.

So again, I agree that horrendous suffering is a real and serious problem, as much for Christians as for anyone else.²² And I agree that such suffering *seems*, at times, to be not just pointless but completely unjust (unjustifiable). During such times it can appear that God, if he exists at all, is actively tormenting us, on one hand, or is a million miles away and can't be bothered, on the other. Just how God can love us and yet refuse to intervene during such times is admittedly well beyond my understanding. But does all that suffering make Christian theism irrational or untenable? Not from anything we've seen so far. Again if there is a problem here it's not with logical inconsistency or improbability, no matter how horrendous the suffering may be.

One might still argue that given the reality of horrendous suffering, God should never have created beings like us in the first place. Loftus himself seems to suggest something

²² My first depressive episode actually began just a few months *after* my conversion. Through that deeply painful experience I began to appreciate that Christianity entails more than simply “theism,” but the agonizing and humiliating crucifixion of the Son of God himself as the means of our salvation. The cross tells us that God “so loved the world” (John 3:16) that he was willing to endure the depths of evil *with* us, and more importantly *for* us; and now he calls us to “take up” our own cross and follow him (Luke 9:23). Though not a popular teaching, this means that Christians are sometimes called to suffer (Acts 14:22; Romans 8:17; Hebrews 10:32; 1 Peter 4:19; etc.).

like this in laying out the first of four “moral concerns” facing God: “that we don’t abuse the freedom given to us”: “The giver,” he says, “is blameworthy if he or she gives gifts to people who will terribly abuse them.” The idea seems to be that if moral freedom meant unleashing horrendous sufferings in the world and exposing humanity to those sufferings, God should never have given it to us. Yet Loftus not only (like me) continues to live in a world that includes all kinds of horrendous suffering, and appears to often enjoy it here, but also (like me) brought children of his own into the world, not knowing whether they might one day either inflict or endure horrendous suffering themselves. This doesn’t mean that Loftus’ “moral concern” objection is necessarily invalid; but it does suggest that he has overstated his case, maybe for rhetorical effect.

Simply declining to create beings like us would have been a logical option for God, certainly, but for most observers – Loftus included, apparently – it’s not self-evident that sheer nonexistence would be morally preferable to remaining alive in a world that includes instances of horrendous evil. As Plantinga argues, a world in which humans are free to do evil as well as good may be “more valuable, all things being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all.”²³ Even when initiated by God himself, a relationship of love entails a risk of rejection; and rejecting the very source of all goodness unfortunately yields painful unintended consequences. That’s admittedly small consolation for anyone actually in the throes of horrendous suffering, however. Free will may explain the introduction of sin and evil into the world on theism: it does little to resolve the manifold, exceedingly painful and seemingly intractable problems that presently remain with us as a result. So next I want to consider the possibility that the present operation of free will actually serves a higher and happier *eternal* purpose.

²³ Plantinga, p. 328.

Beyond horrendous suffering: heavenly hope and the promise of completeness

All parties can agree, I think, that our world is shot through with pain, and is not the kind of world one might expect a perfectly beneficent and powerful God to create. On that score, Loftus goes to some lengths to show that even if God wanted to correct our behavior or build our character (in keeping with a “soul-making” theodicy), he *could* have done so without permitting atrocities and overwhelming pain. For example, he could have made us with a natural revulsion to committing grotesque evil;²⁴ we could have been created with a higher pain threshold and stronger immune systems; our bodies could have been made with consistently self-healing properties, with gills to prevent drowning and wings to prevent falling hazards; God could have revealed himself to us so overwhelmingly and convincingly that there would be no more religious conflicts or terrorism; and so on.

Of course, on Christian theology there was a time before Adam’s transgression when God’s children *were* both morally free and perfectly happy. Nonetheless, Loftus suggests with the examples above that even if God wanted us to learn of his ways in a world now inhabited by fallen, morally corrupted people, that world *could* have been kept a much safer and happier place. Though I have doubts about whether many of his proposed solutions are viable (since there is no way to test what sorts of unintended consequences they might produce), and whether people would actually repent or grow spiritually under less painful conditions, I still tend to agree with Loftus on this. Fallen or not, our world often does feel

²⁴ Since we have a conscience which tells us that horrendous suffering is often the consequence of wrongdoing, we *should* have all the revulsion we need. The problem is that smaller transgressions tend to lead to gradually greater commissions of evil. So pathological liars, for example, usually begin their careers telling “little white lies.”

woefully and even horrendously out of balance in terms of justice and well-being.

That brings us to another major theme of Christian theology, the hope of eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. Skeptics might regard the very mention of heaven as evidence of *wishful thinking*, since heaven is an unverifiable tenet of faith. But whether certain unverifiable propositions prove worthy of belief is the question at hand, specifically whether the evil of horrendous suffering (not the sort of thing rational people would *wish* for themselves or anyone else) is more compatible with Christian theism or naturalism – two unverifiable views of the world. In principle, Christian theism entails not only the existence of God, who created a world temporarily fraught with suffering, but the existence of his heavenly kingdom, in which there is complete restoration and everlasting joy. In any case it seems less than consistent to say that too much evil in the world makes Christian theism false, whereas the great hope Christian theism holds out for us makes it too good to be true. Consistency requires that we accept or reject the “whole package.”

So with the hope of heaven in mind, I want to consider the often overlooked biblical-theological fact that God’s creative work is not actually complete. Given the incompleteness of the creation, a fully satisfactory answer to the problem of evil and suffering may have to await its completion. One implication of this is that when he argues that God “could have” done this, or not done that, Loftus may well be referring to a creation that in principle is not actually *done*.

Most everyone is familiar with the account of creation of “the heavens and the earth” in Genesis. That account culminates with the creation of Adam and Eve in a garden paradise, and is followed by their fall into sin and the releasing of a curse of death and pain upon the earth. Hence all the horrendous suffering under discussion. But there is also an account of creation in the Revelation of John, of a “new heaven and a new earth.” That seems to suggest that there are two

major divine creation “projects,” one that ended just prior to the advent of human history and one that is to commence at the end of that history. In between is the present age, which is marked by death as well as life, corruption along with goodness, and often, horrendous sufferings.

In other words, the original earthly paradise, the present fallen age infected with death and corruption, and the final consummation of all things in the heavenly paradise are three distinct phases of what might be called a vastly comprehensive creation “program.” According to this overarching theological vision, the reason sufferings are so persistent and God’s blessings seem so fleeting is that we are only in the middle phase of the program. As New Testament scholars sometimes say, the kingdom of God is both *already*, having arrived on earth in Jesus, and *not yet*, with the final judgment and restoration still awaiting us in heaven. Horrendous sufferings are bewildering, then, mainly because we haven’t yet reached the end of the story.

Consider Godel’s first incompleteness theorem as an analogy. For those unfamiliar with Godel’s theorem, Scott Aaronson explains it succinctly in terms of a Turing machine, M . For any M , he says, there is a sentence, $S(M)$, written in the language of M , but which M cannot compute. For $S(M)$ that sentence might be: “Machine M will never output this sentence.” Aaronson describes the paradox that results: “There are two cases: either M outputs $S(M)$, in which case it utters a falsehood, or else M doesn’t output $S(M)$, in which case there’s a mathematical truth to which it can never assent.”²⁵ Because M cannot decide whether $S(M)$ is true, it doesn’t output the sentence – and thus $S(M)$ turns out to be true after all. So it is that certain statements may be generated within a mathematical system that are true, yet not actually provable within that system. Because those statements are *undecidable*, the system is *incomplete* with respect to them.

²⁵ Scott Aaronson, *Quantum Computing Since Democritus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 153.

What does Godel's theorem have to do with God and horrendous suffering? Well, as we've seen, Scripture indicates that God's work of creation is not actually complete. Suppose God created our world, W. Although God is all-good and all-powerful, the statement "World W must include horrendous suffering" may well be true – even if its being true appears baffling, or unprovable, or undecidable. In other words it's only undecidable within the "system" of W, our present world. In principle the truth of it will become clear in the larger system of the future paradise, because then the creation will be complete. While this is certainly a less *formal* sort of undecidability, the basic truth of incompleteness is much the same. The compatibility of horrendous evil and divine benevolence, of free will and eternal blessedness, may be unprovable within this world, yet ultimately proven in the larger transcendent kingdom of heaven.

This "theodicy of incompleteness," as I have called it, may help explain the primary spiritual function of human free will in the world – not simply to have a meaningful life, or to make choices that result in happiness (since suffering so often wrecks our happiness anyway), but to decide where we want to spend eternity. In the context of such a grand theological perspective, "this-worldly existence is necessary as the arena in which eternally binding choices are made, and where evil – *especially* the irrational, excruciating sort we call pointless and gratuitous – serves as a powerful inducement to seek God rather than sin."²⁶

So it is that in the new paradise in Revelation there is the Tree of Life, but no sign of the old Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That's arguably because those entering the new paradise have *already* tasted of the bitter fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, including the harsh reality of horrendous suffering, and have chosen eternal life with Christ instead. In heaven, for those of us who choose it, there will no longer be freedom to choose evil, precisely because

²⁶ McIntosh, *Transcending Proof*, p. 25.

we will have already chosen (willed freely) by faith to surrender that particular freedom. Consequently, in heaven every trace of evil and its painful effects will be removed from our experience: “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”²⁷

Thanks to Dr. Connie Johnson for her insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

²⁷ Revelation 21:4 (NKJV).

3. Experience as Christian Apologetics: A Proposal for Pentecostals

Stephen J. Bedard¹

ABSTRACT: There seems to be a renaissance in Christian apologetics within the church today. There are more apologetics-related books being published than ever before. There are countless apologetics blogs, websites, and other online resources. As evidence that this is more than just a popular fad, there is an increasing number of colleges and seminaries that are offering not only apologetics courses, but full apologetics programs as well. This apologetics movement is largely a part of the evangelical wing of Christianity. However, evangelicalism is a wide tent with varying degrees of emphasis on different aspects of Christian life and ministry. Must Christian apologetics be limited to a certain intellectual form of Christianity or are their opportunities elsewhere under the tent? This paper will attempt to demonstrate that Pentecostalism is and has always been positioned to be effective in Christian apologetics through its emphasis on experience. This will be done by defining Christian apologetics, by explaining the role of experience in apologetics, and by offering suggestions on how experience can be better utilized as a Christian apologetic in a skeptical world.

THERE seems to be a renaissance in Christian apologetics within the Church today. There are more apologetics-related books being published than ever before. There are countless

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What is apologetics?

It is important to begin with what the Bible says about apologetics and apologetics method before looking at definitions from modern authors. One of the key passages for defining apologetics is 1 Peter 3:15, where we are told to “have an answer” (NIV) or “make a defence” (ESV) for the hope that is in us. The word for answer or defence is *apologia* and it means to provide a reason for a belief. Apologetics is not limited to Christianity but goes farther back, including Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*.

That Christians are to be ready with an apologetic is clear, but Peter does not give guidance on method, other than it be done with gentleness and respect. Some examples from Paul may help to provide more information.

An important passage is Paul’s evangelistic preaching in Acts 17. Many apologists go straight to Paul’s experience in Athens, but it is worth looking at Paul’s address in the Jewish

synagogue in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9). In this passage Paul argues with the Jews and some of them come to faith, thus disproving the popular mantra that you “cannot argue someone to Jesus.”

More commonly, apologists look to Acts 17:16-34, where Paul interacts with philosophers and other intellectuals in Athens. Paul speaks to them on their level and in their style, even quoting some of their poets. For some, this is the basic model of an apologetic conversation.

The second example comes from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. Whereas Luke emphasizes Paul’s intellectual capability in Thessalonica, Paul rounds it out with a more complete picture. “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” (1 Thessalonians 1:14-15) In addition to Paul’s words, there was an experience of the Holy Spirit that helped to bring confirmation. There is more that could be said about the biblical pattern of apologetics, but some modern definitions are required as well. William Lane Craig, one of today’s most prominent apologists, offers this definition:

Apologetics (from the Greek *apologia*: a defense) is that branch of Christian theology, which seeks to provide a rational justification for the truth claims of the Christian faith. Apologetics is thus primarily a theoretical discipline, though it has a practical application.²

With this definition, Craig focuses on the intellectual aspect. Alister McGrath has a similar emphasis when he defines apologetics as, “the field of Christian thought that focuses on the justification of the core themes of the Christian faith and

² William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), p. 15.

its effective communication to the non-Christian world.”³ Here, McGrath sees apologetics primarily as an aspect of evangelism.

Apologetics does not need such a narrow definition, however, as simply theoretical or even theological. John Stackhouse offers the following definition:

Thus I suggest that *anything* that helps people take Christianity more seriously than they did before, *anything* that helps defend and commend it, properly counts as apologetics, and should be part of any comprehensive program of apologetics.⁴

It is this definition that will be used in this paper. The reality is that both seekers and Christians struggle at times with confidence in the truth claims of Christianity. It is also true that while some people respond to intellectual arguments, there are others who need other types of evidence. For many Christians, some combination of the two that is required.

Apologetics and experience

When many think of apologetics, one of the first names that come up is C. S. Lewis. While Lewis is known for his intellectual style of apologetics, when he looked back at his own faith journey in *Surprised by Joy*, he made this statement:

What I like about experience is that it is such an honest thing. You may take any number of wrong turnings; but keep your eyes open and you will not be allowed to go very far before warning signs appear. You may have de-

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Mere Apologetics*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), p. 11.

⁴ John G. Stackhouse, Jr. *Humble Apologetics*. (New York: Oxford, 2002), p. 115. Emphasis in original.

ceived yourself, but experience is not trying to deceive you. The universe rings true wherever you fairly test it.⁵

Experience is an important aspect of the Christian journey, and this will be demonstrated both in the examples of John Wesley and Pentecostalism.

John Wesley

John Wesley, while not a systematic theologian or professional philosopher, had more than enough intellectual rigour to participate in traditional intellectual apologetics. Albert Outler describes Wesley as having “the habit of pitching on to the vulnerable links in an opponent’s argument and trying to smash them, one by one.”⁶ Anything we see about Wesley’s understanding of confidence in the Christian faith must acknowledge that he had the capability to provide a defence on an intellectual level.

What Wesley sought for himself was a confidence and assurance of being a true Christian. To provide such confidence, Wesley did not use traditional arguments for the existence of God. Wesley was already well trained in theology and yet even in his early ministry, he doubted his own salvation until the Aldersgate experience when his heart was “strangely warmed.”

Outler’s comments on Wesley’s understanding of experience deserves to be quoted at length:

The essence of faith, whether at the threshold or in its fullness, has always to do with man’s immediate and indubitable assurance of God’s loving presence in his heart. Wesley followed Locke in the denial of “innate ideas” and appears never to have taken seriously the traditional “ar-

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, (New York: Fontana, 1955), p. 143.

⁶ Albert C. Outler (ed.), *John Wesley*, (New York: Oxford, 1964), pp. 26-27.

guments” for the existence of God. In their place, he put an alternate notion of the self-evidence of God’s reality as strictly implied in the faithful man’s awareness of God’s gracious disposition toward *him*. This awareness of God’s gracious “presence” is what Wesley meant by “experience,” and it was, for him, as real and unmistakable a perception as any sensory awareness might be. This doctrine has been construed as a subjective theory of experience in general. In Wesley’s view, however, it is a theory of religious knowledge, a corollary of his view of revelation.⁷

For Wesley, it was possible for a Christian to have confidence in the Christian faith and assurance of personal salvation. Wesley believed that something real happened at conversion and that the Christian could expect an experience of God’s presence throughout their life.

Wesley presents a clear description of what this looks like in his essay, *The Witness of the Spirit; Discourse II*. Wesley describes the importance of an understanding of what the witness of the Spirit looks like:

And it is the more necessary to explain and defend this truth because there is a danger on the right hand and on the left. If we deny it, there is a danger lest our religion degenerate into mere formality; lest, having “a form of godliness,” we neglect, if not “deny, the power of it” [*cf.* 2 Tim. 3:5]. If we allow it but do not understand what we allow, we are liable to run into all the wildness of enthusiasm. It is therefore needful, in the highest degree, to guard those who fear God from both these dangers by a scriptural and rational illustration and confirmation of this religious truth.⁸

⁷ Outler, *Wesley*, p. 29.

⁸ Quoted in Outler, *Wesley*, p. 210.

In this second essay on this topic, Wesley was able to distinguish between experience and enthusiasm, a criticism that the Methodists were facing. This distinction was that true experience was a type of religious intuition, rather than mere perceptions and feelings.⁹ In this essay, Wesley measures religious experience to scriptural standards. Experience is seen in the light of Romans 8:16, where God's Spirit witnesses with the person's spirit. This is not just a subjective experience, as there are outward signs of what this looks like. Christian experience must be accompanied by the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit. While there is room for the timing and the manner of the Spirit's work, total absence of the fruit of the Spirit should lead to questions of the validity of the experience.

John Wesley expected that when a person was confronted with the Gospel and that person responded with faith, that something real was taking place. Conversion was more than mental assent to a certain creed or formula. The Holy Spirit was active in such a way that a person experienced assurance of salvation. The truth of Christianity, while able to be defended on other grounds, was also revealed in the ongoing transformation of the Christian.

Pentecostalism

The Pentecostal distinctive is that experience can be used as evidence, specifically that speaking in tongues is evidence for the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Receiving this baptism is not something that needs to be guessed at, it is accompanied by a manifestation. Yet *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues) is not the only experiential evidence of the existence and presence of God.

The earliest revivals, such as Azusa Street, produced change in people's lives that evidenced that something real was taking place. Into the twenty-first century, it is still said

⁹ Outler, *Wesley*, p. 209-210.

that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. And yet one hundred years ago, blacks and whites worshipped together, not putting race before unity.¹⁰ It was said that the “colour line was washed away in the blood.” Revivals were evidence of the reality of God and the truth of God’s Word. Frank Bartleman, witness to the Azusa Street revival, quotes C. H. Spurgeon with these words: “The presence of God in the church will put an end to infidelity. Men will not doubt His Word when they feel His Spirit.”¹¹

While skeptics may claim that improved race relations are possible apart from God, and glossolalia cannot be verified as authentic, there were other manifestations. According to Robert M. Anderson:

Every manner of disease and disability was alleged to have been cured, and the most spectacular miracles were claimed, including the growth of new fingers on the hand of a woman who had lost the originals in an accident. Numerous persons testified to having seen the dead restored to life.¹²

Participants in the revivals were not naive enough to believe that every claim of the supernatural came from God. Bartleman often laments in his account of Azusa Street that there was the presence of spiritualists as well as those who operated in the flesh and were only trying to make a name for themselves. Nevertheless, for those who were seeking a faith that was real and a God that was active, there was more than enough credible evidence.

¹⁰ Edith L. Blumhofer, *The Assemblies of God: A Chapter in the Story of American Pentecostalism Vol. 1* (Springfield: Gospel Publishing House, 1989), p. 98.

¹¹ Frank Bartleman, *Azusa Street: The Roots of Modern Day Pentecost* (S. Plainfield, NJ: Bridge, 1980), p. 66.

¹² Robert M. Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979), p. 93.

Experience and apologetics

How does all of this fit with Christian apologetics? Going back to Stackhouse's definition of apologetics as "*anything* that helps people take Christianity more seriously than they did before, *anything* that helps defend and commend it, properly counts as apologetics," there is a tremendous opportunity for emphasizing the experiential side of Christianity.

Apologetics is appropriate in the context of evangelism when a seeker is considering faith in Christ but is held back by doubts or other misgivings. Apologetics is also appropriate in the context of discipleship as Christians grow in their confidence of the Christian faith. Authentic spiritual experiences can make a difference in both cases. Authentic experiences of and testimonies to healings and other dramatic answers to prayer can be a powerful apologetic to the truth of Christianity. However, such apologetic value requires much more than preaching a message of signs and wonders.

One of the challenges to the apologetic value of experiences comes from within the charismatic movement itself, specifically the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel claims that blessings such as health and wealth are entitled to every Christian who operates in faith. All one has to do is claim the right and the miracle is received. One problem with the prosperity gospel, among other things, is not that it is too experiential but rather it is not experiential enough. Since experience demonstrates that not every faithful Christian is healed, claiming that all are healed actually leads to more disbelief.

Another challenge for experience as a Christian apologetic is accepting the limitations of religious experience. When Mormons are challenged on their faith about the lack of archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon and other difficulties, they fall back on what they call their testimony. Their testimony is the experience they had after reading the Book of Mormon and praying about its truth. The resultant "burning in the bosom" is their evidence that Mormonism is

true. What is the difference between the burning in the bosom and Wesley's strangely warmed heart? Wesley's experience worked in cooperation with all of the historical and rational support for biblical Christianity, while the Mormon's evidence is in substitute for any other support.

Within the Pentecostal experience of signs, the same limitations are there. Even Bartleman, with all of his confidence in the way the Holy Spirit was working in various churches and missions, still fell into the error of Oneness Pentecostalism. A religious experience, while pointing to something supernatural, does not necessarily confirm theological accuracy. Experiential apologetics must be held to the standard of biblical authority and historic Christianity.

Experience and a way forward

What role is there for experience as a Christian apologetic? C. S. Lewis explained:

If anything extraordinary seems to have happened, we can always say that we have been the victims of an illusion. If we hold a philosophy which excludes the supernatural, this is what we shall say. What we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to the experience.¹³

Some, especially among the new atheists who firmly hold to a modernist worldview where science can explain all things, will never accept religious experience or miracles as evidence for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity. However, in a culture that is at least strongly influenced by postmodernism, there remains an opportunity. For some non-Christians, the argument from experience will carry far more authority than the claims of the Bible or of ecclesiastical leaders. This does not mean that experience is more im-

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*. (New York: Fontana, 1960), p. 7.

portant than biblical teaching, but rather apologists will need to work hard to demonstrate the experience of the true God as revealed in the Bible.

A good beginning for a renewed effort in experiential apologetics is Craig Keener's two-volume work, *Miracles*. Keener is both a Pentecostal Christian and a respected New Testament scholar. In his book, Keener presents a solid study of miracles in the New Testament and the ancient world. However, the largest section of his book is on miracle accounts from around the world. Keener seeks to demonstrate that there is some good evidence for credible supernatural experiences that are consistent with the biblical witness. As he states:

[E]xamples can readily refute misinformed claims that people do not experience many highly unusual recoveries that they attribute to prayer. In particularly extraordinary cases (or an accumulation of mildly extraordinary ones), they may also shift the probability toward supernatural explanations, if one's starting assumptions do not rule out such explanations.¹⁴

As Lewis warns, bringing a strict naturalistic philosophy into the issue will allow some readers to reject claims such as Keener's. However, for others, reports of miracles and supernatural experiences in a sober and credible manner may help accomplish the goal, as Stackhouse stated, "of taking Christianity more seriously."

¹⁴ Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts. Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 255.

4. The Eschatology of Science Fiction (with Special Reference to *Star Trek*)

Johnson C. Philip & Saneesh Cherian¹

ABSTRACT: *Eschatology* is that branch of theology that deals with the future. Christians base their eschatology on the Bible. However, even those who do not believe in the Bible, or even in any kind of God or religion, have an eschatology of their own. The eschatology of the Bible is full of hope about the future of mankind. There will be no hunger, no tears, no disease, and no crime. Is it the same with those who do not believe in the Bible? The secular thinkers frequently project a future where there will be no hunger, no tears, no disease, and no crime. At the same time, the secular world projects its future with the help of science fiction. The question we want to explore here is this: *Are the philosophical predictions of secular thinkers sustained in their own predictions of the future via science fiction?* If not, then why do their predictions not match their eschatology?

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The eschatology of the secular world. Several philosophers, in various ways and at different times, have projected that mankind is capable of building a glorious future for itself. Here are a few notable figures:

Karl Marx: Marx believed that mankind could establish a utopian future through communism, where society would be classless and stateless, and wealth would be distributed according to one's needs.

Julian Huxley: As a proponent of transhumanism, Huxley believed that mankind would be able to enhance itself biologically and culturally to build a better future.

John Stuart Mill: Mill was a strong believer in utilitarianism and progress. He thought that through rationality and liberty, mankind could continually improve its condition.

Herbert Spencer: Spencer, a philosopher and sociologist, believed in the idea of social Darwinism, positing that society evolves and progresses in the same way species do.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: A Jesuit priest and philosopher, Chardin held an evolutionary perspective, foreseeing a future in which human consciousness would converge into an Ome-

ga point, representing a supreme level of complexity and consciousness.

A myriad of humanist philosophers throughout history have upheld diverse ideologies and principles, each unique in its perspective and interpretation of life. However, a common, recurring theme among these scholars is the unwavering belief in the potential of human intellect and innovation. They firmly advocate that the power of reason is our greatest tool, providing mankind with the capacity to question, explore, and ultimately understand the complexities of our world. Reason facilitates our ability to discern right from wrong, push the boundaries of conventional wisdom, and shape our ethical and moral compass, thereby nurturing a society that values justice, equity, and intellectual growth.

At the same time, these philosophers acknowledged the pivotal role of technology and social structures in propelling humanity forward. Technology, as seen through their eyes, is not merely a tool for convenience or amusement. Instead, it's a transformative force that can significantly enhance our quality of life, foster global interconnectedness, and spur societal progress. Artificial intelligence would be an obvious and extreme recent manifestation of this belief. Similarly, well-designed social structures are seen as integral to fostering harmony and equity within a society. They provide a framework for collective cooperation and social welfare, encouraging individuals to contribute to a more advanced and just society. The faith these philosophers place in mankind's abilities underscores their optimistic view of human progress and societal evolution.

Based upon such philosophies, mankind in the future should be expected to exhibit the following characteristics:

1. Total containment of diseases through progress in biology, pharmacology, surgery, and automation of medical care.²

² David B. Agus, *The End of Illness*. Published by Free Press in 2012, this book argues that technological advancements and a new understand-

2. No more hunger, because man no longer has to depend upon cultivation alone. An unlimited supply of food can be synthesized using readily available raw material.³

3. Universal education, because everyone is required to send children to schools and colleges which are totally free, offering opportunities to everyone to pursue a career of their choice.⁴

4. Three-dimensional transmission technologies enable everyone to study at home, if they opt for it.⁵

ing of the human body will allow us to completely control diseases. It delves into the topics of biology, pharmacology, and surgery, suggesting that these fields hold the key to eradicating illnesses; Eric Topol, *Deep Medicine: How Artificial Intelligence Can Make Healthcare Human Again*. Published by Basic Books in 2019, this book explores how automation and AI, especially in the context of medical care, can help us combat diseases more effectively. It posits that the integration of AI in healthcare can revolutionize diagnosis, treatment, and the overall delivery of medical care.

³ David Pearce, *The Hedonistic Imperative*, Self-published, 1995. Pearce explores the idea of a future where advancements in synthetic biology could potentially eliminate the need for traditional agriculture, allowing us to create an abundance of food from readily available raw materials and effectively eradicate hunger; Jason Stoddard, *Winning Mars*. Published by Prime Books in 2010, this science fiction novel presents a future where humanity is not limited to traditional cultivation for food production. It discusses the concept of synthesizing an unlimited amount of food using easily available raw materials, essentially eliminating hunger.

⁴ Bill Gates, Nathan Myhrvold, and Peter Rinearson, *The Road Ahead*, Viking Press, 1995. The authors envision a future where universal education is the norm. He predicts a system where children across the world have access to free education, enabling them to pursue any career they choose, thus creating an egalitarian society; Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, Crown Publishers, 2005. Kozol advocates for equitable and universal education. He imagines a future where all schools and colleges are accessible and free, thus offering opportunities to every individual to pursue the career of their dreams.

⁵ Michio Kaku, *Physics of the Future: How Science Will Shape Human Destiny and Our Daily Lives by the Year 2100*, Doubleday, 2011. Kaku forecasts the impact of scientific advancements on our daily lives.

5. Distribution of unlimited amounts of food, availability of universal education, easy access to medicine, elimination of disease, and plenty of income, will lead to a worry-free life.⁶
6. This worry-free life will lead in turn to a totally crime-free life, where policing will not be required and courts of law would be abolished.⁷
7. Human life will be a blissful paradise before we cross AD 2100, or at the most AD 2150, which is less than 130 years away.⁸

He explores the concept of three-dimensional transmission technologies that would revolutionize education, allowing individuals to study from the comfort of their homes; Dan Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*, McGraw-Hill, 2008. Tapscott presents the idea of digital natives using advanced technology, including three-dimensional transmission, for their education. He proposes that this would provide everyone with the option to study at home.

⁶ Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*, Viking Press, 2005, Kurzweil discusses the future of mankind in relation to technological advancements. He envisions a world with unlimited food distribution, universal education, easy access to medicine, disease eradication, and sufficient income, leading to a worry-free life; Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*, Viking, 2018. Pinker explores the progress humanity is capable of achieving. He argues that the combination of unlimited food availability, universal education, easy access to medical care, disease elimination, and abundant income will result in a life free from common worries.

⁷ Peter H. Diamandis & Steven Kotler, *Abundance: The Future Is Better Than You Think*. Published by Free Press in 2012, this book predicts a future where the provision of basic needs and worry-free living would result in a significant reduction in crime, potentially eliminating the need for traditional law enforcement and judicial systems; Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*. Published by Public Affairs in 2013, Morozov's book discusses the possibility of a future where technology-driven solutions, like abundance in essential resources leading to worry-free lives, could radically diminish crime to the point of possibly abolishing the need for law enforcement and courts.

⁸ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*., Harvill Secker, 2015. Harari explores the future of humankind, suggesting a potentially blissful existence by the years 2100 to 2150 due to ad-

Why Star Trek for this analysis. Analyzing the eschatology of science fiction can help us understand what mankind envisions for its future. We chose Star Trek first of all because we are thoroughly acquainted with this series. Second, because while other science fiction includes a vast range of non-human aliens, the Star Trek series that we propose to analyze contains only humanoids. These humanoids vary in countless ways, for that is needed to make the stories attractive. Nevertheless, ultimately they are all humanoids. What is more, Star Trek treats the humanoids and even analyses their output them in terms of human morality.

While the bulk of the stories are taken with subjects related to the physics of propulsion, technological developments, systems maintenance, search and discovery, they also contain plenty of philosophy. A good example would be the *Star Trek* philosophy of “First Contact.” The Federation has issued instructions not to contaminate any civilization or culture on first contact with them by exposing them to the technologically more advanced civilization of Federation citizens. They also come across cultures where slavery is endorsed, where plunder is the way of life. All this can be identified as part of human behavior generally. As a result, the humanoid societies depicted in *Star Trek* are an ideal subject through which to study ethics and eschatology. In this paper we will focus on eschatology, but ethics will also come in as a related subject.

The main subjects in Star Trek. Since all the *Star Trek* series put together amount to hundreds of episodes, there are

vancements in technology, medicine, and society; Michio Kaku, *Physics of the Future: How Science Will Shape Human Destiny and Our Daily Lives by the Year 2100.*, Doubleday, 2011. Kaku theorizes a future of humankind where technological and scientific advancements could lead to a blissful existence by the years 2100 to 2150.

plenty of recurring themes. These themes can be classified into the following topics

Reflection of societal fears and hopes. Science fiction often mirrors society's collective anxieties, hopes, and predictions about the future. It portrays how humans might navigate potential threats like alien invasions, an artificial intelligence takeover, environmental collapse, or nuclear disaster.

Examination of the human condition. Through science fiction, authors explore the ultimate fate of humanity. Whether it's about human evolution, extinction, or transcendence, these themes provoke thought on the fundamental nature and destiny of mankind. Science fiction allows us to imagine and understand the various paths our species might take, whether they lead to utopia, dystopia, or something in-between.

Impact on technological development. Science fiction has a long history of inspiring real-life scientific and technological advancement. By exploring potential futures, it challenges scientists, engineers, and inventors to turn imaginative ideas into reality, shaping our collective future in the process.

Ethical and moral considerations. Science fiction frequently delves into ethical and moral dilemmas related to potential future scenarios. These narratives can foster critical thinking about how we should navigate the ethical challenges that future technologies or situations might pose. These also provide much eschatological insight into what the unregenerate man really thinks about the future, in spite of glowing predictions by humanists.

Cultural insights. The way different cultures envision the future in their science fiction can provide insights into their values, beliefs, and aspirations. Science fiction can illustrate the cultural nuances of how societies perceive their place in the universe and their approach to survival and evolution.

In summary, the eschatology of science fiction provides a lens through which we can examine humanity's expectations, fears, hopes, and assumptions about the future, as well as the ethical questions we might face. It allows us to engage in a dialogue about the possible futures we want to avoid or create.

Survey of videos. To make this survey statistically meaningful and reliable, we have based this analysis on the following series.

Star Trek: Enterprise (2001-2005)

Story between the years 2151 to 2155, which is earlier than any of the other *Star Trek* series, as it serves as a prequel to the original *Star Trek* series.

Star Trek: The Original Series (1966-1969)

Story between the years 2265 and 2269.

Star Trek: The Animated Series (1973-1974)

Story between the years 2269 to 2270.

Star Trek: The Next Generation (1987-1994)

Story between the years 2364 to 2370.

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine (1993-1999)

Story between the years 2369 and ending in 2375.

Star Trek: Voyager (1995-2001)

Story between the years 2371 to 2378.

Star Trek: Discovery (2017-present)

Between the years 2256, which is roughly a decade before the events of the original *Star Trek* series. However, at the end of Season 2, the *USS Discovery* travels to the year 3188, and the series continues from this point.

Star Trek: Picard (2020-2023)

This series is set in the year 2399.

Together the above series represent more than 741 episodes, which is statistically far more than necessary to get an accurate assessment of their eschatology.

What is their actual eschatology

Based upon the seven expectations mentioned above, humanist thinkers as a group expect the world to be a paradise by AD 2100, or at least by AD 2150. However, the 741 *Star Trek* stories above show clearly that none of the above expectations is met within the stories they tell. What is more, some of the problems are only expected to increase.

Health care in the future. Humanistic philosophers harbor grand visions for the future of healthcare. Their perspectives are rooted in the belief that humanity will eventually achieve total control over diseases. They foresee a future where advancements in biology, pharmacology, surgery, and the automation of medical care could eliminate the spectre of disease, transforming healthcare as we know it. Their expectations are predicated on a profound faith in the capacity of scientific and technological progress to reshape human health and extend our lifespans dramatically.

However, this optimistic vision of a disease-free future is not universally shared. For instance, the world of *Star Trek* presents a different narrative. Despite the advanced technology and deep understanding of biological entities across different species, diseases still exist in the *Star Trek* universe. Illnesses, both physical and psychiatric, are portrayed as integral parts of sentient life, and medical challenges continue to be a substantial part of the narrative, even in the utopian future of space exploration. Some of these infectious diseases are so bad that no cure could be found in spite of the ad-

vanced technology after AD 2150. The *Star Trek* stories suggest that disease and our battle against it may be an inescapable part of the human condition, regardless of our technological advancements.

Thus, the optimistic future painted by humanistic philosophers and the contrasting portrayal in *Star Trek* exemplify the ongoing dialogue about the future of humanity. Obviously, the future world of their philosophy is different from the future world depicted by science fiction.⁹

Hunger in the future. The philosophies that emanate from the humanistic perspective promote the potential of humanity to overcome the limitations of the natural world. They foresee a time when mankind will break free from the labor-intensive and resource-draining process of cultivation, turning instead to innovative methods of food synthesis. These methods might include molecular gastronomy, 3D food printing, or bio-engineered food products that require only simple, readily available raw materials. In this future, food scarcity becomes a thing of the past. Nutritious, palatable food could be synthesized limitlessly on demand, meeting the dietary needs of a burgeoning global population and ending world hunger.

However, this future of abundance and ease is not reflected in all visions of the future, and not in those depicted in *Star Trek*. Even though *Star Trek* features advanced technologies such as the *replicator*, capable of synthesizing meals seemingly out of thin air, food and the act of eating are still depicted as fundamental aspects of life.

⁹ Jeff Ayers, *Voyages of Imagination: The Star Trek Fiction Companion*. Published by Pocket Books/Star Trek in 2006, Ayers' comprehensive guide to Star Trek literature elaborates on numerous plots revolving around diseases, supporting their integral role in the Star Trek universe; see also Jeffrey Lang, *Immortal Coil (Star Trek: The Next Generation)*. Published by Pocket Books/Star Trek in 2002, Lang's novel features several episodes where characters deal with illnesses, further demonstrating the continued existence of diseases in the *Star Trek* universe.

Characters in *Star Trek* often express a preference for "real" food over replicated meals, and traditional methods of cooking and cultivation are prized. Episodes taking place on planets similar to Earth show farming, fishing, and other means of food production as thriving activities. *Star Trek* presents a future where the availability of synthesized food hasn't eliminated the need or desire for traditionally prepared meals.

What is more, many cultures are depicted stealing and plundering food from each other, and also from other cultures. None of this is in keeping with the bright picture painted by the philosophy of the humanist philosophers.¹⁰

Universal education in the future. In the eyes of humanistic philosophers, universal education is a cornerstone of a just and advanced society. They envision a future where education is not just a privilege for the few but a right for all. In this ideal future, children are required to attend schools and colleges, which are entirely free. This ensures that every individual, regardless of their socio-economic background, has the opportunity to acquire knowledge, skills, and the capacity to pursue a career of their choice. By eliminating financial barriers to education, these philosophers hope to create a society where everyone can reach their full potential and contribute meaningfully to the community.

However, this vision of universal education contrasts markedly with the world depicted in *Star Trek*. Education isn't portrayed as a mandatory, standardized process, but rather as a journey that varies based on individual needs and interests. For example, Starfleet Academy, the main educational institution in the series, isn't compulsory, and admis-

¹⁰ Vonda N. McIntyre, *The Entropy Effect (Star Trek: The Original Series)*. Published by Pocket Books/Star Trek in 1981, this book features several instances that emphasize the presence of hunger and the need for food in the Star Trek universe; Dayton Ward, *Drastic Measures (Star Trek: Discovery)*, Published by Gallery Books in 2018, this book portrays episodes where characters are dealing with food scarcity, reinforcing the continued existence of hunger within the *Star Trek* universe.

sion is highly competitive. What is more, people in many societies are deliberately kept illiterate by the ruling parties.¹¹

Crime in the future world. According to humanist thinking, an ideal future would be one free of worries, troubles, and strife. It would be a utopia where everyone has their basic needs met, opportunities are equally distributed, and personal and social growth is promoted. In this vision, a worry-free life would eliminate the need for crime because the root causes – such as poverty, inequality, and social injustice – would have been addressed. Consequently, there would be no need for policing or courts of law because disputes would be resolved through mutual respect, empathy, and understanding.

However, the *Star Trek* universe presents a contrasting viewpoint of the future. Despite being set in a technologically advanced era where humanity has made significant progress, the presence of crimes and conflict remains very real. In *Star Trek*, the diversity of lifeforms, cultures, and civilizations – each of them with its own set of values and norms – inevitably leads to frictions and disputes. The series shows that even in the future, societies must grapple with crime, ranging from petty theft to mass genocide.

This can be seen in the form of various antagonistic entities and individuals committing nefarious acts. For example, rogue Ferengi merchants who indulge in deceit and theft, the Cardassians' oppressive occupation of Bajor resulting in large-scale atrocities, or the destruction of entire worlds by

¹¹ Adrienne McLean, *The Star Trek Universe: A Cultural History*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2007. This book takes a broader look at the *Star Trek* universe, examining how the series has explored issues of education, inequality, and social justice; Rebecca Thorn, *Star Trek and Social Justice: A Galaxy Not So Far from Our Own*, Oxford University Press, 2022. In her book, Thorn delves into several societal issues reflected in *Star Trek*, including education. The author argues that not all species or individuals across the franchise's numerous episodes have equal access to educational resources, which can mirror real-world inequalities.

the Borg Collective. In this future, policing and legal systems (like Starfleet security or the Federation's judiciary) still have a role to play in maintaining order and justice.

This divergence between the humanist ideal and the *Star Trek* universe serves as a reminder that progress and technological advancement do not necessarily eliminate the potential for conflict or wrongdoing. It underscores the continuing need for societal systems that uphold justice and maintain order, regardless of how advanced or "worry-free" a civilization might seem. Hence, the *Star Trek* universe provides a more realistic perspective on the future, asserting that crime, conflict, and the need for systems of law and order are likely to persist, even in a more advanced, egalitarian society.¹²

Crimes reported in Star Trek

By now it should be clear that the world depicted in *Star Trek* does not match with the grand picture expected by humanistic philosophers and writers. To further reinforce that conclusion, here is an alphabetical list of crimes common in almost all series. This list is compiled by the author of this paper after watching every Star-Trek episode:

- Assault
- Battles (very massive at that)

¹² Robert H. Chaires & Bradley Stewart Chilton, Eds., *Star Trek Visions of Law and Justice: Law, Crime, and Corrections*, University of North Texas Press, 2003. This book explores the ways in which *Star Trek* has depicted crime and punishment, and examines how the series has dealt with issues such as terrorism, war crimes, and the death penalty. The book also looks at how *Star Trek* has used crime to explore social and political themes, such as racism, sexism, and inequality; Victor E Grech, *Crime and Punishment in Star Trek: Genocide and War Crimes*, Dragon Press, 2017. This book examines the ways in which the *Star Trek* franchise has dealt with the issue of genocide and war crimes. It also looks at how the series has depicted these crimes, and how it has explored the legal and moral implications of these acts.

- Breaches of Starfleet regulations
- Corruption (individual as well as institutional)
- Espionage
- Genocide
- Murder
- Mutiny and insubordination
- Piracy
- Sabotage
- Smuggling in forbidden items, sometimes extremely toxic items, weapons
- Terrorism
- Theft
- Time travel (which is strictly forbidden to maintain integrity of the timeline)
- Totally new types of crime possible only in technological future
- Treason
- Trespassing on protected worlds (violation of the Prime Directive)¹³

Furthermore, some species of humanoids (and one species of cyborg) are almost totally given to plunder. This list is compiled by the authors of this paper after watching every *Star Trek* episode. They are:

- *Ferengi*: Some individuals, due to their society's emphasis on profit and commerce, engage in unethical and dishonest practices, including theft and deception.

¹³ Based upon statistics compiled by analyzing the *Star Trek* series over five years of investigation.

- *Orion Syndicate*: A criminal organization that engages in a wide range of illegal activities, including piracy, smuggling, and theft.
- *Kazon*: A warlike species divided into sects, some of which resort to piracy and theft, often of technology and resources.
- *Borg*: Known for their pursuits to assimilate other species and technologies into their collective, effectively "plundering" them.¹⁴

In summary, the eschatology of *Star Trek* is totally at variance with the eschatology proposed by humanistic thinkers. Instead of the utopia they have suggested, the future imagined by their own kind shows it to be filled with increasing levels of crime – crime that increases in sophistication as well as in savagery.

Why this disparity between the ideal and the real

Humanistic philosophers advocate for a utopian vision of humanity's future, wherein humanity has overcome the scourges of hunger, disease, and crime. This vision embraces the potential for mankind's betterment and the belief in the inherent goodness and capacity for improvement in human beings. It highlights the ambition of building societies that are equitable, peaceful, and flourishing, putting the spotlight on rational thinking and human empathy to solve global problems.

However, despite these optimistic projections for the future, an innate understanding of personal fallibility exists within all humans. Deep within, every individual, no matter

¹⁴ Ibid.

how intellectual or enlightened, is aware of their inherent inclination for error and wrongdoing. This inner acknowledgement of personal imperfection and the inclination toward sinful behavior is not a product of pessimism but of self-awareness and introspection. It underscores the fact that humans, despite all progress and advancements, remain susceptible to moral failings.

In the scriptures we read:

- Psalm 51:5: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”
- Proverbs 28:13: “Whoever conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”
- Romans 7:19: “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”
- Galatians 5:17: “For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.”
- James 1:14-15: “But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.”

The popular *Star Trek* franchise, though set in an advanced future, does not shy away from the truth of universal human depravity. Through its diverse storylines and complex characters, *Star Trek* brings to light humanity's struggle with moral imperfections. Aggression, trespass, and crime, aspects traditionally associated with moral wrongdoing, find their

way into the narratives, character behaviors, and plot developments.

Characters in the series grapple with their individual and collective consciences, often trying to reconcile their sinful and criminal actions with the moral codes of their societies. In this way, *Star Trek* does not present an overly idealized picture of the future, but rather one that is realistically human, complete with its inherent moral struggles and ethical dilemmas.

In short, their own projection of the future shows that the humanistic thinkers are wrong and that at some level they *know* themselves to be wrong. This projection acknowledges the biblical truth that mankind knows itself to be sinful, and the sin problem cannot be solved with technology.

Annotated Bibliography (for further reading)

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THE ESCHATOLOGY OF SCIENCE FICTION

While not strictly philosophical, this book examines many of the themes and moral questions raised in the series.

5. Questioning Prayer: God's Character as a Problem

Daniel Williams¹

ABSTRACT: How important is prayer? Why pray? Why doesn't God answer my prayers? What is the use in praying? Doesn't God already know everything that is going to happen? How can my prayers change the mind of God? These are not the questions of an atheist or agnostic, but rather the sincere questions of believers in Jesus which I have heard in Bible class as recently as only a few weeks ago. The issue of whether God is moved to act based on the petitionary prayers of believers in Christ is the subject of this paper.

HOW IMPORTANT is prayer? Why pray? Why doesn't God answer my prayers? What is the use in praying? Doesn't God already know everything that is going to happen? How can my prayers change the mind of God? These are not the questions of an atheist or agnostic, but rather the sincere questions of believers in Jesus which I have heard in Bible class as recently as only a few weeks ago. The issue of whether God is moved to act based on the petitionary prayers of believers in Christ is the subject of this paper.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are told by our pastors that prayer is an important part of our new relationship with God. In Luke 18:1 Jesus tells his followers a parable encouraging them to pray. "Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart." In Luke 11:1-13, after Jesus had finished praying, one of His disciples asked Him to teach them to how to pray as

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He did. Matthew 6 expands this prayer framework in verses 5-14. In addition we are told, “You do not have, because you do not ask God” (James 4:2), “Ask, and it will be given to you: seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7), and “Pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16). Cf. Colossians 4:3, 2 Corinthians 1:11, John 17:20-21.²

Of course, Scripture warns that God is not the genie in the bottle just waiting to give whatever is asked. That we do not have, because we do not ask, in James 4:2 is followed by 4:3 on motivation being an important factor in our interaction with God. James 4:3 “You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.” In Psalm 66:18-20 we are given a good deal of information on God’s attitude toward us and His desires concerning prayer. “If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear; But certainly, God has heard; He has given heed to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, who has not turned away my prayer, Nor His lovingkindness from me.” A final example of having the proper attitude of humility in approaching God in prayer is found in Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14. Two men on opposite ends of social respectability are in view. Both are engaged in prayer. But the two are not on an equal footing with God. The one, humble, the other proud and contemptuous of his fellow man. Jesus pronounces a stern warning to people who think more highly of themselves than they ought.

The Scriptures are clear that people in the past believed that petitionary prayer was an important part of their relationship with God. More than that, they believed that God could be moved to do things, due to their prayers, that He otherwise might not have done.

² All quotations will be from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) 1995 edition unless otherwise noted.

QUESTIONING PRAYER

For example, Abraham prayed, interceding for Sodom in Genesis 18:16-33. Moses prayed, interceding for the people in Exodus 32:9-14. Solomon prayed in dedicating the temple in 1 Kings 8:22-53. Elijah prayed that the people would know God in 1 Kings 18:36-37. Isaiah understood prayer and linked it to God's omniscience in Isaiah 65:24. Jesus not only prayed in Matthew 14:23, and John 17, but He taught His disciples how to pray in Luke 11 and Matthew 6.

If prayer was engaged in by Jesus Himself, and He encouraged people to pray, and He taught His followers to pray, then it is important, and believers ought to do it. Add to this such admonitions as 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17, Romans 12:12 and Ephesians 6:18 which encourage believers to pray continuously, and it seems more than clear that if we have questions and doubts concerning prayer and its importance in our lives, we need to spend time trying to resolve them so that we can engage in what Jesus thought was an important part of our relationship with God.

The subject of prayer spans the entire corpus of the Biblical literature. From Genesis to Revelation, prayers of various types are offered to God; praise, thanksgiving, worship, confession, and petitionary prayers are some of the ways prayers are categorized.³ This essay will be limited to petitionary prayer, those prayers that ask something of God, and will attempt to answer the question concerning whether our prayers may influence God to do things that He might not otherwise do, that is, if we did not pray. As Scott A. Davison puts it, "...one of the primary purposes of petitionary prayer, according to those who practice it, is to influence God's action in the world."⁴

³ Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 727.

⁴ John C. Peckham, "The Influence Aim Problem of Petitionary Prayer: A Cosmic Conflict Approach," *Journal of Analytic Theology*, Vol. 8 (August 2020), p. 412.

The problem

Why does there seem to be a problem concerning whether God can be influenced through our prayers? As noted above the Scriptures certainly seem to indicate that God can receive petitions from people and that He also seems to respond to those requests by bringing about good that He otherwise would not have brought about. John Peckham identifies what he calls the Influence Aim Problem of Petitionary Prayer (IAP) as problematic for our understanding and affirming of God's omniscience, omnibenevolence and omnipotence.⁵ He goes on to explain that if our prayers do influence God, then He is informed of something He didn't know, which is contrary to His omniscience. Or He is influenced to some good He otherwise would not have chosen, which is contrary to His always choosing the good, contrary to His omnibenevolence. Or He is somehow increased in power, which is contrary to His being omnipotent.

Peckham sums up his understanding of the difficulty by saying that "...the problem at hand is not whether petitionary prayer can be thought of in some way that is coherent with divine omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence, but more specifically whether it is coherent to affirm that petitionary prayer might influence God to act otherwise than He would have."⁶

In a similar vein, Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder pose the question of petitionary prayer as a puzzle. The puzzle revolves around asking God to do something which is either the best thing He can do or is not the best thing He can do. If it is best, then asking won't make any difference as He would have done it anyway. If it is not best, then asking won't make

⁵ Peckham, p. 413.

⁶ Peckham, p. 413.

any difference as He wouldn't have done it. So, their conclusion is that prayer, on the face of it, is pointless.⁷

To understand how prayer might or might not influence God we must investigate His character. Both Peckham and the Howard-Snyder's suggest that the issue of petitionary prayer revolves around different aspects of God's character. They believe that petitionary prayer is warranted by scriptural testimony and propose solutions to their questions. The solutions revolve around understanding God as loving, engaged, and non-deterministic in His dealings with mankind. My solution to the problem/puzzle will be similar to theirs.

The term *providence* is often used to describe God's engagement with the world.⁸ God's *providence* is the outworking of His will; His choice and direction to bring about what He determines, and how and in what way He responds to persons' decisions. John Laing begins his exposition on Middle Knowledge by saying that, "One of the most widely held doctrines of Christianity is that of meticulous divine providence. ...it is "meticulous," because it refers to the smallest details of all events." This is sometimes referred to as His *sovereign will*. God's will is understood to be supreme and without external limitation. Nothing and no one has the ability to counter God's will and actions. However, God can and does impose limitations on Himself. He has given angels and mankind the ability to make significantly free, though limited, choices which may be contrary to His will.⁹ We are introduced to this self-limitation in Genesis 3, where permis-

⁷ Daniel and Frances Howard-Snyder, "The Puzzle of Petitionary Prayer," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2 (2010), p. 43.

⁸ John D. Laing, *Middle Knowledge: Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), p. 13.

⁹ This position is controversial. The two most significant theological camps, within each of which there is wide variety, are the Reformed Calvinist and the Armenian. For an overview of some of the current perspectives on the issues of divine providence and omniscience see Bruce A. Ware, ed. *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2008).

sion has been given to the serpent-being to make slanderous accusations against God's character to tempt the man and the woman into making the rebellious choice to eat of the forbidden tree.

God's character

To understand how petitionary prayer might move God, we need to briefly investigate what God has revealed of Himself. Who is God? What is He like? How should I relate to Him? These and other questions concerning God and our understanding of Him are hugely important for how we should understand prayer. These questions are theological in that they seek to understand God. Historically this study has been pursued by pulling together scriptural references, scientific observations, and philosophical reasoning.¹⁰ Scripture reveals that God is knowledgeable and His knowledge and understanding are without discernible limits; He is therefore *omniscient*. The Scriptures which describe God's knowledge and purposeful interaction with the world and mankind are numerous; the following are a few examples: Isaiah 46:10; Psalm 147:5; 1 John 3:20; 1 Chronicles 28:29; Ps. 139:1-5.

Science explains the universe, our particular world, and ourselves as orderly and seemingly designed to exacting specifications.¹¹ Philosophy speaks to the reasonable nature

¹⁰ For an excellent introduction to theology and how it is pursued I recommend John C. Peckham, *The Doctrine of God: Introducing the Big Questions* (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), pp. 1-12.

¹¹ To better understand a proposed faith based scientific approach which strongly supports a consciously designed universe see, H. Wayne House, ed., *Intelligent Design 101: Leading Experts Explain the Key Issues*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008). In addition, Steven Meyers' and Michael Behe's books on intelligent design are excellent sources for making a strong scientific case for an intelligent designer. See bibliography.

of our reality and strongly suggests that a knowledgeable, capable God is responsible.¹²

In addition, God, in creating the world and us, and in revealing Himself and His creative purposes, is understood to make decisions. This speaks to His *sovereignty* indicating that His will is supreme. He is active and purposeful. He seems to respond to prayer, He interacts with people, and reveals His purposeful guidance of all that takes place. He is, in a word, *providential*.¹³ God is understood to be stable in His character.

God has traditionally been understood to be in some sense *immutable* or *impassible*. To some theologians this means that God is unchanging in His essential nature that He cannot be affected by anything external to Himself. In this view, He is unresponsive to anything or anyone. His providential ordering of the world is accomplished not in a series of sequential acts, but is rather subsumed in one pure timeless act (*actus purus*).¹⁴ Malachi 3:6 is often quoted as indicating this

¹² Rasmussen makes a strong logically based argument for God's existence being the best explanation of the knowledgeable providential basis for reality. Joshua Rasmussen, *How Reason Can Lead to God: A Philosophers Bridge to Faith* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2019).

¹³ Providence is identified by Paul Helm as "theological" and "out of date"; rarely used in today's discussions of God's activity in the world. Paul Helm, *The Providence of God: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 17-18. However for some, it is still a useful term and helpful for understanding God's activity in bringing about His desired will. For an extensive discussion of God's providence with reference to human freedom see John C. Peckham, *Divine Attributes: Knowing the Covenantal God of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 150-162. See also John D. Laing, *Middle Knowledge: Human Freedom in Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2018), p. 13.

¹⁴ This understanding of God's character is described as "Utter immutability and strict impassibility," by Peckham. It is one of several views concerning whether God can engage with the world or have emotions. John C. Peckham, *The Doctrine of God: Introducing the Big Questions*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), p. 29.

truth, along with James 1:17.¹⁵ This would mean that God does not and cannot respond to prayer, as this would mean a change in His thinking and a responding to something outside Himself.¹⁶ Peckham goes on to describe several other views concerning whether God changes, or has emotions and responds to prayer, views which understand these verses as describing God's stability of character rather than His being timeless and unresponsive. He is, in a word, *passable*.

In attempting to understand God's revelation of Himself, particularly as it relates to His providential guidance of all that happens in the world, and our prayerful interaction with Him, various theological perspectives have evolved. They can be divided broadly into *immutably deterministic* and *passably non-deterministic*.

The *immutably deterministic* perspective is that God's will is not only supreme and sovereign, but that He determines everything that takes place within His creation in one timeless moment. All actions, thoughts, and decisions have their origin in God's will. This determinism is what makes His omniscience, His unrestricted knowledge of all that can or will happen, a certainty.

The *passable non-deterministic* view is that God does not determine everything that takes place, that God does interact with His creation and does experience time. In the creative expression of His will, He has made room for human and angelic freedom of expression, and for random (stochastic) activity which provides the context for, and results from, those creaturely decisions. The *passible deterministic* position is that though God determines all events, there is room for human free-will.

¹⁵ Malachi 3:6 "For I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." NASB. James 1:17 "Every good thing given, and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow."

¹⁶ This understanding of God's character is described as 'Utter immutability and strict impassibility', by Peckham, *Divine Attributes*, pp. 20-66.

Theological Perspectives: Immutably Deterministic

Reformed: Calvinism

In an article on prayer and sovereignty, R.C. Sproul raises the question as to whether, given Calvinism's perspective on God's sovereignty, people should pray. After all, according to this theological perspective, hasn't God already ordained all that will take place? His first justification for praying is that we are *commanded* to pray, just that. In addition to being commanded to pray we are also given the *privilege* of prayer. Prayer for the Christian is both a duty and an unspeakable privilege.¹⁷

Sproul supports and expands his position by quoting Calvin from Book III, Chapter 20 of the *Institutes* which says, "But, someone will say, does God not know, even without being reminded, both in what respect we are troubled and what is expedient for us, so that it may seem in a sense superfluous that he should be stirred up by our prayers – as if he were drowsily blinking or even sleeping until he is aroused by our voice? But they who thus reason do not observe to what end the Lord instructed his people to pray, for he ordained it not so much for his sake as for ours."¹⁸ Sproul's position is that petitionary prayer is for the benefit of the one praying and in no way influences God to do other than what He has already decided to do.

Christopher Woznicki's reading of Calvin, in concert with other reformed theologians, is in agreement with Sproul's

¹⁷ R. C. Sproul, "Prayer and God's Sovereignty: Do Our Prayers Change God's Mind?", Excerpt from "Prayer and God's Sovereignty." *Our Sovereign God: Addresses Presented to the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology*, 1974–1976. James M. Boice, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).

¹⁸ John Calvin, Henry Beveridge, (Translator), *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 713. <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/commentaries/commentaries.i.html>.

understanding.¹⁹ He believes that a proper reading of Calvin leads to the conclusion that petitionary prayer is the believers' response to a loving and merciful God, but that God does not respond to those prayers as if He was learning anything new or changing His plans in any way.

Why do Sproul and Woznicki, following the teaching of Calvin, believe that (contrary to what Scripture seems to indicate) prayer does not change how God acts in the world? They are both quite explicit that it is due to their belief in God's *immutably determinative* sovereignty.²⁰ Though Calvin is clear that God invites our prayers, he is also clear that God responds to our prayers in loving relationship and not by being moved by them to change His way of dealing with the world. This answer may be satisfying to some but it seems to make prayer more an exercise in spiritual growth rather than an interaction with a caring God who takes seriously the heartfelt requests of His people recorded in Scripture.

Reformed: Lutheran

Luther, who in all probability was a significant influence on Calvin's understanding of prayer, believed that prayer did not inform or move God to do other than what He already intended to do.²¹ He reasoned from his understanding that God determines everything according to His will. God's will being supreme, and uncontestable, everything that happens

¹⁹ In a similar article Woznicki agrees with Sproul that in the Reformed tradition, prayer is for the person and does not influence God. Christopher Woznicki, "What Are We Doing When We Pray? Rekindling a Reformation Theology of Petitionary Prayer," *Calvin Theological Journal*, 53 no 2 (Nov 2018), pp. 333-334.

²⁰ Calvin wrote that God has decreed all that takes place. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 766-795.

²¹ Woznicki, "What are we doing," 336, n10 quoting Elsie McKee's article, "John Calvin's Teaching on the Lord's Prayer," in *The Lord's Prayer Perspectives for Reclaiming Christian Prayer*, ed. Daniel Migliore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 89.

does so because God wills it so. Why then does God encourage petitionary prayer? Luther says:

The reason He commands it is, of course, not in order to have us make our prayers an instruction to Him as to what He ought to give us, but in order to have us acknowledge and confess that He is already bestowing many blessings upon us and that He can and will give us still more. By our praying, we are instructing ourselves more than we are him.²²

Reformed: Martin Bucer

Of even more influence on Calvin than Luther was Martin Bucer. According to Bruce Gordon, Calvin followed Bucer's understanding of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, contrary to Luther's. He opines that Bucer was a direct and substantial influence on Calvin's thought concerning prayer. Bucer was in alignment with many of his fellow reformers in understanding prayer as primarily benefiting the person doing the praying. This is because God has predetermined all that would take place. God's sovereign *immutable determination* is their key to understanding God's relationship with the world.²³

Issues with the Immutably Deterministic View

Is God moved by our prayers? Is *impassible determinism* warranted from the scriptural witnesses? Is this theological perspective necessary for our understanding of God and prayer? Many theologians believe that contrary to Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin and Luther, the Scriptures indicate that God

²² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 21: *The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and The Magnificat*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), p. 233.

²³ Woznicki, "What are we doing," pp. 338-340.

is *immutable* in His character and *passible* in His loving providential interaction with His creatures.²⁴

As noted earlier, Abraham engages in what seems are substantive conversations with God in Genesis 15:1-21; 17:1-27; and 22:1-24. Abraham is given promises which he both believes resulting in righteous standing before God (15:6), and poses questions concerning procreation (15:2-5), his preferences in progeny (17:19), and how it will all eventually work out (22:15-18).

In the same way, Moses and God converse on a number of occasions, which indicates God's willingness to be importuned concerning His decisions even though they seem warranted and quite reasonable given the circumstances. For instance, when God expresses Himself in the theophany of the burning bush, and informs Moses that he is to be the one that God will send – "...I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." (Ex. 3:10) – Moses expostulates, saying that he doesn't want the job and in fact is ill-suited to the task. God then enters into a brief argument concerning His ability to provide all that Moses will need to get the job done. Moses doesn't give up in trying to inform God concerning his abilities and anticipated lack of success in Chapter 4. Of course, Moses eventually gives in and gets on with the job of delivering the people.

An even more significant petition is made by Moses in Exodus 32 on behalf of the people just when God has decided to destroy them, due to their disloyalty, and to start over with Moses. God is certainly within His rights and Moses doesn't try to dissuade Him based on sympathy or suggesting that God just overlook the trespass. Beginning in verses 11-12 Moses argues that the Egyptians won't understand the judgement and will impugn God's motives. In verse 13 he reminds God that He has made an oath to Abraham, Isaac and Israel to multiply their descendants and give them the

²⁴ Peckham, *Doctrine of God*, p. 46f.

land forever. In verse 14 the Lord changes His mind in response to Moses' arguments.

Notice, Moses argues based on what He knows of God's character. God made promises and God keeps His promises. He is a God of integrity who can be relied upon. Whatever the people may do, God will keep His word. These brief examples indicate that God not only interacts with people but responds to them and changes what He intends to do based on that interaction.

Theological Perspectives: Passable, Non-Deterministic

Reformed: Arminianism

Jacobus Arminius was born in the Netherlands and studied at Marburg, Leiden, Geneva, and Basel. He served as pastor of a congregation in Amsterdam (1588–1603) and was professor in the University of Leiden, the Netherlands, the last six years of his life. Arminius began as a strict Calvinist (he had studied under Beza, Calvin's son-in-law, in Geneva). While defending Calvinism against Koornheert, Arminius believed his opponent more ably defended his views and that he, Arminius, lost the debate. This sense of defeat led Arminius to rethink his theological position and to eventually reject Calvinism.²⁵

In rejecting Calvin's views concerning God's *impassible deterministic* sovereignty, Arminius embraced the concept of God being *passible*. That is, God could be moved by the emotions and prayers of people to do things He might not have otherwise done. This emphasis on God's approachability and loving desire to save everyone, as understood from 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9, was in stark contrast to Calvin's teaching on the arbitrary nature of God's determining everything, including who would and would not receive salvation.

²⁵ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), pp. 488-489.

John Wesley carried this doctrine of God approachable *passibility* forward in his Methodism in England. He, along with George Whitefield conducted extensive evangelistic meetings throughout the country, bringing revival to the Church.²⁶

Open Theism

Similar in many respects to Arminianism, Open Theism, also called free will theism and openness theology, is the belief that God does not exercise meticulous control of the universe but leaves it "open" for humans to make significant choices (to exercise free will) that impact their relationships with God and others. It is clearly non-deterministic in its understanding of divine providence.²⁷ This means that God does not know the future exhaustively. While affirming that God knows all that can be known and so is omniscient, they deny that this means that God knows everything that will happen.²⁸

The emphasis of Open Theism is that of people enjoying a reciprocal loving relationship with God. For this to happen people and angelic beings must be free to choose to enter into that loving relationship with God. They cannot be forced. God intends, and in John Sanders' words, "...takes the risk," of creating beings who can choose to reject Him.²⁹

Additionally, Open Theism denies impassibility. They affirm that Scripture indicates God's being affected by the decisions and prayers of His creatures.³⁰

While attractive as a counter to a meticulously determined universe, the Openness view departs from Arminianism's

²⁶ Enns, *Handbook*, p. 489.

²⁷ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999).

²⁸ Ware, p. 198.

²⁹ Sanders, p. 203.

³⁰ Ware, p. 196.

understanding of God's comprehensive knowledge including knowledge of all future events.³¹

Issues passable, non-deterministic

The theological perspectives of Open theism and Reformed Arminianism seem to provide a closer alignment with Scripture than Calvinism or Lutheranism. The issues with each view concern whether God determines what will come to pass and so the certainty of His knowledge or is open to the change based on prayer.

Theological Perspectives: Passable. Deterministic

Molinism

Luis de Molina (1535-1600) was a contemporary of both Luther and Calvin. He was a Jesuit professor of theology at several institutions in Spain.³² During his studies he was confronted with the problem of divine sovereignty and human volition. Does God determine every decision and event including sin and evil? Can God be moved by the prayers of His people? His answer was no to the first and yes to the second.

Molina believed that Scripture was clear on the nature of God's knowledge: the nature of God's *omniscient* knowledge is without limitation and is based in His determination of which world to create. God knows everything that can be known based on His will. He knows all events, actions, thoughts, and emotions of everyone, past, present, and future.

³¹ David Hunt, "The Simple-Foreknowledge View," in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, J.K. Beilby and P.R. Eddy, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 65.

³² For a comprehensive dissenting criticism of Molina's middle knowledge see, Travis James Campbell, "Historical and Theological Studies: Middle Knowledge: A Reformed Critique," (*Westminster Theological Journal* 68, 2006), pp. 1-24.

Molina also believed that human responsibility and freedom was clearly taught and that as Scripture was assumed to be divinely inspired and therefore accurate, the two concepts must be reconcilable.

To explain how God's knowledge can be comprehensive concerning every action and thought, including freely chosen decisions and seemingly random actions, Molina conceived of what he called *middle knowledge (scientia media)*.³³ According to Molina, "Middle Knowledge is God's pre-volitional knowledge of all true *counterfactuals*. It is a type of knowledge God possessed logically or explanatorily prior to his willing to create the world or his making of any decisions about what kind of world, if any, he would create."³⁴

Counterfactuals are understood to be "...contrary-to-fact hypothetical statements: if something were the case (which in fact it is not), then something else would be the case."³⁵ To illustrate how this works consider the following examples. If I were to drive my hot sports car on the interstate, I would get pulled over by a police officer for speeding. If the Supreme Court had declared Al Gore the winner of the 2000 presidential election, the United States would not have invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. According to Molina's understanding of *middle knowledge*, God knows which of these propositions are true and which are false before deciding to make this world or any world. It is important to note that in the examples, the *counterfactuals* involve agents with free will or events that are random. Therefore, included in God's Middle Knowledge is His awareness of what all possible individuals with freedom of choice would freely do in any set of circum-

³³ Kirk R. MacGregor, *The Life and Theology of the Founder of Middle Knowledge: Luis de Molina* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2015), p. 79.

³⁴ MacGregor, p. 79.

³⁵ William L. Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Wipf & Stock, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition), p. 71.

stances in which they find themselves and how any of those events would turn out.

This understanding of counterfactuals was derived by Molina from several Scriptures. In 1 Samuel 23:9-13 we read:

Now David knew that Saul was plotting evil against him; so he said to Abiathar the priest, "Bring the ephod here." Then David said, "O Lord God of Israel, Your servant has heard for certain that Saul is seeking to come to Keilah to destroy the city on my account. Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down just as Your servant has heard? O Lord God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant." And the Lord said, "He will come down." Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the Lord said, "They will surrender you." Then David and his men, about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When it was told Saul that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the pursuit.

In this text David asks Abiathar if Saul is going to attack Keilah and whether the citizens would turn him over to Saul if that took place. The Urim answers in the affirmative. So, David flees the city and eludes Saul. The prediction was accurate about what would happen, but it didn't take place. Molina recognized that as God cannot be mistaken concerning His knowledge of future events, He was communicating what would happen under certain circumstances, i.e. counterfactual knowledge.

In another example, in Jeremiah 38:17-18, God warns Zedekiah that if he surrenders to the Babylonians, his life will be spared, and the city will not be burned. However, if he does not surrender, then he will be killed and the city will be burned. Notice again that this is not simple foreknowledge of events, but rather predictions of the decisions and conse-

quences of those decisions under these particular circumstances. They are *counterfactual* incidents.

Molina also found counterfactual knowledge in the New Testament. Jesus makes such a pronouncement in Matthew 11:20-24 concerning the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum:

Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.”

Here again Jesus is given knowledge concerning how things would have gone if the situation had been different. If he had visited Tyre and Sidon and done the miracles in them that he did do in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, then they would have repented. But God did not choose to create that particular world circumstance and so they did not repent. They possessed the ability to repent, but they did not.

Molina believed that these examples in Scripture, as well as many others, refuted the position of Calvin and Luther that people lacked the freedom to receive salvation. Further, Molina’s insight indicated that their views concerning God’s determining not only who would be saved but who would be reprobate were in error, and that God was responsive to the non-determined decisions of people. By way of application for this essay, this meant that prayer was undetermined and

could move God to do things that He otherwise might not have done.

Why the term “middle knowledge”? Molina was interacting with Thomas Aquinas’s framework concerning God’s comprehensive omniscient knowledge. At the time of his writing, theologians like Luther and Calvin shared this framework understanding. Molina placed his concept of counterfactuals between God’s natural and free knowledge.³⁶ Natural knowledge refers to all necessary truths which God knows according to His nature. These are independent of His will and prior to creation. God also knows the full range of possible truths in possible worlds. He knows, for example, that in some possible world Peter freely denies Christ three times and that in another world Peter freely affirms Christ under identical circumstances, for both are possible.

Free knowledge refers to truths God knows by knowing His own will. Natural knowledge comes by God’s freely exercising His will in creating or controlling events within the created order. He knows exhaustively the future since He created it.

Molina added the concept of *middle knowledge* which logically follows God’s natural knowledge and is prior to His free knowledge. This is knowledge which is prior to God’s decision to create some possible world and so is prevolitional. “Middle Knowledge is God’s prevolitional knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom.”³⁷ As shown in the scriptural examples above, the events relate to what could happen in a variety of circumstances including whether a person prayed or not.

Issues passable, deterministic

Molinism, while addressing the apparent conflict between God’s sovereign will and human responsibility, is considered

³⁶ Laing, *Middle Knowledge*.

³⁷ MacGregor, *The Life and Theology*, p. 50.

problematic by many theologians. Bruce Ware sees two problems with Molina's view. The first says that "it is not at all clear how God can know by middle knowledge just what choices free creatures would make in various sets of possible circumstances." The second concerns libertarian free will and the arbitrariness of creaturely decision making. These objections are addressed in the conclusion.³⁸

Conclusion

Because of God's middle knowledge, He knew how each possible individual would pray in any set of circumstances prior to His decision to create the world. God then used that information to providentially order the world so that some of those prayers make a difference in which world is created. God decides how to respond to our prayers prior to our praying them due to His middle knowledge of what they would be. Based on our praying and God's middle knowledge, our prayers can change the world.

For example, God can decree to actualize a world where I exist and includes some of the things I pray for. These prayers are during my life and are freely decided on by myself. They are not divinely decreed in any way. I can pray or not as I choose. So, what if I don't pray? Then God "middle knows" that I didn't pray for some of the things I want and He may or may not actualize a world in which I obtain those things. Both God and I are free to decide. God knows all of the possible worlds He could create, all the people that He could create and all of the circumstances that might obtain in those worlds. He "middle knows" how each person would decide to act and what they would think in each of the possible worlds He could create. Based on His middle knowledge He decided to create the world He did.

Another example of counterfactual knowledge is Hezekiah's prayer in 2 Kings 19:14-36. Had Hezekiah not prayed

³⁸ Ware, *Perspectives*, pp. 110-111.

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for Israel's deliverance from the attack of the Assyrian king, Israel would have been physically destroyed in 701 BC.

How important are our prayers? From these and previous scriptural examples it seems clear that our prayers do influence God to the extent that we, through our prayers, are co-creators of the world with God. Prayer is direct interaction with the creator of the world prior to His creative act. Because of His love and grace, He desires us to interact with Him and ask Him for His benefits to us. I conclude with Jeremiah 33:2-3, "Thus says the Lord who made the earth, the Lord who formed it to establish it, the Lord is His name, 'Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know'."

6. A Resurgence of Paganism: Feminism and Goddess Worship

Billy Chilongo Sichone¹

ABSTRACT: The world is ever changing in many ways, and not always in a good way. What was once viewed as wrong, repulsive and appalling is the very thing sought after today. Times do change and have changed even in areas that relate to the religious. There is evidently a vicious reawakening taking place, of goddess-centered ancient religions, opposed to biblical Christianity on every side. There is also a thriving of syncretic and animistic religions at every turn. What accounts for this and how is the Christian to respond to all these rapid changes in this dynamic world? This paper briefly highlights some salient features about mysticism or the mystic religions as they relate to this resurrected goddess worship.

HUMAN BEINGS HAVE a tendency to look for something to worship. If anything happens that they cannot explain, they soon attribute it to some deity as the cause. Others try to explain away events using the scientific method, rejecting all other attempted alternative explanations. The fact that humans are by nature religious in one way or the other (including the so-called ‘atheists’ are religious!²) makes them prone

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² McFadden says that the “atheistic analysis of the universe” supplied by Marxism is so complete that “many writers understandably classify Marxism as the first secular world religion” – Charles J. McFadden, *Christianity Confronts Communism* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1982, p. 7.

to seek out answers. In one sense, curiosity is a good thing because it triggers a desire to investigate, but in another, it may lead to practices, rituals and behaviors that really turn people aside from the Living God. In ancient times, people turned to pagan practices, and attributed the cause of all things to some form of deity or a cluster of deities. Men tended to construct alters, shrines or venerated some aspects of nature such as hot springs or some extra ordinarily big tree as harboring some form of divinity.

They were, in most cases, *animistic*, believing that invisible forces existed that essentially governed the world and held the destiny of the world under their full control. Life revolved around these deities, whether male or female. Time was believed to be cyclical rather than chronological or linear, and if a people did not conduct themselves well or failed to offer sacrifices at the right time, the deities' wrath would instantly be triggered, resulting in unexplained deaths, omens, droughts or some such calamity, until they were appeased. To pacify these irked deities, blood sacrifices of one sort or the other, including the sacrificing of human lives would be performed.³

This often pantheistic polytheistic worship of a pantheon of gods has been an established practice among humans in ancient uncivilized cultures. However, this form of worship is making a comeback in a big way, with the advent of globalization, postmodernism, pluralism, and humanism, among other drivers of free thought. Human beings increasingly feel that they are free to do and believe what they will without any external coercion or prescription as has been so in the past. More and more people reject any authority including the Holy Scriptures and instead prefer to think and act in ways consistent with their relative world view. The Bible is no

³ The Aztecs of Central Mexico may be the most famous example of a culture that required human blood sacrifice to appease a deity. See John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 106-115.

longer their highest court of appeal, nor do they think it worth imbibing the truths hidden in God's word.

Goddess worship described

What then is goddess worship? Simply stated, goddess worship is the veneration or worship of a female goddess that reigns over and rules the world. Says the feminist Nicolae, "The first identified characteristic, that of 'deity', manifests in the Goddess Movement as a supreme female being, predominantly perceived as both immanent and transcendent, as a tangible mother-deity and as a psychological archetype. The Goddess is all-pervading and all-encompassing."⁴ She is believed to be integrated in nature and ensures that all things happen as per plan. This female deity is potent, emotionally reactive and yet caring at the same time. If she is reviled, ignored or not given due attention, she hits back in various ways, including floods, heat waves, droughts or whatever way that would make her ire known. To pacify her, sacrifices have to be made. Because she is in nature and controls all things, she is the source of all life and sustenance; without her, people whither and perish. But there is more, in that she is most powerful and does as she pleases, not subject to male manipulation as has been the case among humans for some time now.

As a result, *Gia* or *Mother Earth* is worshipped in different forms, some of which appear legitimate in and of themselves. Think about the environmental movements as well as the subtle Hinduistic tenets that presently influence our world; these are religious in themselves in most cases. Nature Watch, Greenpeace, and other organizations appear legitimate at face value but underneath or undergirding are religious tenets, worship of 'Gia' the earth goddess. Therefore, goddess worship has to do with submission, veneration and

⁴ Tae Nicolae, "The Western Revival of Goddess Worship," *Feminist Theology*, Vol. 31, Iss. 2, 2023, p. 132.

exaltation of a female goddess as was the case in the ancient past. Another point we need to highlight is that goddess worship is essentially witchcraft. The Wicca and other satanic organizations or movements all support weird practices that are in direct contradiction with Scripture. In Deuteronomy and Leviticus,⁵ the Bible forbids all sorts of witchcraft, sorcery and out-of-body experiences; they are not permitted by God. Wicca allows and supports goddess worship, and seems to empower the initiated adherents.

This has implications for all. For one thing, the God of the Bible (or any male deity) is dethroned. With demonic powers, individuals can achieve a lot including manipulating, controlling and battering people into submission. In recent times, we have observed the rise of clearly wicked practices, ritual and movements that are downright scary, and yet the subjects feel uniquely empowered, and able to do whatever they want. In some cases, they post and show some of what they do to the whole world in the name of “freedom of expression.” In a postmodern context, nothing is right or wrong but depends on the individual that determines how they feel about something.

In the United States for instance, Satanism and these ancient religions have seen a revival of sorts and in many cases their adherents are lobbying to each them to the children, all in the name of “freedom of religion.”⁶ For another thing, in goddess worship, male “chauvinism” is aimed at and shot down. Books, sentences, and even individual words must be carefully constructed to either be neutral or in favor of the female gender. Furthermore, the status of the female gender must be respected because without women, no one would exist. Without their presence, things would drastically and

⁵ Leviticus 19:26-31; Deuteronomy 18:10-13; Deuteronomy 26:14; Isaiah 47:12-14; I Samuel 28: 3-9 etc.

⁶ See Lily Rothman, “The Evolution of Modern Satanism in the United States,” *Time*, July 2015. <https://time.com/3973573/satanism-american-history/>.

swiftly fall into disrepair with attendant negative ramifications. A number of these claims are legitimately true but subtly mixed with erroneous thoughts, jettisoning all scriptural thinking in the final analysis. This is a subtle deception point, indeed a slippery slope, even for some professing Christians. In a ferociously dynamic world, it is ever necessary for the saints to meticulously watch and pray, to ensure we do not accidentally swallow a coated poison pill along with the good medicine. Admittedly, it is nigh impossible to completely stop or eliminate the dangerous fangs of error but we certainly can mitigate their deleterious effects.

Objectives of goddess worship

What then does goddess worship stand for? Simply stated, it demands that the ultimate deity is a female who both gives life as well as ends it. She is self-existent, needing no male support or assistance to rule, govern or run the world.⁷ If males will not bow the knee, they are to be stopped or else slaughtered forthwith. It further means and implies that the female gender must lead, as opposed to the biblical mandate and pattern of male leadership. It is thus pagan in nature, a return to what formerly was a popular paradigm prior to the advent of the Christian gospel. As the feminist Neocolae notes, “members of the women’s rights movement retrieved and embraced the feminine definitions of ‘God’ coined by their predecessors, and further expanded the dimensions of female spirituality through neo-paganism.”⁸

Connections of goddess worship to feminism

Arising from what has been postulated or presented above, goddess worship goes even further, and it makes sure that

⁷ See for example Allan Turner (n.d.), *Wimmin, Wiccans, and Goddess Worship*, Indus School Resource.

⁸ Neocolae, p. 131.

females not only defy men's authority but make decisions when and how they think best entirely independent of the influence of any men. The "patriarchal" world view and conviction triggers in feminists the feeling of being short-changed, unappreciated, undervalued and suppressed. By that token, feminists demand more, are in rebellion and spend more time advocating for their rights, equality and equity. Though some of these demands are good in and of themselves because fallen man has abused them, the pundits veer to another extreme where they upset the natural order God has set, or even what nature would require. It further topples the family leading to neglect, divorce and aspirations to compete with men at all times rather than cooperate or collaborate. This shows itself in many ways. Examples include the extreme aversion to the biblical domestic order, sexual preferences contrary to nature, overly bold self-assertiveness and a clear disregard for men.

On feminism, women are no longer the "weaker vessel" but demand equal decision-making authority and freedom to indulge or do whatever they please, while exhibiting an aversion to home keeping. From what has been described, it is not hard to observe or discern that all these have direct links or connections to the political feminist movement, whose agenda is to dethrone the man, reject traditional roles and enable women to do whatever they please without any help or interference from men. But the feminist movement demands even more, in changes to protocols, authority structures reporting and even basic family structure. Extreme feminists refuse to be under the "abusive" man and in many cases would, if possible, dominate the world. After all, women or females are in the majority, so why should a worthless man have all the power? Away with such a thought! Feminist women have progressed to affirm each other, empower and support one another, not by a mutual faith in Christ, but by rejecting the biblical order or re-interpreting the Scriptures in ways that they think is best.

Dangers with goddess worship to the family and church

Having defined or described what goddess worship is all about, we now proceed to highlight its dangers, effects or ramifications on various aspects of social life including the Church and family. It is abundantly evident that goddess worship is idolatry, the worship of some form other than the True God.

Firstly, it breaks the commandments enshrined in Exodus 20, notably the first (“You shall have no other gods before me”) and the second (“You shall not...bow down to them”). Secondly, goddess worship is a form of bondage from which the Son should set free (John 8:32, 36). Without being delivered from the dominion of darkness, people are limited and inhibited. Thirdly, goddess worship engenders needless fear in followers or adherents. They are not at liberty to live life at their best because they dread this deity. Fourth, goddess worship disrupts God’s design of the family at times leading to misplaced leadership structures. Although it appears to empower women, it fosters rebellion, disregard or an aversion of the male gender. Fifth, it generates a competitive rather than a collaborative spirit in male-female relations. At every turn, women hustle to be on top of the hierarchy and/or in charge; if not, all sorts of discontent erupt. Sixth, goddess worship triggers and ferments a spirit of independence, self-centeredness, materialism, and in extreme cases, outright hate between men and women. Although we support that women should be empowered, encouraged to excel at what they do beyond the home as well as receive equitable treatment, it is of concern if women become egocentric, disrespectful of others and in the final analysis neglect their children and spouses all in the name of self-actualization or gratification.

We echo our earlier sentiments that goddess worship is enslavement and a step backwards into the pagan past. But then, we need to state that goddess worship expresses itself in different forms and shades. Some are initiated into the spirit

of this incantation unawares. They catch or adopt it from school, society, socialization, laws and in some cases from the local culture. If and when the Bible has been relegated to the fringes or even opposed outright, then everything else becomes possible. With the advent of postmodernism, all things become relative as well as allowable. In the present scenario, women gripped by the 'Gia' spirit tend to reject responsibility or even reject the idea of having or raising their own children!

Projecting into the future, we might see women "renting" their wombs for artificial insemination, cloning, abortion, or offering children for adoption, if only they might pursue their ends. In as much as we have rights to make certain decisions, in these cases, people veer to unethical extremes.. By that token, traditional marriage is discarded if not viewed as obsolete. The family bond is wrecked and or acrimony becomes common, a new 'normal.'. Another indirect offshoot of goddess worship would be upsetting the order in the church of God to the extent that the church is viewed as too restrictive, suppressive and not supportive to women. If women are not allowed to become preachers in church along with the men, for instance, they revolt and gravitate to the next church that would countenance such. If they cannot find one like that, they apostatize or begin to attack the church from outside using polemical works.

As a tangent, feminists can be heard to claim that they were "forced" out of church by the archaic rules, male chauvinism or incorrect interpretation of Scripture. They would claim that the epistles forbidding women to take authority in Church have either been misunderstood or interpreted with a biased eye. Their argument would go something like this: *'You know, Paul was dealing with a cultural situation that was time bound and not applicable for all time. He spoke only at Corinth and not London or New York, you see. It was meant to correct a situation, you see'* – or they would say *'Paul was a male chauvinist raised with a chauvinistic Jew-*

ish eye that counted only males as people to the disregard of women. Paul seems to have underrated women, thought they were less intelligent and thus not worth considering. What we think he should have said is....'

What these people forget is that Paul was equally a Roman citizen, brought up in Tarsus and thus had a big picture view of things, though primarily was led by the Holy Spirit to write what he did. Opposing Scripture is opposing God himself in the final analysis. That said, feminists will talk in adversarial, contentious and acrimonious terms claiming their rights are being infringed and have repeatedly been robbed. They will disregard Scripture and go great lengths to prove that what a man can do, they can too, and in some cases even better. That is how people of the goddess view things. They use grids and lenses far out to sea from the biblical shores and may become infuriated when biblical language or ideas are introduced in a discourse, because they are viewed as enslaving, downgrading or self-esteem-denying to the post-modern woman. What they do not realize is that they are part of a religion, a movement whose main aim is to oppose God.

Would we then conclude that everything the feminists say is factually wrong and thus must be rejected? Not quite; what we contend is that their allegiance is not to the true God and thus they cannot submit to His dictates as enshrined in His word. The spirit of the age comes across in many more ways than one, including through social media, television, movies, cultural events, catalogues, school curriculums, documentaries and a host of other ways. Often, the feminist spirit is intermingled with good things such as human rights, but once imbibed, tends to hijack the mind leads those influenced by it to the spiritual gallows. Goddess worship is a deadly phenomenon, without handles and subtly toxic to the soul.

Why this idolatry must be opposed

Clearly, goddess worship as propelled by feminism in all its shades and modes is firstly idolatry and secondly against the created order or even the word of God. “In a modern society arguably disenchanted with existence...numerous Western women are transfixing their reality by making God in their own image.”⁹ This is an affront and stands in opposition to the God of the Bible. Idolatry may be simply defined as the veneration of anything other than the God of the Bible. Feminism makes much of its gender and points myriads back to the worship of a pagan deity other than the true Creator of the universe. It must therefore be opposed by all well meaning sane people before it ruins their lives, societies or families. Entire homes have been ruined by this vice that practically rips against the grain of created order of things. Granted, the female gender is important and to be respected, but it cannot exist alone or in a vacuum. The Christian church must meticulously watch this movement and oppose it based on biblical principle. This may not be in sync with the present mode of thinking, but it pleases God, and that is what is important.

A Christian response

That this is a real problem is beyond debate. How to respond is another thing, and difficult to delineate exactly. We suggest a few possible responses that would be helpful. Firstly, the Christian should know that there is always a warfare consistently going on at all times. People are looking for ways to undermine, oppose or even eliminate the word or influence of God. Second, the Christian must develop a biblical world view. The scriptural metanarrative must be hidden upon the tablets of saints’ hearts. In the light of revived goddess worship, women are especially encouraged to take in the word of God and let it dwell richly in them, lest they be led astray.

⁹ Nicolae, p. 130.

Thirdly, Christians need to be aware that the education curriculum and systems have often been hijacked in favor of the humanistic agenda. Saints need to be proactive, and craft sound curriculums if in homeschooling, or else mitigate the impact from the public schools or culture around them. Fourthly, Christians need to teach the biblical standards to the novices as well as to the older folk in the faith. Repeated review of God's word keeps many of us on track lest we forget. Fifth, Christians must defend and demonstrate that their world view is superior or correct because it is based on the designer of the world's prescriptions. Sixth, males should demonstrate the Christlike character that will make the feminist's voice unnecessary or irrelevant. For example, husbands are called to love their wives sacrificially, "as Christ loved the church." Often, many feminists are either frustrated in relationships with men, or have developed deviant behaviors or preferences. In order to defend themselves or make up for their deficiencies, some turn to goddess worship, expressing itself through feminism. It is so deep now that women now demand their own Bibles, churches or some such ministries. Although this may appear innocent and in some cases good, they do not realize that the goddess worship spirit is at work in the background. They must regain their lost control, prowess or rights. There could be other ways to respond but the aforementioned should suffice. We now transition towards the end of our discourse.

What others have said about goddess worship, Wicca and similar movements

The New Age Movement has spawned a number of spiritual phenomena, involving the occult and Spiritism). Premised on postmodern thought and practice, absolutes are abhorred and individuals do as they please, feeling really empowered. It is like in the times of the Judges when people did as they saw fit. Several people (including Catherine Sanders) have writ-

ten on the growing popularity of Wicca, witchcraft and other forms of occult practice, documenting the proliferation of Satanic practices all around us. A time was when any mention of the occult was not tolerated in the public space and thus clandestine, but in these degenerate days, the veil has been lifted. These examples provide evidence of a huge comeback of pagan practices expressing itself in different ways. That which once appeared legendary or fantastic is now back with us in a big way.

Other contexts and cultures abound with once-legendary stories pointing to animistic occultism. For instance, in Kasama of Zambia, among the Bemba's many legendary stories making their rounds involve shrines, unique natural features such as waterfalls (Chishimba), hot springs, and such things. Turner has written a very penetrating paper titled 'Wimmin, Wicca and Goddess worship' which inspired this paper and is well worth reading. There Turner not only gives the history, background and development of these occult practices; he also demonstrates that these have returned in a modern dress, though essentially the same in nature.

Practicing Wiccans, like Harmony Nice, flatly reject the idea that they are in bondage or worship gods. She clearly states that she is not Christian but rather a free agent to do as she pleases, believe in (and worship) a deity of her choice, and does not believe in a higher power above nature. Wicca is simply "personifications of nature," is a simple nature philosophy and a person can settle for a belief system that best fits. Her *YouTube* channel has attracted a large and growing number of admirers. Dave Hunt and Welford have written on what witchcraft can do and how it affects the world, if not the church. Works such as Stanley J. Grenz's *Primer on Post-modernism* (1996), David S. Dockery & Gregory A. Hornbury's *Shaping a Worldview* (2002), and Herbert J. Pollitt's *The Interfaith Movement: The New Age Enters the Church* (1996) have documented how things have evolved in the world from absolute truth to a culture of relativity that has

ushered in ecumenism, laxity, and enhanced divorce rates, all of which result in decimated families and churches. Then we have writers like Rebecca Brown and others who, in the name of advancing the cause of Christ, have fallen prey to New Age antics, if they are not trifling with the occult. Witchcraft is increasingly the new normal that people no longer hesitate to embrace.

Lessons gleaned from these considerations

There are many lessons to be gleaned from these considerations, with potential to affect changes in not only our worldview but our values and practices. Want of space and time does not permit us to drill deep or highlight all the salient points yielded from this study. We however focus on the most important lessons every Christian worth their salt needs to walk away with. Doing so, we shall be able to inoculate the church from errors presently terrorizing not only the church but the society at large. To achieve our ends, we simply highlight these lessons below:

1. The goddess of feminism has a clear agenda. It will not rest until it achieves its goals.
2. The feminist agenda claims historical rights that were “robbed off” sometime in the past, effectively changing the narrative. It has, over the past many years, been formidably and diligently working hard to change the script.
3. Feminism, in its essential nature, aims to eliminate male authority. It has progressively done this in several stages and approaches, one of them being the changing of the male pronouns like “he” to ‘them’ or ‘humans’ etc.
4. This world view aims at reviving ancient ritual practices couched in Wicca or witchcraft.

5. Effectively, this rebels against *Yahweh*, the God of the Bible.
6. Consequently, the saints need to be aware and take heed. There are far too many enemies threatening the church as it is.
7. Ecumenism has gained a lot of momentum in a globalized world. It does not tolerate the exclusive nature and claims of Christianity, and is thus hostile to the faith.
8. The World Council of Churches (WCC) and others have reverted back to ancient pagan religions, syncretically mixing them with Christianity.
9. Sadly, the church is adopting humanist psychology¹⁰ and occult practices into its worship..
10. The church has incorporated many wrong things from the occult and psychology into its practice, effectively polluting it. There is need to watch at all times.
11. The church has allowed much mythology to get into the Church but will be crushed at Christ's return.
12. The saints need to open their eyes to see the danger and damage presently being effected by the occult world.

Conclusion

Feminism has made serious inroads in all sectors of society. With it has been a resurrection of the ancient worship of the goddess. Witchcraft and other mythological phenomena have weaved their way into public life and are hardly questioned in our day. Christians should be aware of this and make sure they have a clear mind, standing on the truth.

¹⁰ Note that authentic psychology is good and helpful. It should be regulated by Scripture, though. Thus, *not all* psychology is necessarily evil in and of itself. Like all other things, it has been abused by pundits.

Book Review

Hermeneutics for Everyone by Daniel Goepfrich

*Johnson C. Philip*¹

Hermeneutics for Everyone:
A Practical Guide for Reading and Studying Your Bible
Daniel Goepfrich
ISBH, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2024
206 pages

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS, the art and science of interpreting the Bible, is a discipline that holds immense value not only for theologians and scholars but for everyone who engages with the Bible. This discipline is crucial because every reader, consciously or unconsciously, interprets the scriptures as they seek to understand its messages and teachings. However, the formal study of hermeneutics often remains confined within the walls of seminaries and theological institutions, making it somewhat inaccessible to the layperson. This gap in accessibility can lead to varied and sometimes misinformed interpretations of the Bible, as individuals without formal training attempt to decipher complex theological concepts and historical contexts on their own. Understanding the Bible requires more than just reading the text; it involves grasping the nuances of its historical setting, literary genres, and the intent of its authors. Therefore, there is a significant need to bridge the gap between scholarly hermeneutics and the everyday reader of the Bible.

Addressing this need, the author of this book has taken a commendable step by bringing the principles of biblical hermeneutics out of the seminary classroom and into the hands of the general public. The author, equipped with scholarly

¹ See footnote on page 77 for a brief bio of Johnson C. Philip.

knowledge and understanding,² has endeavored to demystify the process of biblical interpretation, making it accessible and comprehensible to laypeople. This effort is crucial in empowering readers to engage with the Bible more meaningfully and responsibly.

By presenting hermeneutical principles in an approachable manner, the book invites readers from all walks of life to delve deeper into the Bible, encouraging them to explore its depths with both reverence and intellectual curiosity. It aims to equip readers with the tools they need to interpret the scriptures accurately and thoughtfully, fostering a more informed and enriching interaction with the biblical text. This approach not only enhances personal Bible study but also contributes to a more theologically informed and discerning Christian community.

The book is made up of eleven chapters in three parts, plus an epilogue, appendix, glossary, and select bibliography. The first part deals with introductory material. The second part lays down the basic principles for the layperson. The third part deals with application and two more ways to study. The book is available as a Kindle publication and also as a print publication.

I read this book with great curiosity. Most books that claim to make Hermeneutics simple, manage to make it as

² Daniel Goepfrich (Th.M., D.Min.), an international conference speaker and author, is the Teaching Pastor at Oak Tree Community Church (South Bend, IN). He teaches Greek for Calvary University (Kansas City, MO) and Bible exposition and theology for Word of Life International Bible Institutes. He is Associate Professor of Greek and Hebrew for Colorado Biblical University (Fort Morgan, CO) and served for 15 years as Professor of Bible and Theology at Tyndale Theological Seminary (Hurst, TX). In 2017, he founded *Theology is for Everyone* (theologyisforeveryone.com) to produce biblically sound resources that everyone can use and understand. He is the author of "Hermeneutics for Everyone" (2024), "Biblical Discipleship" (2020), "New Testament Chapter by Chapter" (2017), "Old Testament Chapter by Chapter, Volumes 1 and 2" (2022, 2023), and "Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage" (2007) as well as several journal articles and multiauthor contributions.

complex as the other difficult books in the end. I have so far seen only two books that make things really simple, so I was curious if this one simplified things or not. I was in for a surprise because the author manages to make the subject simple, and he also gives plenty of exercises to reinforce the lessons.

The first section (four chapters) is devoted to introductory matters that include introduction to the Bible, inspiration, Bible translations, and the art of investigation. This might seem elementary, but we need to remember that the book is for “everyone” and not Bible school students alone. So I commend the author for introducing these subjects.

The second section (five chapters) is devoted to the process of interpretation. That consists of a basic four-step process: asking questions, composing everything into one integrated whole, testing the integrity of deductions, and submitting everything to God’s word. This is the engine that will guide everyone to interpret the Bible properly. The author has kept his text in this portion as simple as possible without compromising with accuracy.

Part three has two chapters: some natural conclusions, and two more ways to study. This section adds much value to the book. Followed by some chapters which are sort of an appendix. The author includes a three-page select bibliography by subject. That will help motivated readers to gain access to more advanced textbooks in fields of their choice in hermeneutics.

There is no end to books on hermeneutics. However, the majority are advanced textbooks, of practically no real value to the layperson. Here is a book that will definitely speak to everyone. The language and presentation are simple, and only the most basic and essential information is given. The book will help non-seminarians to interpret the Bible properly. That said, the book will also help seminarians to gain a fresh perspective of biblical hermeneutics.

Book Review

Return of the God Hypothesis by Stephen C. Meyer

Don McIntosh¹

Return of the God Hypothesis

Stephen C. Meyer

New York: HarperCollins, 2021

568 Pages

TO CELEBRATE my 60th birthday this February, my wife Tricia and I decided to spend the weekend in Dallas, where we would not only enjoy getting out of town for a couple of days but attend the annual “Science and Faith” conference hosted there by the Discovery Institute.

One of the highlights of my trip was meeting Dr. Stephen Meyer, who turned out to be disarmingly friendly. I had heard Dr. Meyer debate on evolution and intelligent design, and had read his book *Darwin’s Doubt*, so while at the conference I picked up a copy of his latest, *Return of the God Hypothesis*, confident that it would be a fascinating read. I was not disappointed.

Meyer’s previous works have largely argued for the scientific rationality of intelligent design over “Darwinism,” i.e., the belief that all of life has descended from a common ancestor by undirected natural processes, as the best theory to explain the complexity of life on earth. In *Return of the God Hypothesis* Meyer departs somewhat from that focus and speaks in more general terms about the plausibility of theism (the existence of God) as a scientific hypothesis. Consequently, having laid out the rough outlines of the God hypothesis itself, he dedicates most of his book to questions touching on his particular area of expertise, philosophy of science.

¹ See footnote on page 25 for a brief bio of Don McIntosh.

Meyer begins with a Prologue recounting an insight that came to him at a most inconvenient time, namely while suffering a migraine headache during a debate with Lawrence Krauss. Meyer's insight had to do with the way evidence (from cosmology, physics and biology) actually supported the existence of God as a serious scientific hypothesis. From there the book is organized into four main parts – I. The Rise and Fall of Theistic Science, II. Return of the God Hypothesis, III. Inference to the Best Metaphysical Explanation, IV. Conjectures and Refutations, and V. Conclusion.

Part I begins by discussing not merely theism, but “the Judeo-Christian Origins of Modern Science.” Meyer notes that in Western nations with a Christian intellectual heritage, like Great Britain and later the United States, science grew rapidly, leading to fascinating discoveries and the development of life-enhancing technological innovations. Great scientists like Newton, Kepler and Boyle were as dedicated to God as they were to the practice of science.

But with the rise of materialistic science, partly filling a void left by attacks on theism by Enlightenment philosophers – notably Hume and Kant – the influence of theism upon science began to quickly fade. Darwin filled that void further with publication of the *Origin of Species*, which left atheistic philosophers like Marx and Freud a friendly intellectual environment from which to repudiate religious belief further still.

Part II explores what over the last century or so has come to be regarded as a radical and even ridiculous proposition: that belief in God might be scientifically defensible. Logically enough, Meyer begins at the beginning, with evidence for the big bang and a creation of the universe *ex nihilo* (or an “absolute” beginning of both space and time). Along the way he addresses the respective failures of appeals to the weak anthropic principle, the strong anthropic principle, or simply chance, to account for life's emergence in the universe. From there he unpacks various lines of evidence for the fine-tuning of physical constants and quantities in the universe, which

most scientists believe must be calibrated to an extraordinary degree of precision for life to exist.

This fine-tuning is not merely a cosmological phenomenon, however, since even at the local (earthly) level the chemical constituents of life itself have to be precision-engineered, again to astonishingly precise specifications, in order for life to originate and propagate. And as Meyer explains further, the systematic discontinuity of the fossil record and the inimitably specified structures of organisms making up the huge diversity of life on earth suggests that the same kind of intense design-and-production activity required to create the first organism must have taken place repeatedly.

For me, though, Part III is really the heart of the book and at the same time what makes it a uniquely powerful contribution to the intelligent design literature. Here Meyer examines the origins of life and the universe from a philosophical perspective, pointing out that both theism and naturalism are ultimately unprovable metaphysical depictions of reality. For such sweeping questions involving “unobserved (or unobservable) causes,” no simple tests or experimental designs are available to either confirm or falsify the hypothesis. Kant famously wrote of the “Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics.” The way I see it, Part III of *Return* could be read as a sort of “prolegomena” to any future analysis of competing metaphysically laden scientific theories.

As Meyer explains, broad-based theories of origins can never be ultimately validated. They are not deductive inferences (which by the form of their logic are either valid or invalid, true or not true). Nor are they straightforwardly inductive inferences, of the kind that show, for example, that bodies with mass attract one another according to a mathematically stated law, as in Newton’s theory. Rather, the method scientists actually employ to address such broadly speculative theories is an *inference to the best explanation*, which means that for any scientific question of origins there will always be more than one possible explanation. The

question then is not which hypothesis is more “scientific” in terms of scientific testability, since no such hypothesis can be directly tested, but which is best in the way of criteria like simplicity and explanatory power and probability.

On the assumption that a better theory is more probable than its competitors, Meyer explores the criterion of probability in terms of Bayesian analysis, a method popular with scientists and philosophers alike. Here Meyer, while still employing the usual fluid but accessible language that is his trademark, spells out Bayes’ theorem – where the probability of a hypothesis being true in light of the evidence is a function of the prior probability of the hypothesis, the probability of the evidence given that the hypothesis is true, and the prior, or intrinsic, probability of the evidence.

In Part IV, “Conjectures and Refutations” (taken from Karl Popper’s famous book of the same name), Meyer employs the method of inference to the best explanation to revisit some more specific scientific questions. Here he points out the lack of viable natural explanations for the origin of information, as well as the lack of any evidence for the “multiverse hypothesis” and other naturalistic theories for the origin of the universe.

Meyer is careful here to point out that an inference to the best explanation should not be confused with a “god of the gaps” fallacy, or an “argument from ignorance,” since the inference postulates God as the best of numerous competing hypotheses, *any* of which, if accepted as true, would fill in certain “gaps” in our knowledge formerly thought not answered (or answerable). As Meyer notes, by rejecting any explanatory appeal to the activity of God as a fallacy from the outset, “scientific materialists and theistic evolutionists effectively require scientists and philosophers to explain all events in the history of the universe materialistically” To anyone who considers whether theism or naturalism best explains the origins of life and the universe to be an open question, such a requirement only begs that question.

All told, *Return of the God Hypothesis* is a compelling read. Followers of creation-evolution and related debates might be disappointed, as there are but few specific, factually detailed arguments for intelligent design or against evolution (these were more fully presented in Meyer's previous works, *Signature in the Cell* and *Darwin's Doubt*). And readers not already somewhat familiar with the history and philosophy of science may find some of the arguments and terminology hard to follow (though to his credit, Meyer spends much time explaining difficult concepts). Beyond that, Meyer's latest work serves as more than just good, even inspiring writing, but also may be seen as a useful reference for information on the origins controversy and maybe the best argument to date for Christian theism as a serious scientific hypothesis.

