


The End of Infidelity

by

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Peter Pike, editor

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Note:

The authors of *The End of Christianity* sometimes cite previous books they've written. We've reviewed some of those books. Our review of *The Christian Delusion* can be found at <http://www.calvindude.com/ebooks/InfidelDelusion.pdf>. We've reviewed *The Empty Tomb* at <http://www.triapologia.com/hays/ebooks.html>. For a review of an early edition of John Loftus' *Why I Rejected Christianity*, see <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2006/10/satans-school-for-girlie-men.html>.

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Abbreviations

TCD = *The Christian Delusion*

TID = *The Infidel Delusion*

TEC = *The End Of Christianity*

TEI = *The End Of Infidelity*

WIRC = *Why I Rejected Christianity*

Preface

When Steve Hays, Jason Engwer, Paul Manata, and Patrick Chan collaborated to produce *The Infidel Delusion* in response to *The Christian Delusion* (edited by John Loftus), it was my privilege to edit, format, and present the book to the world. Loftus and his co-contributors were well aware of the existence of *The Infidel Delusion* and other similar responses, but one will search in vain to find proof of that in their sequel, *The End of Christianity*. The writers largely ignore evidence presented against their views in the first book even while professing to be open-minded, genuine skeptics. Indeed, their boasts ring hollow when one examines the content of their sequel and find little response to the numerous arguments levied against their position.

The paucity of such response cannot be because they are unaware of the existence of works like *The Infidel Delusion*, for Loftus himself spent several posts on his blog trying to patch up his arguments after that work was published. Failing to achieve success on that front, the new atheists seem to have resorted to the old trick of just ignoring the opposing view.

On one level, therefore, it may be perceived as a chasing after the wind for Steve Hays and Jason Engwer to return in this follow-up book, *The End of Infidelity*. To detail with such labor the new (and many repeated old) errors that Loftus and his co-writers put forth, even as the atheists have refused to address any challenges to their view, can seem daunting. Yet new atheists will only further marginalize each other if they continue with hands clasped firmly over eyes and ears, as if the opposition to their philosophy is not growing.

It is therefore my honor to present another refutation of John Loftus and his cohorts. I give you Steve Hays' and Jason Engwer's *The End of Infidelity*. For those unfamiliar with their previous work, generally Hays and Engwer write separate sections of a chapter. Because of differences in style between the two authors, each chapter is divided and the author of the following section indicated with a header. The exceptions are chapters 7, 12, and 14, which are written solely by Hays and therefore contain no division. In addition to the responses, several articles are contained in the appendices at the end of the book. The last two appendices were penned by Engwer; all others by Hays.

— Peter Pike

Introductions

Steve Hays

Preliminaries

Before delving into the particulars, I'd like to make a general observation. The contributors to TEC proudly view themselves as "skeptics." Ironically, this self-image disarms their critical judgment. No one is more easily fooled than someone who assumes he's foolproof. It's a recipe for confirmation bias. His skeptical self-image leads him to let his guard down, to credulously accept whatever his fellow skeptics say, to default to one-sided "skeptical" literature rather than conducting independent research and reviewing both sides of the argument. A professed skeptic doesn't take basic intellectual precautions because he's already convinced himself that he can't be hoodwinked, unlike those gullible Christians.

Introduction

Loftus thanks Carrier for "peer reviewing" TEC. Why he thinks any reasonable person is taken in by this charade of in-house "peer review" already tells you something about the self-delusive nature of infidelity.

In the introduction, Loftus tries, once more, to shore up the Outsider Test for Faith (OTF).

I) Loftus says

According to conclusive scientific studies in this area of research, we believe what we prefer to be true. Once our minds are made up, it is very hard to change them. We seek to justify our decisions, especially the costly ones in terms of commitment, money, effort, time, and inconvenience (18).

I appreciate Loftus' candid diagnosis of how atheists think.

II) Loftus says

Most importantly, the problem of who has the burden of proof will have been resolved as well. For then it's agreed that the person with the burden of proof is the one making an extraordinary claim about supernatural beings and forces... (17-18)

By casting the issue in such tendentious terms, Loftus put his thumb on the scales. Whether claims about supernatural forces or beings are "extraordinary" is a prejudicial characterization. That's hardly "impartial." That's not something Loftus is entitled to stipulate.

III) Loftus says

The whole reason Christians object to the OTF is because they intuitively know their faith will not pass the test, though this tacitly concedes the whole argument (16).

To the contrary, the fact that Loftus must default to naturalism tacitly concedes the whole argument going into the debate.

IV) Loftus says

Christians confronted with this scientific data usually proceed with the all too familiar “You Too” (tu quoque) informal fallacy, saying, “Hey, cognitive dissonance theory applies to you, too” (18-19).

What makes Loftus think the tu quoque is fallacious? Did he read that on the Internet?

Isn't the tu quoque just a type of argument from analogy? Does he think arguments from analogy are inherently fallacious? While particular instances of the tu quoque can be fallacious, it's hard to see how that type of argument can be fallacious, unless you think the argument from analogy is a fallacious type of argument. Is that what Loftus is alleging? Does he even know what he's talking about?

V) Loftus says

To the outsider, the sciences are the paragon of knowledge...The only true outsider position is agnosticism, which I've called the default position—as such, it is the neutral point of view. An agnostic as defined here in this instance is one who is skeptical of all metaphysical claims...All metaphysical claims must pass the OTF before we should believe them (15).

1) Even if we accept his hyperbolic claim that scientific knowledge is the paragon of knowledge, that doesn't create any presumption against theism or the paranormal.¹

2) Loftus has a hopelessly naïve view of scientific realism. For scientific realism is not metaphysically neutral. To the contrary, scientific realism is up to its eyeballs in metascientific presuppositions. Let's spell this out:

i) The existence of the external world.

There's a physical world, which is ontologically independent of the observer.

¹ Cf. J. Hannam, *The Genesis of Science: How the Christian Middle Ages Launched the Scientific Revolution* (Regnery 2011); R. Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion: Freeing the Spirit of Enquiry* (Coronet 2012).

Ironically, this bedrock presupposition is called into question by quantum mechanics, which seems to suggest that observables are dependent on observers.² That seems counterintuitive, but quantum mechanics is notoriously counterintuitive.

ii) The regularity of nature

Nature is cyclical. The same causes yield the same effects.

iii) The general reliability of induction

The future generally resembles the past. Nature is predictable.

iv) The general intelligibility of nature

v) The general reliability of the senses

vi) The general reliability of the mind (or brain) to interpret sensory input.

vii) The adequacy of mathematics to describe nature

viii) Appearances correspond to reality

ix) Scientific theories accurately describe or successfully refer to the natural world.

Needless to say, Loftus hasn't begun to argue for a single one of these metascientific presuppositions.

3) Even if, for the sake of argument, we affirm scientific realism, that doesn't exist in a vacuum. For the presuppositions which undergird scientific realism are arguably theological presuppositions.³

Loftus not only needs to justify his metascientific presuppositions, but he needs to justify each and every one of them on purely secular grounds.

4) W. V. Quine was an eminent philosopher who attempted, as far as possible, to reduce philosophy to science. Ironically, this circled back on itself, resulting in a deeply skeptical view of scientific knowledge.

It would address the question of how we, physical denizens of the physical world, can have projected our scientific theory of that whole world from our meager contacts with it; from the mere impacts of rays and particles on our

² D. Mermin, "Is the moon there when nobody looks? Reality and the Quantum Theory," *Physics Today* (April 1985), 38-47; <http://tinyurl.com/3kyvmkk>

³ Cf. Del Ratsch, "Humanness in Their Hearts"; <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2006/11/where-science-and-religion-fuse.html>

surfaces and a few odds and ends such as the strain of walking uphill.

There is a puzzle here. Global stimuli are private: each is a temporally ordered set of some one individual's receptors. Their perceptual similarity, in part innate and in part modeled by experience, is private as well. Whence then this coordination of behavior across the tribe?⁴

The sensory atomist was motivated, I say, by his appreciation that any information about the world is channeled to us through the sensory surfaces of our bodies; but this motivation remained obscure to him. It was obscured by his concern to justify our knowledge of the external world. The justification would be vitiated by circularity if sensory surfaces and external impacts on nerve endings had to be appealed to at the outset of the justification.

There is much clarity to be gained by dropping the project of justifying our knowledge of the external world but continuing to investigate the relation of that knowledge to its sensory evidence. Obscurity about the nature of the given, or epistemic priority, is then dissipated by talking frankly of the triggering of nerve endings. We then find ourselves engaged in an internal question within the framework of natural science. There are these impacts of molecules and light rays upon our sensory receptors, and there is all this output on our part of scientific discourse about sticks, stones, planets, numbers, molecules, light rays, and, indeed, sensory receptors; and then we pose the problem of linking that input causally and logically to that output.

Much as I admire [David] Lewis's reduction, however, it is not for me. My own line is a yet more sweeping structuralism, applying to concrete and abstract objects indiscriminately. I base it, paradoxically as this may seem, on a naturalistic approach to epistemology. Natural science tells us that our ongoing cognitive access to the world around us is limited to meager channels. There is the triggering of our sensory receptors by the impact of molecules and light rays. Also there is the difference in muscular effort sensed in walking up or down hill. What more? Even the notion of a cat, let alone a class or number, is a human artifact, rooted in innate predisposition and cultural tradition. The very notion of an object at all, concrete or abstract, is a human contribution, a feature of our inherited apparatus for organizing the amorphous welter of neural input.

The conclusion is that there can be no evidence for one ontology as over against another, so long anyway as we can express a one-to-one correlation between them. Save the structure and you save all. Certainly we are depen-

⁴ W. V. Quine, *From Stimulus to Science* (Harvard 1999), 16,20.

dent on a familiar ontology of middle-sized bodies for the inception of reification, on the part both of the individual and of the race; but once we have an ontology, we can change it with impunity.

This global ontological structuralism may seem abruptly at odds with realism, let alone naturalism. It would seem even to undermine the ground on which I rested it: my talk of impacts of light rays and molecules on nerve endings. Are these rays, molecules, and nerve endings themselves not disqualified now as mere figments of an empty structure?⁵

Naturalism itself is what saves the situation. Naturalism looks only to natural science, however, fallible, for an account of what there is and what what there is does. Science ventures its tentative answers in man-made concepts, perforce, couched in man-made language, but we can ask no better. The very notion of object, or of one and many, is indeed as parochially human as the parts of speech; to ask what reality is really like, however, apart from human categories, is self-stultifying. It is like asking how long the Nile really is, apart from parochial matters of miles or meters. Positivists were right in branding such metaphysics as meaningless.

So far as evidence goes, then, our ontology is neutral. Nor let us imagine beyond it some inaccessible reality. The very terms 'thing' and 'exist' and 'real,' after all, make no sense apart from human conceptualization. Asking after the thing in itself apart from human conceptualization, is like asking how long the Nile really is, apart from our parochial miles or kilometers.

So it seems best for present purposes to construe the subject's stimulus on a given occasion simply as his global neural intake on that occasion. But I shall refer to it only as neural intake, not stimulus, for other notions of stimulus are wanted in other studies, particularly where different subjects are to get the same stimulus. Neural intake is private, for subjects do not share receptors.

But in contrast to the privacy of neural intakes, and the privacy of their perceptual similarity, observation sentences and their semantics are a public matter, since the child has to learn these from her elders. Her learning then depends indeed both on the public currency of the observation sentences and on a preestablished harmony of people's private scales of perceptual similarity.

⁵ *ibid.* 405.

These reflections on ontology are a salutary reminder that the ultimate data of science are limited to our neural intake, and that the very notion of object, concrete or abstract, is of our own making, along with the rest of natural science and mathematics.⁶

VI) Loftus says

Nonetheless, this objection confuses a set of religious beliefs with a total worldview (11).

But as we just saw, science is not worldview-invariant. Science is underwritten by metaphysical, indeed, theological, presuppositions.

VII) Loftus says

If our parents said something was true, then we believed it as children (10).

Parenting would be so much simpler if only that were so. Clearly, Loftus doesn't have much experience in that department.

VIII) Loftus says

Another objection to the OTF is that it should equally be applied to morality...Carrier argues in the last chapter that moral facts exist and that science can find them, while Eller, a cultural anthropologist, had argued instead in favor of cultural relativism. In neither case do their views on morality undercut the OTF... (11).

1) We'd only have an obligation to take the OTF in case we have epistemic duties, and we'd only have epistemic duties in case we have moral duties. Epistemic duties are a subset of moral duties.

But if moral relativism is correct, then we have no moral obligation to be honest or intellectually responsible—even assuming the OTF is otherwise valid.

2) And appealing to Carrier's failed attempt to defend secular ethics is a nonstarter. As we shall see, Carrier unwittingly illustrated the inability of atheism to underwrite objective moral norms.

IX) Loftus says

One thing we can all agree upon is that we want to be happy. The need for happiness drives all our moral values... (12).

⁶ W. V. Quine, *Confessions of a Confirmed Extensionalist* (Harvard 2008), 328, 402-403, 405, 416, 463-464, 471.

1) Indeed, even a sadist can agree with that. A sadist wants to be happy. Torturing men, women, children, and animals makes him happy. That drives his moral values.

2) Conversely, atheism is depressing. Just ask Woody Allen. Or the antinatalist. Therefore, if you want to be happy, don't be an atheist. In particular, don't be an epistemically self-conscious atheist.

X) Loftus says

This, then, if anything, is the basis for our choosing which moral values produce the most good for the most people (12).

1) That's a utilitarian slogan. If Loftus is a utilitarian, then he needs to argue for utilitarian ethics. He needs to identify which version of utilitarian ethics he espouses, and he needs to defend his position against stock criticisms of utilitarian ethics.⁷

2) A little earlier in the same paragraph (see IX above), we had Loftus endorsing hedonism. But hedonism and utilitarianism can easily come into conflict. Suppose what makes me happy comes at the expense of others? What makes me happy doesn't make you happy. What makes you happy doesn't make me happy.

XI) Loftus says

...Then the religionists can use the same epistemology to defend their own faiths... (14).

That's simple-minded.

1) There is no general presumption against supernatural explanations. At that level, there's no antecedent bias against the miraculous claims, if any, of rival religions.

2) However, that doesn't mean every miraculous claim enjoys the same initial status. We can still judge on a case-by-case basis. We can also judge based on the general credibility (or lack thereof) of rival religions.

Reported miracles aren't born equal. It depends on the reporter, as well as the character of the miracle. Is it meaningful? Purposeful? Or just something weird for the sake of weirdness?

Besides, the few miracles attributed to the angel showed a certain mental disorder, like the blind man who didn't recover his sight but grew three new teeth, or the paralytic who didn't get to walk but almost won the lottery, and the leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers. Those consolation miracles,

⁷ E. g. <http://www.mindspring.com/~mfpatton/Tissues.htm>

which were more like mocking fun, had already ruined the angel's reputation when the woman who had been changed into a spider finally crushed him completely.⁸

XII) Loftus says

If nonbelievers are to take the OTF, then Christians need to tell us what an outsider perspective for us would be...The problem is that there just isn't any worthy religious contender from out of the myriad number of religions that can be considered from an outsider perspective for nonbelievers (14).

1) Of course, for Loftus to say there aren't any worthy contenders is a backdoor admission that he's put his thumb on the scales. That's not a "neutral" starting-point.

2) An outsider standpoint relative to atheism needn't be religious. For instance, not prejudging what's extraordinary is one alternative.

It's not as if we were born with innate knowledge of the history of the universe. We don't know in advance what has happened, will happen, or can happen. That's something we can only learn through observation, revelation, or testimony.

XIII) Loftus says

There seems to be some moral values that human beings all share irrespective of their religious beliefs...one problem in subjecting moral values to the same skepticism demanded of religious faiths is that we need common shared moral values to live our lives in our respective cultures (12).

1) This fails to distinguish between objective moral norms and moral beliefs. The fact that a group of people may share the same values doesn't make those values objectively true. That could just be a "language game" or type of social etiquette, like dress codes or table manners.

2) One way to help everyone get along is to eradicate the nonconformists. If atheists can't stand Christians, and Christians outnumber atheists, then atheism is a threat to the social fabric.

So perhaps we should have an annual hunting season to hunt down infidels. That would also be good for the taxidermist industry.

I'm just trying to alleviate Loftus' concerns about the breakdown of the social order.

⁸ G. Marquez, "A very old man with enormous wings," <http://salvoblue.homestead.com/wings.html>

XIV) Loftus says

While philosophers debate the minutia of what makes science science, science proceeds to deliver the goods... (14-15).

Apparently, Loftus is utterly ignorant about longstanding debates over scientific progress.⁹

XV) Loftus says

The OTF does not entail such radical skepticism. We have more than enough evidence to conclude the existence of the material world is far more probable than any proposed alternative—which is why we think it exists (16).

1) There is no direct or independent evidence for the existence of the material world. Any evidentiary appeals will be circular.

2) But assuming it does exist, that's a metaphysical claim. And it's not a metaphysical claim which science can test. To the contrary, that's a metascientific presupposition which science must postulate to do science in the first place.

3) Moreover, science itself raises questions about the existence of the material world, viz. quantum mechanics.

XVI) Loftus says

Otherwise there are billions of rational non-Christians who were raised in different cultures who could not believe by virtue of the fact that they were born as outsiders and will subsequently be condemned to hell...let [Christians] admit that God is allowing people born into non-Christian cultures to be condemned to hell merely by virtue of the fact that they were born as outsiders into different religious cultures (16-17).

i) Actually, many people are born outside the pale of the gospel, born to live and die in ignorance, because they already stand condemned. That's symptomatic of God's preemptory judgment.

Sinners aren't damned because they refuse to believe a gospel they never heard. Rather, sinners are condemned because they are sinners. Rejecting the gospel is an aggravating circumstance, not a necessary condition.

Loftus says

And let Christians stop all cross-cultural, missionary-evangelistic work, too... (17).

⁹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-progress/>

That's a non sequitur. If "outsiders" respond to the gospel, that goes to show you that they are God's elect.

XVIII) Loftus says

Christian, the mental pain you may feel as you read this book is called cognitive dissonance (18).

Actually, what I feel when I read this book is more like watching a Pink Panther movie. Like Inspector Clouseau, there's a conspicuous gap between the self-image of the contributors and the actual level of their performance. And the comic element lies in drastic difference between what the character perceives about himself and what the viewer perceives about the character. Clouseau is oblivious to the dramatic irony, much like the contributors to this book.

XVIII) Loftus says,

We simply cannot turn back the hands of time and become Amish (15).

I wasn't planning to. However, it's not as if the Amish are fictional characters.

XIX) Loftus says

Skepticism is an adult attitude for arriving at the truth (13).

That fails to draw a rudimentary distinction between rational and irrational skepticism. Skepticism is not an adult attitude—skepticism is a demented attitude. The mental ward is full of skeptics. Delusive paranoia.

Jason Engwer

What world are John Loftus and his colleagues living in? Loftus writes:

In my world, miracles do not happen. What world are *you* living in?...

If in our world miracles do not happen, then they did not happen in first-century Palestine, either. (TEC, 79-80)

In the previous book in Loftus' series, other contributors made similar comments:

He [David Hume] is merely appealing to what everyone knows: the frequent reports of the extraordinary we hear from UFO abductees, Loch Ness Monster fans, people who see ghosts or claim psychic powers, always seem to turn out to be bunk upon examination. Ask Joe Nickell. Ask James Randi. Ask

the evangelical stage magician Andre Kole, who exposed Filipino "psychic surgeons." (Robert Price, TCD, 277)

See, also, Richard Carrier's comments on page 292 of that same book. In the sequel, we get more of the same: see pages 265, 277, 307, and 312-313, for example. Matt McCormick asks:

If these things [paranormal phenomena] are real and are so common, then where are they and why can we not find any better evidence in their favor than the passionate testimonials of unscientific converts? Do the demons and miracles only manifest themselves when there are no credible witnesses or skeptics present? (213)

Two of the most prominent leaders of early Christianity, James and Paul, were critics of the religion who claimed to see Jesus risen from the dead.¹⁰ Similar scenarios have been documented in the modern world. Craig Keener notes that people frequently convert to Christianity on the basis of modern miracle accounts, including their own experience of a miracle or the experience of somebody they know well.¹¹

Paranormal phenomena often occur in the presence of credible and skeptical witnesses in non-Christian circles as well:

Those séances [involving Eusapia Palladino] led to the publication of a massive, graphically detailed account of eleven sessions with Eusapia, conducted by three very experienced researchers. That report describes, play by play, what happened during the séances, and perhaps most important, it documents how the investigators were all reluctantly converted to a belief in the genuineness of Eusapia's phenomena....

Since the earliest days of the British SPR [Society for Psychical Research], many of its influential members had been reluctant to deal seriously with the physical phenomena of spiritualism....

Eventually, the SPR felt pressured to respond, and so they assembled a team of their most experienced, highly skilled, and skeptical investigators to study Eusapia one more time, apparently with the aim of justifying the Society's negative assessment of the medium. Indeed, it seems that the SPR officers and investigators all expected to find nothing but fraud when they tested Eusapia. The members of this team were the Hon. Everard Feilding, Hereward Carrington, and W.W. Baggally. Feilding had already detected numerous fraudulent mediums and claimed to be a complete skeptic.

¹⁰ On the significance of James' conversion, see <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/11/review-of-michael-liconas-resurrection-17.html>; on Paul's, see <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/07/pauls-conversion.html>.

¹¹ e.g., *Miracles*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), 265, 277, 284, 286, 289, 297

Carrington was an amateur magician who had recently published a book, three-fourths of which was devoted to the analysis of fraudulent mediumship. And Baggally was a skilled conjuror who "claimed to have investigated almost every medium in Britain since Home without finding one who was genuine."...

Despite the rigid controls and good light, many impressive phenomena occurred during the eleven séances. In fact, the table levitated completely so many times that the experimenters eventually tired of that effect and asked Eusapia to produce something else. Moreover, many impressive things happened even while experimenters virtually draped themselves all over Eusapia....After the séances had ended, Baggally itemized and counted all the phenomena reported. He concluded, "Eusapia was not detected in fraud in any one of the 470 phenomena that took place at the eleven séances."...

Far more riveting, however, are the reflections of the investigators written after each session with Eusapia. They document, with great candor, the intellectual struggle each investigator experienced as he reluctantly came to believe that Eusapia's phenomena were genuine. Skeptical accusations of favorable experimenter bias in this case would be outrageous.¹²

The contributors to TCD and TEC sometimes appeal to sources like James Randi to support their naturalistic view of the modern world (TCD, 277; TEC, n. 19 on 398).¹³ Such reliance on Randi is precarious. In the words of Michael Sudduth, a philosopher who's studied paranormal phenomena, "Randi? Surely you jest."¹⁴ We discussed some of the problems with an appeal to Randi in TID (142-143). It takes more than appealing to people like Randi to explain the best paranormal cases.

The problem isn't just that Loftus and his colleagues have no explanation. They demonstrate no familiarity with even the general outlines of the evidence, and they make claims that are easily shown to be false. They're at least ignorant, if not dishonest, in their treatments.

We've already recommended some resources on modern paranormal phenomena, above and in TID. I'll mention a few more at this point.

Stephen Braude recently gave a lecture in which he discussed two of the most significant paranormal cases in modern times, the mediumship of Daniel Home and the

¹² Stephen Braude, *The Gold Leaf Lady* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 47-49, 51

¹³ See, as well, Matt McCormick's recommendation of "any of James Randi's books" near the end of a May 8, 2010 interview found at <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/thinkatheist/2011/05/09/think-atheist-radio-show-episode-7-dr-matt-mccormick-may-8-2011>. He was recommending books on critical thinking in the context of analyzing supernatural claims. See, also, Victor Stenger's citation of Randi's work in *Physics And Psychics* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1990), 154.

¹⁴ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2007/02/dark-side.html>

photographic phenomena produced by Ted Serios.¹⁵ In the lecture, he outlines some of the principles involved in analyzing the evidence for paranormal phenomena, and he discusses some of the evidence skeptics have failed to explain in cases like the two I've mentioned above. Craig Keener, a New Testament scholar I cited earlier, recently completed a book on the historicity of miracles. The book addresses both ancient and modern miracles, and he discussed the subject with another New Testament scholar in a recent interview.¹⁶ Regarding experimental evidence for the paranormal, see the discussion between Rupert Sheldrake and Richard Wiseman on the March 8, 2010 Skeptiko webcast.¹⁷ See, also, Stanley Krippner and Harris L. Friedman, edd., *Debating Psychic Experience* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2010).

John Loftus tells us, "the sciences are the paragon of knowledge...Show me the experiment, and the argument is over." (TEC, 15) That standard has been met. Loftus should abandon his rejection of the paranormal, since some paranormal phenomena have been demonstrated in a scientific experiment. But it's more likely that he'll change his standard, as other critics of the paranormal have done.¹⁸

Nobody familiar with the sort of evidence I've mentioned above should be persuaded by the facile naturalistic claims made by Loftus and his colleagues. Their assumption of a naturalistic modern world, for which they offer nothing approaching a convincing argument, is highly dubious.

The most significant attempt to support their perspective is found in Victor Stenger's chapter in TEC. But that chapter is about evidence for an afterlife, not evidence for the supernatural in general. And, as we'll see when we review that chapter, even Stenger's treatment of that one aspect of the paranormal is inadequate.

In TID, we noted that Loftus and his colleagues hadn't handled the subject of modern miracles well. There isn't much of an improvement in TEC. The same can be said of a lot of other problems with TCD. Like its predecessor, TEC doesn't interact much with conservative scholarship (or moderate or liberal scholarship in some cases) on issues like Biblical authorship and the textual transmission of the New Testament. The patristic evidence is frequently neglected, even where there's a vast amount of it and it's highly relevant to the assertions being made by the authors of TEC. Corroboration of early Christian claims from non-Christian sources is likewise neglected. Prophecy fulfillment and eyewitness testimony, two lines of evidence frequently appealed to by the Bible itself, receive little attention. And so on.

¹⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V34EjMHZTkg>

¹⁶ <http://apologetics315.blogspot.com/2011/04/question-of-miracles-interview-with.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.skeptiko.com/rupert-sheldrake-and-richard-wiseman-clash/>

¹⁸ In addition to the discussion between Rupert Sheldrake and Richard Wiseman cited above, see pages 57-58, 61-62, 114, 182, and 213 of the book I cited afterward.

I suspect that even many skeptics will think that TEC overreaches at points. The authors of TEC who also contributed to TCD don't seem to have learned much from their experiences with the previous book. I'll give a few examples.

Despite his education, his experience as a pastor, and decades of studying Christianity, Loftus continues to pose ridiculous objections that he ought to have abandoned long ago. He suggests that Christians think that people in non-Christian cultures go to Hell "merely" because they were born in the wrong place (16-17). He tells us, without demonstrating it, that historians can't detect miracles (80) and that they "must assume a natural cause for events in history" (81). There's "simply no way" we can know that God raised Jesus from the dead "with the historical tools available to us" (80). He tells us that "extraordinary claims" must be "what science considers naturally possible" in order to be acceptable (81). Is he saying that *supernatural* events must be *natural* in order for him to believe that the events occurred? That doesn't make sense. On the next page, he tells us that he'll accept a historical argument for a miracle if there's "a ton of evidence" (82). Elsewhere, he tells us that he'd need "a *lot*" of evidence to believe that a supernatural event occurred (14). But if historians and others who are studying history *can't* detect the supernatural, and a claimed event must be considered *natural* by science in order for Loftus to believe that the event occurred, then how can there be "a ton of evidence" or "a *lot*" of it that would convince him that a supernatural event occurred in history? He repeatedly suggests that an absence of faith among ancient Israelites and other non-Christians proves that there isn't enough evidence for Christianity, since sufficient evidence would have produced faith (80, 101). Yet, he doesn't conclude that there must be insufficient evidence for his own beliefs when people disagree with him. Loftus frequently makes these kinds of claims that are highly unclear and misleading at best. More likely, the claims are self-contradictory.

Richard Carrier tells us that "we find no evidence that any Christian convert did any fact-checking before converting or even would have done so" (62). Note that he claims that we have no reason to think that these people were even interested in evidence. He tells us that "every third-person account of conversions" (62) has the fideistic quality he describes. It doesn't take much reading of the New Testament and patristic literature to see that Carrier is wrong.

In a chapter on Jesus' resurrection, Robert Price tells us that he's assuming a high view of the historicity of the gospels for the sake of argument. He then claims that, even when such an assumption is granted, the Swoon Theory and other alternatives to Jesus' resurrection have "not the least improbability" (222) and cause "no problem at all" (232). He says there's "no need to posit special circumstances or to multiply hypotheses" (232). He tells us that the gospels probably originally taught that Jesus didn't die on the cross (223). If the absurdity of those claims isn't apparent to you already, it should be after you read our review of Price's chapter.

The authors of TEC repeatedly cite ancient extra-Biblical texts as if they know what those texts originally said.¹⁹ Yet, they keep casting doubt on the reliability of the New Testament text²⁰, which is supported by much better evidence.

The examples above are just several of many more that could be cited. And consider the context in which those errors are occurring. Most of the authors of TEC have a doctorate in some relevant field. They had a long time to think about their arguments, before producing the book and while it was being put together. TEC isn't their first book against Christianity. They had many opportunities to learn from past mistakes. Much of what they get wrong in TEC was corrected previously, by reviewers and others, in response to TCD and in other contexts. Loftus and Carrier were editing and "peer reviewing" (9) the other authors' contributions. They were giving each other feedback along the way. At least some of them have been studying Christianity and related issues for decades, often in an academic setting. Think of how many authors are involved in these books and the help they've received from their publisher and individuals who reviewed their material prior to its publication. They've been marketing TCD and TEC with descriptions like "perhaps the most definitive refutation of Christianity yet in print", "tour de force", "awesome", "arguably the best critique of the Christian faith the world has ever known...this book completely destroys Christianity", "Loftus and his friends annihilate the Christian Goliath", "the first book I give to anyone who wants to understand why I am no longer a Christian", "the sharpest set of intellectual criticisms [of Christianity] found under the cover of a single volume", and "This book should win the game: Christianity, it's strike three and you are out!"²¹ In that sort of context, wouldn't you expect a much better book?

Like its predecessor and like Loftus' work in general, TEC is far more about the authors' objections to Christianity than how they explain the evidence for the religion. The book is somewhat good at offering the former, but poor at addressing the latter. It's no wonder Loftus and his colleagues consider Christianity "wildly improbable" (104) when they're engaging in such a one-sidedly incomplete calculation of the odds. The same approach could be reversed. Loftus' "smorgasbord" (76) of objections to Christianity, accompanied by such an inadequate treatment of the evidence for the religion, could be replaced by a lengthy list of objections to *his* belief system and a similar neglect of the evidence he would cite in support of *it*. It's not difficult to give a belief system a surface-level appearance of being wildly improbable under those circumstances. If TCD and TEC present the best arguments against Christianity, as some of the endorsers have suggested, then the end of infidelity is more appropriate than the end of Christianity.

¹⁹ 56, 60, 113, 194, 199-200, 229, 234-235, 276

²⁰ 109, 115-116, 128, n. 12 on 399

²¹ <http://richardcarrier.blogspot.com/2010/04/christian-delusion.html>; <http://richardcarrier.blogspot.com/2011/07/end-of-christianity.html>; inside and back cover endorsements of TCD and TEC

Chapter 1

Steve Hays

I) How Eller's chapter is supposed to support the main thesis of the book is hard to tell. Even if we accept his Darwinian analogy, the fact that, according to him, Christianity is highly adaptable in time and place hardly suggests the end of Christianity is coming anytime soon. To the contrary, that suggests Christianity is here to stay. It's an exceptionally survivable, time-tested religion.

II) On p29, Eller rehashes the pop stock narrative of Bart Ehrman and Elaine Pagels about lost gospels and lost Christianities. He shows no awareness of, much less responsible interaction with, the evangelical counterargument.²²

Like other contributors to TEC, Eller is simply playing to the galleries. TEC is a pep talk for fellow infidels. Telling the faithful faithless what they want to hear.

But suppose we play along with this urban legend for the sake of argument. Suppose the NT apocrypha had just as much or more right to be in the NT canon as the books sanctioned by the church. What would that admission accomplish for the sake of atheism?

The NT apocrypha also contain miracles. The NT apocrypha depict Jesus as a divine or supernatural figure.

True, the NT apocrypha are sometimes heretical, but how is that relevant to atheism? What atheism finds fundamentally objectionable about Christianity is not Christian orthodoxy but Christian supernaturalism.

III) On p30, Eller claims Paul had no knowledge of the historical Jesus. Once more, he ignores (probably through self-reinforcing ignorance) scholarship to the contrary.²³

IV) Eller says

Paul's main contribution was the creation of what Robert Wright in a cagey recent article called "a good Jesus," a gentle teacher whose only "doctrine" was "love" ... (30).

One wonders if Eller has even read the Pauline Epistles. This characterization disregards the role of penal substitution and eschatological judgment in Pauline Christology.

²² E.g. <http://www.denverseminary.edu/article/beyond-belief-the-secret-gospel-of-thomas/>; <http://ehrmanproject.com/more-resources>

²³ E.g. D. Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Eerdmans 1995).

V) He also classifies anything that calls itself Christian as Christian. But, of course, Christians distinguish Christianity from the cults.

Jason Engwer

A lot of what we wrote in response to David Eller's first chapter in TCD is applicable to his first chapter in TEC. His view of Christianity hasn't developed much. He's critical of the evolution of Christianity, but his thinking on these issues would benefit from some evolution.

Differences among forms of professing Christianity don't prove that there isn't one form or group of forms that's true. Eller is mistaken when he claims that such diversity "does undermine any possible claim of uniqueness or truth in Christianity" (25). Let's say that denominations A, B, and C disagree with each other on some issues. And they've each changed their views over time on issues X, Y, and Z. Does it follow that none of those denominations can represent a unique or true form of Christianity? No, nor does it even follow that they aren't *all* sufficiently unique and true. If they agree on a core set of beliefs that are true, and the issues they've changed their mind about over time are inessential, what do their external and internal inconsistencies on lesser matters prove? If church A has been consistent on essential issues, while churches B and C haven't been, how is church A thereby invalidated? Or if all three have been inconsistent or have been consistently wrong, how does it follow that what was taught by Jesus and the apostles is wrong? Eller isn't connecting the dots. Rather, he's presenting a large amount of data and some conclusions he draws from the data, but without connecting the two.

Any movement that exists in this world is going to be "secular, worldly, changing, and evolving to adjust to social circumstances" (23-24) to some extent. Why should we think that's objectionable? This is, after all, a world that God created. And if He intends that Christianity be lived out in this world, then not every form of interaction with the world, change, etc. is going to be inappropriate. It's hardly scandalous if a Christian wears blue jeans rather than a tunic, uses a cell phone, or has to take some time and effort to discern what he should think about embryonic stem cell research, a new economic theory, or the implications of some aspect of Trinitarian theology. Different professing Christians will reach different conclusions on such issues, and that, too, is hardly scandalous. Some of the people involved in something like a dispute over Trinitarianism may be wrong, but the existence of such disputes doesn't prove that Christianity itself is at fault. Christianity doesn't have to provide every answer in order to provide some, and it doesn't have to produce maximal clarity and unity in every circumstance in order to produce sufficient clarity and unity. The characteristics of professing Christianity that Eller cites, as if they're problematic, would only be problematic under *some* circumstances, and the degree to which they're problematic will vary from one case to another. Eller doesn't say much about

such distinctions. The reader has to connect the dots or, in the case of more discerning readers, recognize that there is no connection.

Eller's argument is as stale as it is wrong. Celsus objected to the diversity of Christianity in the second century (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 3:10-12), as have many other critics of the religion since then. Origen made some of the same observations in response to Celsus that a Christian today could put forward in response to Eller. But Eller doesn't seem to have learned much from what Christians have already said in response to arguments like his. Maybe that's because he doesn't have much familiarity with the responses.

He cites the often-repeated claim that there are tens of thousands of Christian denominations in the world (24). A lot of numbers have been circulating over the years, some far larger than others, and the issue often comes up in disputes between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Eric Svendsen and James White, for example, have replied to the Catholic citation of such numbers.²⁴ The large number Eller cites is produced by classifying even minor differences as constituting a separate denomination. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, is divided up into hundreds of denominations by the source Eller cites. Two governmentally independent Baptist churches that agree on every or almost every issue would be considered two different denominations. Eller's number wouldn't seem nearly as significant to his readers if he provided such details. But he doesn't. Instead, he lets his readers fill in a lot of the blanks for themselves, banking on the fact that they'll fill in the blanks with a lot of false assumptions.

He takes a step in the right direction when he mentions that there are "some fifty sects of Methodism alone" (24), but he doesn't explain how minor the differences can be that qualify a group as a separate sect. He doesn't acknowledge the insignificance of the number of denominations he cites, even though some readers may realize its insignificance when they see his comment about Methodism.

Eller gives us a tour through church history to illustrate how Christianity has evolved over time. But it's a largely lopsided tour that ignores a lot of what's good in church history while highlighting the bad.

He explains that Christianity was "born in a moment of cultural crisis", namely "the conquest of Palestine by the Romans, and before that the introduction of Greek or Hellenistic culture" (28). He says that the background Christianity came out of is similar to the backgrounds of other movements. But given how broad his terms are, so what? Many things can be called a "crisis", and a world so large, with so many people in it, will frequently have circumstances in place that could be cited as the background that allegedly gave birth to a movement. If something like the Roman conquest is responsible for the rise of Christianity, then *to what extent* is it respon-

²⁴ Eric Svendsen, *Upon This Slippery Rock* (Amityville, New York, Calvary Press, 2002), 58-64; <http://www.aomin.org/aoblog/index.php?itemid=2218>

sible? The significance of the Roman conquest in this context depends on the degree to which it was a factor. As with so many other issues, Eller doesn't go into much detail, but instead lets his readers fill in the blanks. The crisis Eller cites in this case is so vague as to span multiple centuries. Even if Christianity arose in circumstances similar to those surrounding other movements, sometimes only *vaguely* similar, it doesn't follow that nothing supernatural was involved. If God is acting in response to common human problems, then we'd expect much of Christianity's background to be common.

But there are uncommon elements as well, and discussing the common ones doesn't address those that are uncommon. It's doubtful that Eller knows much about the evidence for Christianity. Other contributors to these books, like Richard Carrier and Robert Price, address issues like Jesus' resurrection while Eller says little or nothing about those issues. If people like Carrier and Price are wrong, as they are, then Eller's highlighting of the more common aspects of Christianity is insufficient.

In a ridiculous paragraph about the Biblical canon, Eller refers to how books were "voted out", mentions documents like the Gospel of Judas and the Apocalypse of Peter as if their credibility is comparable to that of the canonical books, and cites the work of Elaine Pagels (29). There was widespread consensus on the gospels and other portions of the canon long before any vote occurred. Eller doesn't show much familiarity with the evidence and doesn't interact with conservative scholarship, or even much liberal or moderate scholarship, on the canon.²⁵

He tells us that Paul shaped Christianity as much as or more than Jesus did in some ways (30). But did Paul do so in any way that would undermine Christianity? Paul tells us that the core elements of the faith that defined the gospel were passed on to him by others who were Christians before him (1 Corinthians 15:1-11). The faith he taught was, in its essentials, the same one he opposed as a non-Christian (Galatians 1:23). The gospels and Revelation say nothing about Paul, and the non-Pauline epistles say next to nothing about him. He was a prominent church leader (as we see in Acts, Paul's letters, 2 Peter 3:15-16, and many extra-Biblical sources), probably the foremost of the apostles (as Peter was before Paul's conversion), but Eller doesn't demonstrate that he was prominent in any way that would be a significant problem for Christianity.

Eller tells us that "Jesus' quotes had not been recorded yet" when Paul wrote (30). He's assuming late dates for the gospels and other New Testament documents that quote or allude to Jesus' sayings. He's also assuming, against Luke 1:1, that Jesus' words weren't circulating outside of those documents. And he's assuming that Paul

²⁵ I wrote a series of articles on the New Testament canon at <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/06/new-testament-canon.html>. On the gospels, see C.E. Hill, *Who Chose The Gospels?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Hill's book includes some interaction with Elaine Pagels.

isn't referring to such Jesus traditions in passages like 1 Corinthians 7:25, 9:14, 11:23-25, and 1 Timothy 5:18. Eller doesn't argue for any of those assumptions.

While he says a lot about the disunity of the early Christians, he doesn't address the many affirmations of unity that we find in the New Testament and extra-Biblical literature.²⁶ The existence of groups like the Gnostics and Marcionites doesn't have much significance if those groups were minorities with little credibility. They were preceded by apostles and other early Christian leaders who were united in contradicting those later groups.

We learn a lot from the arguments used by groups like the Gnostics. They appealed to alleged secret traditions of Jesus and the apostles, while mainstream Christianity appealed to public teachings and many public records and other forms of evidence. Mainstream Christianity appealed to the harmonious teachings of the united apostles, whereas groups like the Gnostics and Marcionites set the apostles against each other, thus admitting that one or more of the apostles contradicted those later groups. It's not difficult to determine who's more credible under such circumstances. Yet, people like Eller act as if the mere existence of such heretical groups creates a major problem for Christianity. How is disunity with groups like the ones I just mentioned supposed to be problematic? The significance of early Christian disunity depends on details that Eller says little or nothing about.

Much more could be said about his inaccurate portrayal of early Christianity, but I'll stop at this point. His treatment of later church history isn't as significant, but also has some problems. According to Eller, Tertullian and "others" taught that you must shed your blood in order to be saved (33). No source is cited. I suspect that Eller is leaving out some significant qualifications, such as the qualification that a person must be willing to shed his blood in *particular circumstances*. It's not as though these Christians were claiming, without qualification, that nobody is saved who hasn't shed his blood for Christ. Similarly odd is Eller's dating of the Council of Chalcedon to the year 380 (34). He comments that there "might someday" be an "African pope" (50). The Roman bishops Victor I and Gelasius I were Africans. Most of Eller's material isn't so problematic. But most of it also isn't of much significance to the truthfulness of the Christian religion.

He repeatedly refers to forms of "pseudo-Christianity" (36, 46). But, earlier, he said that there is no Christianity, and later he claims that no form of Christianity is truer than another. How can there be pseudo-Christianities in such a context? A pseudo form suggests the existence of a true form to which the pseudo is being contrasted. Eller is at least being unclear in what he's saying, if not self-contradictory.

He concludes his chapter with the claim I referred to above, that no form of Christianity is any more true or special than another (51). Even a broken clock is right

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:11; First Clement, 42; Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 1:10:1; etc.

twice a day, but Christianity apparently isn't even right that often. Or Eller is being overly critical, to the point of absurdity.

If a liberal Methodist church claims that Jesus didn't physically rise from the dead, while a conservative Presbyterian church claims that He did, then what's the third alternative that Eller would consider the correct one? If he isn't denying that some forms of Christianity are truer than others in that sense, then why didn't he make his point more clearly? And whatever that point is, is it one that he argues for? Or just another unsupported assertion?

We know that Eller considers the diversity of professing Christianity to be inconsistent with the existence of any form of Christianity that's true. What he doesn't tell us is why we should agree with him. Surely every reader will agree with Eller in finding some of the Christian diversity objectionable in some way, but whether that diversity leads us to all of *Eller's* conclusions is another matter. We can agree that there's some ugliness in the picture of Christian diversity that Eller paints. But he doesn't give us much reason to agree with him about the degree of ugliness or its implications.

Chapter 2

Steve Hays

I) Richard Carrier introduces the theme of his chapter with the following, unattributed claim:

It is often claimed that Christianity could never have begun or succeeded unless the people of its first three centuries had overwhelming evidence that it was true (53).

He doesn't cite any documentation to support his claim. Pulling books off my shelf, I can't say that's a prominent argument among Christian apologists like Boa/Bowman, Winfried Corduin, W. L. Craig, Bill Dembski, John Frame, Norman Geisler, Gary Habermas, Tim Keller, C. S. Lewis, Mike Licona, Hugo Mynell, J. W. Montgomery, J. P. Moreland, Ronald Nash, Alvin Plantinga, Jay Richards, Ken Samples, Lee Strobel, Richard Swinburne, or Cornelius Van Til. Indeed, it's fairly conspicuous by its absence.

Seems more like Carrier was casting about for a pretext to opine about this topic.

II) Carrier says

It can therefore claim no supernatural success in winning converts. Its rate of development and success was entirely natural. Since that rate was natural, we should expect its cause was natural, which alone closes the book on Christianity having any supernatural evidence or guidance. Had it had such, its rate of success would reflect that. It does not (54).

But even if (arguendo) we accept the premise, the conclusion is patently fallacious. Carrier is playing semantic games, where he uses "natural" as a synonym for "naturalistic."

But in Christian theology, even natural causes ultimately have a supernatural cause. Likewise, Christian theology has a doctrine of ordinary providence.

It's not as if God had to override conditions in the Roman Empire to advance the Christian faith. Rather, such conditions would be providentially in place with that very end in view. Of course, Carrier denies that, but he's not engaging the real argument.

III) A crippling problem with Carrier's chapter is that his argument suffers from several central contradictions. On the one hand he says things like:

Clearly, the most repugnant beliefs could command large followings—all the more so among the powerless, oppressed, and disenfranchised, for whom humiliated heroes sometimes became a rallying point for opposition to an unjust imperial order (56).

Like modern Marxism (also once wildly popular despite stalwart elite hostility), it promised to subvert the most despised of elite values and produce an egalitarian utopia of justice for the common man... (62).

The Christians promised that the faithful will even inherit the earth itself, gaining all the power and plenty they always longed for while watching their oppressors and exploiters suffer utter downfall and defeat...They will smile inside, knowing their abusers will “get it” in the end while they will themselves get twice the reward (65).

Within a system like that of the Roman Empire, which lacked real democracy or even a sufficient scale of freedom of speech, there could only be two kinds or rebellion; the violent or the cultural (66).

Christianity had tons of customers just waiting to be sold on the idea (61).

The Roman Empire was tailor-made to breed exactly such resentment and deprivation (65).

Contrariwise, he also says things like:

...only when Christianity acquired absolute despotic power (first in the hands of Emperor Constantine, and then by all his subsequent family and imperial heirs thereafter)... (54).

In actual fact, the Romans didn’t “hunt them all down.” All reliable evidence confirms that persecution of Christians was limited, occasional, and sporadic at best (64).

Medieval missionaries used the same tactic by first converting kings, chieftains, or other heads of state, and thus inspiring or compelling the rest of their nation or tribe to follow suit (67).

All evidence and scholarship confirms Christianity was for a long time a tiny fringe cult... (53).

Notice how his arguments cancel each other out:

On the one hand, Christianity was long a tiny fringe cult. It only became mainstream when the power elite imposed Christianity on the unwilling masses.

On the other hand, Christianity had tremendous popular appeal, tapping into preexisting religious movements and social grievances.

On the one hand, Christianity was successful because Christian martyrs were banking on eschatological payback for all they suffered at the hands of their Roman persecutors.

On the other hand, persecution of Christians was “limited, occasional, and sporadic at best.”

On the one hand, Christianity was successful because it had a seditious ideology that challenged the power elite.

On the other hand, Christianity was successful because the power elite adopted and sponsored an ideology which was inimical to their power base.

Christianity was a tool of social control. No, Christianity was a subversive, egalitarian movement.

IV) Carrier indulges in his penchant for parallelomania. Yet this implicates him in yet another central contradiction, for Carrier speaks with forked tongue on this matter. He tries to trump up a case for pagan parallels when he’s attacking the Christian faith and pandering to his fellow infidels, but when he has a different agenda, he admits the paucity and dubiety of the alleged parallels:

Although I have not exhaustively investigated this matter, I have confirmed only two real “resurrected” deities with some uncanny similarity to Jesus which are actually reported before Christian times, Zalmoxis and Inanna, neither of which is mentioned by Graves or John G. Jackson (another Gravesian author—though both mention Tammuz, for whom Inanna was mistaken in their day). This is apart from the obvious pre-Christian myths of Demeter, Dionysos, Persephone, Castor and Pollux, Isis and Osiris, and Cybele and Attis, which do indeed carry a theme of metaphorical resurrection, usually in the terms of a return or escape from the Underworld, explaining the shifting seasons. But these myths are not quite the same thing as a pre-Christian passion story. It only goes to show the pervasiveness in antiquity of an agricultural resurrection theme, and the Jesus story has more to it than that, although the cultural influence can certainly be acknowledged.

The only pre-Christian man to be buried and resurrected and deified in his own lifetime, that I know of, is the Thracian god Zalmoxis (also called Salmoxis or Gebele'izis), who is described in the mid-5th-century B.C.E. by Herodotus (4.94-96), and also mentioned in Plato's *Charmides* (156d-158b) in the early-4th-century B.C.E. According to the hostile account of Greek infor-

mants, Zalmoxis buried himself alive, telling his followers he would be resurrected in three years, but he merely resided in a hidden dwelling all that time. His inevitable "resurrection" led to his deification, and a religion surrounding him, which preached heavenly immortality for believers, persisted for centuries.

The only case, that I know, of a pre-Christian god actually being crucified and then resurrected is Inanna (also known as Ishtar), a Sumerian goddess whose crucifixion, resurrection and escape from the underworld is told in cuneiform tablets inscribed c. 1500 B.C.E., attesting to a very old tradition. The best account and translation of the text is to be found in Samuel Kramer's *History Begins at Sumer*, pp. 154ff., but be sure to use the third revised edition (1981), since the text was significantly revised after new discoveries were made. For instance, the tablet was once believed to describe the resurrection of Inanna's lover, Tammuz (also known as Dumuzi). Graves thus mistakenly lists Tammuz as one of his "Sixteen Crucified Saviors." Of course, Graves cannot be discredited for this particular error, since in his day scholars still thought the tablet referred to that god (Kramer explains how this mistake happened).²⁷

V) Carrier says

All of this does mean that the claim that the rise of Christianity caused the fall of the Roman Empire is a myth (54).

He makes it sound as if he's debunking Christian apologetic myth, when—in fact—it was Edward Gibbon, the notoriously anti-Christian historian, who popularized that myth.

VI) Carrier says

We should also expect that a compassionate god who wanted us to know his message of salvation would not allow any errors or alterations to be made to the book containing that message... (71).

1) Like a well-engineered device, Scripture has information-redundancy. Therefore, scribal errors are insufficient to garble the message.

2) Scribal errors never prevented Jews and Christians from knowing and believing the Bible.

3) For that matter, infidels like Carrier believe the extant text of Scripture is sufficiently reliable for them to allege all manner of error in the Bible. If, however, our

²⁷ http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/graves.html

MSS were hopelessly corrupt, infidels couldn't distinguish untextual errors from merely scribal errors.

VII) Carrier says

If Christianity is false, we should expect exactly this: (a) reported revelations of a newly risen Jesus would occur only to diehard believers, only for a very brief time, only in one single geographic location, and only exceedingly rarely to anyone else... (70).

1) He didn't appear to diehard believers. Rather, his resurrection made them diehard believers.

2) At the risk of stating the obvious, he appeared to people who knew him since they'd be in a position to recognize who he was. That the same individual who died had risen. What would be the point of appearing to strangers?

3) There's nothing suspicious about the fact that his post-Resurrection appearances are geographically localized. He appeared in the same area where he ministered.

4) If more people said Jesus appeared to them, Carrier would simply dismiss that as hallucinatory.

And if we had more 1C records of Jesus' sightings, Carrier would contest the authenticity of the records.

VIII) Carrier says

The same goes for notions of blood sacrifice and vicarious atonement—which were commonplace then and very much in the mindset of the time, but which are now seen for what they are: silly (73).

Of course, that's not an argument. It's just a circular appeal—you shouldn't believe it since it's...unbelievable!

Yet hundreds of millions of people today don't think it's "silly."

Jason Engwer

Richard Carrier is responding to a variation of an argument by J.P. Holding. But that variation differs from Holding's position, and it often doesn't represent the strongest form the argument could take.

For example, Carrier responds to the notion that "pagans were all drunken, orgy-loving rapscallions" (60). He replies to the claim that the Romans "hunted [all the

early Christians] down" (63). He interacts with the idea that a willingness to die for a belief proves that the belief is true (64). He argues against the position that "no one trusted the testimony of women" (67). Yes, some Christians make such claims, but the best Christian arguments on those subjects are more nuanced. Do Christianity's best representatives claim that the Romans were "hunting down" *all* Christians, that willingness to die for a belief proves that belief's correctness, etc.? Carrier goes after a lot of low-hanging fruit. There can be good reasons to respond to weaker arguments. Readers should realize, though, that Carrier is going after easier targets while more formidable ones are ignored.

For those interested in a response to Carrier by somebody who uses an argument somewhat similar to the one he's critiquing, though in a stronger form than what Carrier addresses, see Holding's book *The Impossible Faith* (United States: Xulon Press, 2007) and his online material on the subject.²⁸ That material includes some responses to Carrier.²⁹

One of the problems with Carrier's approach is that he appeals to such a wide diversity of sources. Patching together such a disparate collection of parallels to Christianity is misleading. If he has to cite one pagan god popular in one region during a particular timeframe to parallel one aspect of the early Christian view of Jesus, some other pagan gods popular in other parts of the world at other times to parallel something else, and some gods popular in other contexts to parallel a third item, then the diversity of the sources weakens his argument. A god popular under one set of circumstances may not have been popular in a context like Christianity's.

In the modern world, you can find some people who enjoy pain. And some people are polytheists. Some are communists. But if somebody in the modern United States were beginning a new movement, it would be problematic in that setting to make things like the enjoyment of pain, polytheism, and communism prominent in that new movement. Yes, you can find some people who have considered such things appealing. But that fact doesn't overturn the general thrust of the argument that a movement prominently featuring such things would be hindered by those characteristics in a setting like the modern United States.

And the success of a movement with one unpopular characteristic may not reflect the prospects of a movement that combines that characteristic with a few others that are unpopular. The combined effect of the characteristics in one movement is more significant than the existence of, say, one or two such characteristics in each of several other movements.

Parallels to Christianity can weaken a Christian argument without removing all of its force. For example, Carrier mentions that some pagan gods were humiliated in some way, similar to how Jesus was crucified (55-57). But not all types of humiliation are

²⁸ <http://www.tektonics.org/lp/nowayjose.html>

²⁹ <http://www.tektonics.org/ezone/carrierindex.html>

equal. Working a lowly job doesn't have the same implications as being executed as a criminal. Some of Carrier's parallels aren't of much significance. And something like the crucifixion wouldn't have to be an insurmountable obstacle in order to be an obstacle to some extent. Saying that some people believed in humiliated gods doesn't remove the fact that the humiliation of Jesus caused problems for Christianity.

Similarly, the fact that female testimony was accepted in some ancient contexts lessens, but doesn't eliminate, the difficulty of the Christian appeal to female witnesses of the empty tomb and the risen Jesus.

Carrier is correct in observing that Romans "often" held relatively high moral standards (60). But his argument that Christianity had "tons of [potential] customers" for its morality (61) should be qualified. Eric Osborn notes:

Yet Christians were seen by Jews and Gentiles to be profoundly legalist. Tertullian describes a cartoon in which a Christian is depicted as a book-reading donkey dressed in a toga (nat. 1.1.14). Similarly a Jew like Trypho could read and admire the Gospel, yet declare to Justin that its precepts were too hard for practice (dial. 10).³⁰

In the second century, Galen describes Christianity in terms of a philosophical school with some commendable moral standards.³¹ Yes, the same could be said of some non-Christians, but how many? When we read what the early Christians said about their moral standards in comparison to those of non-Christians³², do we get the impression that most non-Christians agreed with the Christian system of morality or didn't think it was significantly more difficult to follow than their own? Carrier may agree with my point here, but I think the point still bears mentioning. He's correct to criticize Christians who underestimate the morality of ancient non-Christians. The fact remains, though, that disagreement with its moral system was a significant obstacle that Christianity had to overcome.

We also have evidence that other early Christian beliefs caused problems for Christianity among a majority of non-Christians. For example, Paul refers to the crucifixion as a difficulty for both Jews and Gentiles in general (1 Corinthians 1:23). Justin Martyr anticipates mockery of Jesus' sufferings among non-Christian Jews when he comments, "Say no evil thing, my brothers, against Him that was crucified, and treat not scornfully the stripes wherewith all may be healed, even as we are healed." (Dialogue With Trypho, 137) He goes on, in the same section of his work, to suggest that non-Christian Jews have been taught by their leaders to ridicule Jesus in that

³⁰ Tertullian: *First Theologian Of The West* (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 240

³¹ Robert Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 68-93

³² e.g., Philippians 2:15, 1 Peter 4:3-4, The Epistle To Diognetus, 5-6

manner. He tells them to "pour no ridicule on the Son of God; obey not the Pharisaic teachers, and scoff not at the King of Israel, as the rulers of your synagogues teach you to do after your prayers". Origen commented that the suffering of Jesus "in the eyes of most people brings shame on the doctrine of the Christians" (Against Celsus, 3:28).

Justin Martyr expects his pagan audience to be skeptical of the concept of resurrection (First Apology, 19). Sebastian Moll notes, "It can be considered almost certain that a pagan audience would have sided with Marcion on that point [i.e., would have rejected physical resurrection]."³³

Carrier takes his argument so far as to claim that Christians eventually "had so magnified and exalted their God-man that he was exactly to everyone's liking" (56-57). Exactly to everyone's liking? Critics like Celsus and Julian the Apostate don't seem to have found Jesus so appealing. Just who were Athenagoras, Origen, and other Christians responding to when they defended concepts like bodily resurrection and the incarnation if there were no critics of such concepts?

Carrier cites the example of an alleged change in the portrayal of Jesus from Mark's gospel to John's. Contrasting Mark 15:15-37 and John 19:16-30, he writes:

Thus, the story could be changed to suit any audience, from the subversively humiliated hero [in the gospel of Mark] to the triumphant divine dignitary who's always in charge and needs no one's help [in the gospel of John]. There's certainly nothing supernatural about rewriting history to market your product. (57)

It's not as though John's gospel replaced Mark's, and it's not as though the two passages Carrier has cited are all we have to go by. Rather, John's gospel was accepted along with Mark's and was considered supplementary material, not a competitor. Papias quotes the positive assessment of Mark's gospel given by a man he identifies as "the elder", most likely the apostle John.³⁴ The early Christian treatment of the two gospels doesn't imply that they were as different as Carrier is suggesting. Mark's gospel was part of how Christians were "marketing their product" from the first century onward. It wasn't abandoned and replaced with something else.

Mark's Jesus, like John's, is "always in charge". That's why He predicted His resurrection, a fact that His unfaithful followers had to be reminded about (Mark 9:31, 16:7). Passages like Mark 14:62 suggest that Jesus was very much "in charge". And John's high view of Jesus doesn't deny that He was troubled at times (John 12:27) and sought the help of others, even though He was sovereign (19:28). There is more of an emphasis on Jesus' deity in John's gospel, but the Divine and human aspects

³³ in Sara Parvis and Paul Foster, ed., *Justin Martyr And His Worlds* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2007), 151

³⁴ http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/11/review-of-michael-liconas-resurrection_15.html

are both present in both gospels. The early Christian tradition that John's gospel was meant to supplement the others is likely true. The fourth gospel is different from the others, but not as different as Carrier suggests.

He draws vague parallels between Christianity and themes we find in other ancient religions, like "dying-and-rising gods" (59) and gods who "impregnate women" (72). The pagan gods in question didn't experience a resurrection of a physical body that died. They "rose" in some other sense. And the term "impregnate women" can refer to anything from having sex with a woman to a virgin birth as described in Matthew and Luke.³⁵ Carrier's fellow skeptics often overestimate the similarities and relationships between Christianity and ancient pagan religions. Carrier himself has corrected that tendency at times, as Steve Hays noted in his review. It's counterproductive, then, for Carrier to make so many unqualified references to concepts like "dying-and-rising gods" and "impregnating women". And Carrier doesn't address some of the anti-pagan themes in Christianity that accompanied the vague similarities he focuses on.

The earliest Christians believed that their gospel was "to the Jew first" (Romans 1:16). They considered the Jewish people their "fathers" (Romans 9:5). They viewed pagan religion as a system of "ignorance" (Acts 17:23) and "foolishness" (Romans 1:22-23). Pagan gods were "no gods" (Galatians 4:8). Pagan religions were viewed as demonic (1 Corinthians 10:14-22). Pagan religions left people "dead in trespasses and sins" and "without God and without hope" (Ephesians 2:1, 2:12). The infancy narratives and resurrection accounts were written in a highly Jewish context, with many citations of Old Testament scripture, references to Jewish tradition, Hebraisms, etc. These Christian documents were viewed as the word of God, and they continued to have the highest place of authority in Christianity after it became a majority Gentile religion. The same Gentile who could see vague similarities between Jesus' virgin birth and a pagan god's impregnation of a woman through sexual intercourse could also notice the differences. And he could notice that he was being condemned as somebody dead in sin who was coming from a depraved religion.

Carrier cites Justin Martyr in support of the notion that Christianity and pagan religions were similar (60). But Justin's comments on the similarities between the two were accompanied by references to the differences between them. Other ancient Christians often discussed the differences as well.³⁶ Carrier's treatment of Justin is misleading.³⁷ He selectively cites Justin while neglecting other passages from the other end of the spectrum in the same author and in other early Christian sources. Not only does Justin himself note that there are differences that accompany the similarities between Christianity and pagan religions, but the apparent reason why

³⁵ See, for example, Craig Keener's discussion of such issues in *A Commentary On The Gospel Of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 83-86, 705-710.

³⁶ Aristides (Apology, 8); Tatian (Address To The Greeks, 21); Theophilus of Antioch (To Autolycus, 2:6); Athenagoras (A Pleas For The Christians, 14); Tertullian (Apology, 21)

³⁷ See 435-452 in *This Joyful Eastertide* at <http://www.triapologia.com/hays/ebooks.html>.

he's emphasizing the similarities is because some pagans didn't think the religions were so similar. Justin is trying to convince them of something he thought they didn't yet believe.

And it's not as though Justin's evaluation is all we have to go by. We know the details involved in many of these pagan religions, and we know that their similarities to Christianity are vague.

The fact that Justin sometimes emphasized their similarities, in an attempt to persuade pagans, therefore doesn't carry much weight. Elsewhere, Justin comments on how pagans have difficulty accepting Christian concepts, such as resurrection³⁸, and he contrasts the evidence offered for Christian claims to the lack of evidence for pagan claims (First Apology, 19-20). Justin's view might be summarized in this sentence:

If, therefore, on some points we teach the same things as the poets and philosophers whom you honour, and on other points are fuller and more divine in our teaching, and if we alone afford proof of what we assert, why are we unjustly hated more than all others? (20)

A lot more could be said about the similarities and differences between Christianity and pagan religions. And a book-length treatment of the likelihood of Christianity's success in the ancient world could be written (as Richard Carrier and J.P. Holding have done). But I want to turn now to what I consider the most significant portion of Carrier's chapter, where he addresses something Justin refers to above.

Justin tells us that "we alone afford proof of what we assert", whereas Carrier writes:

When we pore over all the documents that survive, we find no evidence that any Christian convert did any fact-checking before converting or even would have done so. We can rarely even establish that they *could* have, had they wanted to. There *were* people in antiquity who could and would, but curiously we have no evidence that any of those people converted. Instead, every Christian who actually tells us what convinced him explicitly says he *didn't* check any facts but merely believed upon hearing the story and reading the scriptures and just "feeling" it was right. Every third-person account of conversions we have tells the same story. Likewise, every discussion we have

³⁸ While Carrier keeps drawing vague parallels to "dying-and-rising gods", Sebastian Moll notes: "It can be considered almost certain that a pagan audience would have sided with Marcion on that point [i.e., would have rejected physical resurrection]." (in Sara Parvis and Paul Foster, ed., Justin Martyr And His Worlds [Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2007], 151). Celsus, a second-century pagan critic of Christianity, referred to physical resurrection as "revolting", "impossible", and "the hope of worms" (cited in Origen, Against Celsus, 5:14). Carrier misleadingly claims that "pagans would have no problem with one more dying-and-rising son of god and savior" (60), ignoring the fact that many pagans did object to the *type* of rising Christians were referring to.

from Christians regarding their methodology for testing claims either omits, rejects, or even denigrates rational, empirical methods and promotes instead faith-based methods of finding secrets hidden in scripture and relying on spiritual inspirations and revelations, and then verifying all of this by whether their psychosomatic "miracles" worked and their leaders were willing to suffer for the cause. Skepticism and doubt were belittled; faith without evidence was praised and rewarded....

There just wasn't any evidence Jesus really rose from the dead other than the word of a few fanatics and a church community demonstrably full of regular hallucinators and fabricators. The only miracles Christians themselves could perform in public were some faith-healings and exorcisms and unremarkable bouts of prophesy – in other words, quite suspiciously, *only things that we know have natural causes* (being entirely cultural and psychosomatic phenomena).

Even if every public, checkable claim made by Christian missionaries were entirely true, it still cannot be concluded that their private, uncheckable claims were true as well; yet only the latter had any plausible claim to being supernatural. (62-63)

Ironically, Carrier's assessment reflects his own irrationality. Notice not only his repeated use of terms like "any" and "every", which we'll see are false, but also his claim to know things he couldn't know. How would Carrier know that all of Paul's miracles, for example, had natural causes? Paul often refers to his performance of miracles without going into much detail.³⁹ And his miracles described in Acts go beyond "faith-healings and exorcisms and unremarkable bouts of prophesy". Carrier's claim that "only" private miracle claims "had any plausible claim to being supernatural" is likewise absurd. The gospels repeatedly refer to highly public miracles that would be "plausibly supernatural" if they occurred (Jesus' feeding of thousands of people, the raising of the Nain widow's son, etc.). Similarly, Acts records many highly public miracles that would be "plausibly supernatural". Then there's Carrier's ridiculous characterization of the resurrection evidence as "the word of a few fanatics and a church community demonstrably full of regular hallucinators and fabricators". We addressed Carrier's claims on those subjects in chapter 11 and appendices VII and VIII of TID.

He raises the issue of whether Christians claimed to have converted on the basis of evidence. Only a tiny percentage of ancient Christians tell us why they converted. A larger number tell us what their evidential standards were after conversion.

Even if an ancient Christian had converted on the sort of non-evidential basis Carrier refers to, that Christian could still be sufficiently concerned about evidence later in life. When Carrier was a five-year-old, I suspect he accepted many claims from his

³⁹ Romans 15:19, 1 Corinthians 2:4, 2 Corinthians 12:12, Galatians 3:5

parents, teachers, etc. without much, if any, evidence. All of us accept claims about history, science, and other subjects without having much or any evidence for those claims. In the case of children, an early lack of concern for evidence is often replaced by more of a concern for evidence later in life. If a thirty-year-old man believes what he does about George Washington based on good evidence, it isn't much of a refutation of his conclusions to note a lack of an evidential basis for his same beliefs about Washington when he was a seven-year-old.

And Carrier is wrong about ancient Christian conversion accounts anyway. Some of the apostles are described as having converted on the basis of miracles they witnessed (John 1:45-50, Acts 9:1-21). The gospels refer to other people who believed on the same basis (John 7:31, 11:45, 12:11). We see the same in Acts. Peter's Pentecost sermon included appeals to evidence (Acts 2:22, 2:32-33). Other individuals in Acts are described as having been converted by means of evidence as well (9:42, 13:12). The converts of Acts 17:4 were persuaded by Paul's "explaining and giving evidence" that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy (17:3). He presumably wasn't arguing for the facts of Jesus' life on the basis of New Testament documents, but by means of extra-Biblical evidence. Paul refers to his performance of miracles as a regular part of his ministry and as evidence authenticating his claims (Romans 15:19, 1 Corinthians 2:4, 2 Corinthians 12:12, Galatians 3:5). In the patristic era, Tatian refers to fulfilled prophecy as one of the factors involved in persuading him to convert (Address To The Greeks, 29). Theophilus of Antioch also appeals to the evidence of prophecy to explain his conversion and in an attempt to persuade others (To Autolycus, 1:14, 2:33).

It should be noted that conversion accounts are often brief summaries. We're even told at times that some material is being left out, such as when Acts 2:40 tells us that Peter said many other things. Justin Martyr tells us that the Christian who converted him said more than he's recording (Dialogue With Trypho, 8). It doesn't make sense to expect the authors of the documents I've cited above to go into a high level of detail about their historiography or other evidential standards or the standards of the other individuals they're discussing.

Critics sometimes object that the early Christian documents fall short of the highest historiographic standards or the best historiographic practices of their day. Since Luke records so much accurate historical information, for example, he's sometimes criticized for not attaining to an even *higher* standard. He's criticized for not citing more of his sources or not saying more about his methodology, for instance. I addressed Carrier's use of such an objection in TID.⁴⁰ There's a difference between objecting that the ancient Christians didn't possess or present *any* evidence and objecting that they didn't possess or present *enough* evidence. If Carrier is going to make claims like the ones he does in TEC, quoted above, he can't defend those claims by arguing that Christians like Paul, Luke, and Justin Martyr showed *some* concern about evidence, but not *enough*. If he's going to claim that the early Christians nei-

⁴⁰ 168-169

ther possessed nor desired evidence, then he needs to defend *that* claim, not something else.

It also doesn't make sense to suggest, as Carrier has in the past, that eyewitnesses and contemporaries of events should do further investigation, such as by interviewing witnesses. It may be necessary or beneficial for them to do further investigation in some cases, but there's no reason to assume that it's needed in every case.

We don't expect eyewitnesses in modern law courts to seek additional evidence, beyond their own eyewitness experience. A witness to a bank robbery could seek out the bank's camera footage, in order to confirm his memories or add further details. But we don't conclude that his testimony has no evidential value without the addition of the camera footage, nor do we consider him irrational for thinking that his memory of his experience is sufficient. To object that we don't have more details about the historiography or sources in an eyewitness account, like Paul's testimony about the resurrection or Luke's testimony about Paul's miracles, isn't much of an objection.

Much the same can be said about contemporaries of an event who aren't eyewitnesses, though their testimony is generally of less value than that of an eyewitness. Just as we today often assume the historicity of recent events that few or no people dispute, without presenting our historiography, sources, or evidence every time we discuss those events, so would people in antiquity. For example, if the empty tomb was a fact widely accepted by both the early Christians and their early enemies, as the evidence suggests⁴¹, then somebody like Luke could refer to that widely accepted fact without thinking that he needed to argue for it. It doesn't follow that he wasn't concerned about evidence, nor does it follow that we should think he wasn't concerned.

Even if a Christian didn't say much about his methodology or sources, we can learn a lot from the results he produced. Luke doesn't need to tell us much about his methodology or sources in order for us to observe that he records a large amount of accurate historical information, including on matters that wouldn't be easy to investigate. Whatever his methodology and sources, the results are impressive.⁴² Or if Justin Martyr shows familiarity with extra-Biblical Jewish sources⁴³ or extra-Biblical

⁴¹ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/02/early-jewish-acknowledgment-of-empty.html>

⁴² <http://www.christiancadre.org/Acts%20Article.DOC>

⁴³ Justin is familiar with many Jewish responses to Christianity, as his interactions with their scripture interpretations, for example, demonstrate. See, also, section 108 in his *Dialogue With Trypho*. He "shows acquaintance with rabbinical discussions" (Michael Slusser, ed., *Dialogue With Trypho* [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Of America Press, 2003], n. 9 on 33). Bruce Chilton writes that Justin "appears to adapt motifs of Judaism", and Rebecca Lyman comments that Justin "is aware of Samaritan customs as well as some patterns of rabbinic exegesis" (in Sara Parvis and Paul Foster, ed., *Justin Martyr And His Worlds* [Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2007], 83, 163). He wasn't just repeating what he read in the New Testament documents. He's aware of Jewish arguments outside of those reflected in the New Testament, and he's aware of post-apostolic developments in Judaism.

information about the gospels⁴⁴, we don't need to have a passage in which he explains to us that he consulted such sources. The results speak for him. Similarly, we have good evidence that Origen consulted non-Christian sources on evidential matters and was aware of the evidential significance of hostile corroboration.⁴⁵ We don't need to have any one passage in which Origen gathers all of that information together for us or presents us with an overview of his methodology and sources. We can piece such things together by the comments he makes in different places and the results he produces.

Since I just referred to Origen, this would be a good place to mention that his treatise *Against Celsus* is a valuable source on the subject currently under consideration. Celsus made claims about Christian anti-intellectualism similar to Carrier's, and it's significant to note how Origen responded and what Celsus admitted elsewhere. For those who are interested, I wrote an article on the subject a few years ago.⁴⁶

Though Carrier is dismissive of those who convert to Christianity on the basis of reading scripture, it should be noted that people would come to scripture with knowledge of extra-Biblical information. The fact that a Christian refers to his being convinced of prophecy fulfillment by reading the scriptures, for example, doesn't prove that he didn't have any extra-Biblical evidence for that fulfillment. On the contrary, the ancient Christians sometimes appeal to ongoing fulfillment of prophecy, beyond what's recorded in scripture (e.g., Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, 7; Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus*, 1:14). Even if they hadn't made such comments, the most Carrier could claim is that Christians *might* have believed in prophecy fulfillment without any extra-Biblical evidence. But if the matter is inconclusive, then Carrier can't claim to know that these Christians weren't interested in evidence.

The same can be said of other evidential categories, not just fulfilled prophecy. Take eyewitness testimony, for example. How does Carrier know that people who ac-

⁴⁴ Consider, for example, his knowledge that the gospels were written by apostles (plural) and associates of apostles (plural), which reflects some knowledge of the documents' authorship, perhaps even the fact that two were written by apostles and two were written by non-apostles (*Dialogue With Trypho*, 103).

⁴⁵ Much could be cited here. See, for example, section 1:51 of *Against Celsus*. John McGuckin notes that Origen "consulted on several occasions with famous rabbis...Talmudic texts also have Origen in discussion with the Caesarean Jewish scholar Hoschaia Rabba." (*The Westminster Handbook To Origen* [Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004], n. 62 on 11) Elsewhere, McGuckin refers to "the apologetic exchanges between the Christian and Jewish scholars of the respective Caesarean schools" (*ibid.*, 27). Henry Chadwick wrote, "In the *contra Celsum* Origen does not merely vindicate the character of Jesus and the credibility of the Christian tradition; he also shows that Christians can be so far from being irrational and credulous illiterates such as Celsus thinks them to be that they may know more about Greek philosophy than the pagan Celsus himself, and can make intelligent use of it to interpret the doctrines of the Church. In the range of his learning he towers above his pagan adversary, handling the traditional arguments of Academy and Stoa with masterly ease and fluency." (*Origen: Contra Celsum* [New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003], xii)

⁴⁶ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2007/08/early-christian-discernment.html>

cepted New Testament documents as eyewitness testimony didn't have any evidence for that conclusion? The Biblical documents themselves appeal to means of verification, like trusted messengers and handwriting (e.g., 2 Thessalonians 3:17, 1 Peter 5:12). The Christians of the second century repeatedly appeal to individuals and churches who verified the authorship of the New Testament.⁴⁷ Even without such comments in our extant sources, it would be unreasonable to suggest that the early Christians didn't have such information passed on to them or weren't concerned about it. How likely is it that the Roman and Corinthian churches didn't discuss the authorship of Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians, for example, or that the early Christians weren't concerned about what those churches said? As documents like First Clement and Polycarp's Letter To The Philippians illustrate, eyewitnesses and contemporaries of the apostles would have discussed authorship issues in a variety of contexts, probably frequently and before many audiences.⁴⁸

It should also be noted that a combination of more subjective and more objective factors can be involved in a person's conversion. The presence of one doesn't preclude the presence of the other. In John 10:38, Jesus comments that people can believe for more than one reason, including on the basis of objective evidence. Similarly, the Christian who converted Justin Martyr appealed to both more subjective and more objective criteria (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, 7). What's relevant here is not only the descriptions we have of early conversions, but also the principles laid down for conversions in general.

Some early Christian appeals to evidence don't specify whether they're addressing a conversion or post-conversion context, but presumably they'd be relevant to both. The Old Testament and the New appeal to evidential concepts like fulfilled prophecy and eyewitness testimony.⁴⁹ Richard Bauckham has documented the presence of many ancient historiographical concepts and terminology in the New Testament documents.⁵⁰ The highest church office, that of apostle, consisted only of eyewitnesses (Acts 1:21-22, 1 Corinthians 9:1), and the churches that had a historical relationship with the apostles were the most prominent in the second century (Rome,

⁴⁷ e.g., Papias on Mark's gospel (cited in Eusebius, *Church History*, 3:39), Clement of Alexandria on Mark and John (see <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/11/some-early-sources-on-infancy.html>), Tertullian on the gospels (*Against Marcion*, 4:5)

⁴⁸ Another example is the labeling of manuscripts. Christians consulted old manuscripts, sometimes even "ancient" ones (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5:30:1), and compared them to newer ones. The name of a document's author could be attached to a document in a variety of ways, such as in a document title, on a tag, or on the spine of a codex. When a Christian picked up a previous generation's copy of, say, one of the gospels, he would be getting testimony about that document's authorship from that older source. Tertullian tells us that it was normal to attach an author's name to a document, at least in the context he was addressing (*Against Marcion*, 4:2), and the New Testament manuscripts we have support his claim.

⁴⁹ e.g., Isaiah 41:21-23, John 19:35, Acts 1:21-22, 1 Corinthians 9:1, 2 Peter 1:16

⁵⁰ *Jesus And The Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006)

Smyrna, Ephesus, etc.). Last year, I wrote a three-part series of articles about some of the relevant patristic material.⁵¹ I'll cite several examples here.

Justin Martyr refers to the importance of evidence, including hostile corroboration (First Apology, 20, 30, 33-34, 53). Tatian is aware of the value of hostile corroboration (Address To The Greeks, 31) and firsthand knowledge (Address To The Greeks, 35). Rhodo considered it shameful for a person who claimed to be a Christian teacher to not be able to support his teachings with arguments. He comments about his interactions with a heretic, "I said to him, 'What is your proof for a single Source [of good and evil]? Please explain,'...I laughed in condemning him, because he called himself a teacher yet did not know how to confirm what he taught" (in Eusebius, Church History, 5:13). Irenaeus appeals to eyewitness testimony and the earliness of sources (Against Heresies, 3:3:3-4; Fragments, 2). Tertullian appeals to information about the apostles and their associates available from apostolic churches (The Prescription Against Heretics, 32). Dionysius of Alexandria evaluates the New Testament books on the basis of their internal evidence, making some of the same observations that have been made by modern scholarship (Eusebius, Church History, 7:24-25). Eusebius appeals to internal evidence as well (Church History, 3:25). Etc.⁵²

Sometimes the Christians of antiquity weren't as concerned about evidence as they should have been. And some of their conclusions were wrong. But the same can be said of ancient non-Christian sources, as well as modern ones. There's a lot that's bad in ancient Christianity, but also far more that's good than Carrier suggests.

And what about ancient non-Christian sources? Dismissing the early Christians as unconcerned with evidence, even if an accurate characterization (which it isn't), leaves other sources unexplained. Josephus, Tacitus, Justin Martyr's Jewish opponents, Celsus, and many other ancient sources who weren't Christians agreed with Christian claims, including some claims Carrier has disputed.⁵³ If Carrier has to so often dismiss the united testimony of so many Christian and non-Christian sources, the problem most likely is with him rather than them.

⁵¹ http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/10/historical-nature-of-early-christianity_18.html; http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/10/historical-nature-of-early-christianity_19.html; http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/10/historical-nature-of-early-christianity_20.html

⁵² See appendix 10 for further discussion.

⁵³ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/03/what-early-non-christians-said-about.html>

I. The Burden of Proof

Loftus tells the reader that he's taking a "smorgasbord" approach (76). On 76-77, he gives 10 alleged examples of how Christianity is "wildly improbable." Then, on 99-105, he gives another 15 alleged examples of how Christianity is "wildly improbable." Plus other miscellaneous examples randomly strewn throughout the chapter.

In giving these examples to illustrate the "wild improbability" of Christianity, Loftus automatically assumes a burden of proof. If the aim of TEC is to disprove Christianity, then Loftus must actually make a case for his position. If he's going to give 25+ examples of how Christianity is "wildly improbable," then that needs to be accompanied by 25+ corresponding arguments. Each example is only as good as the quality of the supporting argument (or absence thereof).

I can't overstate the fact that a Christian is under no obligation to respond to mere assertions regarding the alleged improbability of the Christian faith. If Loftus fails to argue for his examples, then he fails to make good on his claims.

25+ assertions that Christianity is wildly improbably don't create the slightest presumption to that effect, much less establish that claim. To paraphrase Christopher Hitchens, what's asserted without argument may safely be dismissed without argument.

This is also a test for the reader. Infidels pride themselves on their rationality. Will they hold Loftus to elementary standards of intellectual accountability? Or will they nod approvingly and applaud whatever he says? If the latter, then their self-image is self-delusional.

However, the deficiency actually runs much deeper, which brings us to the remaining points.

II. Rules of evidence

According to Loftus:

I am skeptical of the extraordinary claim that Jesus resurrected because I cannot dismiss my present experience. I must judge my past from my present. I cannot do otherwise (79).

An obvious problem with this evidentiary standard is that Loftus relies on science to supply a key criterion for the Outsider Test for Faith (OTF). Yet, Loftus' scientific beliefs are hearsay beliefs. Loftus is not a scientist. He has not done his own fieldwork

or lab work to independently confirm his scientific beliefs. This is no part of his personal experience. His scientific beliefs come from third-hand popularizations.

Indeed, his claim is odd even from a secular standpoint. Normally an atheist will claim the present must resemble the past. But Loftus has upended this claim: for him, the past must resemble the present.

III. “Extraordinary claims”

Loftus says:

When we factor in claims of miracles, it gets even worse, for extraordinary claims of miracles demand a greater deal of solid evidence for them... (78).

An extraordinary claim is a claim about an alleged event considered improbable because it's outside the realm of the ordinary, something we wouldn't expect to happen...The most improbable kinds of extraordinary claims are about alleged events that cannot be explained within nature and thereby require supernatural being(s) or forces to explain them (81).

There are several basic problems with this contention:

1) Is it improbable that a poker player had five royal flushes in a row? Well, that's highly improbable if the deck is randomly shuffled. If, on the other hand, the dealer is a cardsharp, then it may be highly probable (even inevitable) that the player had five royal flushes in a row.

So you really can't say, in the abstract, what is probable or improbable. That depends on other variables, known or unknown.

2) Apropos (1), what does Loftus mean when he says a miracle is improbable? Does he mean it's improbable that a miracle would happen *by chance*? Sure. But that's hardly an argument against miracles, for miracles aren't definable as chance events.

Or does he mean it's improbable that *God* would perform a miracle? If so, how does he figure the antecedent odds on God performing a miracle?

Or does he mean God's existence is improbable? If so, then he can't begin with the probability of miracles; rather, he must begin with the probability of God (whatever that means).

3) Another problem with his maxim is that it cuts both ways.

On the one hand, Christians don't regard the existence of God as extraordinary. Rather, they regard the existence of God as necessary. There's nothing extraordinary

about the existence of a necessary being. To the contrary, it would be extraordinary if a necessary being did not exist. Indeed, it would be impossible.

Conversely, Christians regard nature as extraordinary. And that's because nature is contingent. Its existence is unnecessary. Therefore, the existence of nature demands a special explanation.

Given the existence of nature, then nature is ordinary, but the given is extraordinary. As Leibniz famously asked, why does something exist rather than nothing?

Beyond the general "specialness" of nature, you also have fine-tuning arguments which contend for the extraordinary character of the big bang, or life on earth, &c.

At the moment, my purpose is not to expound or defend any of these arguments. Rather, I'm making the point that Loftus' maxim is a double-edged sword. It doesn't carry any presumption in favor of naturalism. It doesn't create any presumption against supernaturalism.

Both sides of the debate can begin with this maxim and draw opposing conclusions. Both sides of the debate can try to use this maxim against the other side. So this maxim doesn't assign a distinctive or disproportionate burden of proof on the Christian. As far as the maxim is concerned, the onus falls equally on believer and unbeliever alike.

4) Finally, it doesn't occur to Loftus that his maxim cuts both ways in another, fatal respect. For it only takes a single instance to establish a miracle. One will do.

By contrast, Loftus has to eliminate every single reported miracle. Loftus must take the antecedent, unfalsifiable position that each and every witness to a miracle was either a deceiver or deceived. Just one isolated exception will dash the entire argument.

So there's no parity between these two propositions. And it's Loftus' position which comes up short.

Surely the claim that there's a 100% failure rate in the whole of human history to reported miracles is nothing if not an utterly extraordinary claim. And that, in turn, demands extraordinary evidence.

By what possible evidence could Loftus overcome the standing presumption against his extraordinary claim? He wasn't there. He's in no position to examine every report. Or interview the witnesses.

Also, it's safe to say that for every reported miracle, many similar incidents go unreported. Not every witness had occasion to write it down. Not every witness was literate.

Even if he wrote it down in a private diary, many diaries are never published. Many diaries are forever lost to the ravages of time.

If extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence, then extraordinary disclaimers demand extraordinary evidence.

IV) Levitation

Loftus says

If someone claimed he or she levitated, that would be an extraordinary claim of this sort because it would be something against what is expected in the natural course of events—something like the Transfiguration...If that same person also claimed he or she vanished, that would be an additional extraordinary claim. If that person then claimed to have rematerialized in a remote part of the globe, that would be a third extraordinary claim. The important point is that these are three independent extraordinary claims (81-82).

Several problems:

- 1) Is levitation analogous to the Transfiguration? The Transfiguration is a purposeful, meaningful event in a way that levitation generally is not.
- 2) Why do I have to have an opinion about levitation? Perhaps I haven't studied the relevant literature in sufficient depth to venture an educated opinion. The intellectually responsible position would be for me to take no position.
- 3) As a matter of fact, levitation is a well-attested phenomenon.⁵⁴ So that creates a *prima facie* presumption that it really occurs. Of course, that presumption could be overcome by sufficient counterevidence. But as it stands, there is probative evidence for levitation.
- 4) Loftus' characterization is simplistic. Whether or not I find a reported levitation plausible depends, in part, on the nature of the claimant. If, say, I happen to know that the claimant is deeply involved in witchcraft, then his paranormal powers are not unexpected.

⁵⁴ Cf. S. Braude, *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and the Philosophy of Science* (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1986).

Put another way, while it might be “extraordinary” for an ordinary person to levitate, it’s not extraordinary for someone who’s dedicated to the occult.⁵⁵

Do I have a special reason to believe something special happened? That’s a better way to frame the question.

5) By the same token, we’re not dealing with three independent variables. For, in each case, we’re dealing with the same agent. If an agent exhibits one paranormal ability, then it’s not surprising if he exhibits more than one paranormal ability. These are interdependent insofar as these are all dependent on the nature of the agent.

V) Truth by definition

Loftus says

An extraordinary claim is a claim about an alleged event considered improbable because it’s outside the realm of the ordinary, something we wouldn’t expect to happen. The only kinds of out of the ordinary or extraordinary claims I can accept are those that meet two criteria (a) They are within the range of what science considers naturally possible...(81).

But that’s the fallacy of truth by definition. He concocts a self-serving definition that conveniently anticipates the desired conclusion. He begins with his conclusion, then works back from his conclusion to a definition that not so coincidentally includes his own position while automatically excluding the opposing position. Funny how that manages to line up.

But that’s not an argument. To the contrary, that takes for granted the very issue in dispute.

Indeed, it’s a backdoor admission that there is no argument for his position. So he puts some floral wallpaper over the hole in his argument. It looks solid until poke your finger through the wallpaper and discover empty space on the other side.

VI) Devil take the hindmost

Let’s take a specific example of what Loftus asserts to be “extraordinary”:

There exists a devil, Satan, and numerous other demonic beings as well as angels, archangels, cherubim, seraphim and other types of supernatural beings (76).

⁵⁵ At the moment I’m not taking a position on whether levitation is inherently occultic, but merely using that to illustrate a larger principle.

We do not believe in supernatural beings or forces and hence do not make any extraordinary claims about nonnatural entities that are beyond what we can or should expect (83).

Let's pick on the devil. In what respect is that existential proposition "extraordinary"? Suppose we ask the following question:

If the devil exists, is it extraordinary that he exists?

On the face of it, there's nothing extraordinary about that claim. What's extraordinary about admitting that something which exists...exists? I mean, isn't that a tautology?

Of course, Loftus will challenge the premise. He doesn't think the devil exists.

But therein lies the hidden, question-begging assumption which underwrites his classification. Unless you already know that the devil does not exist, you're in no position to classify existential claims about the devil as extraordinary claims. For if the devil is real, then what's so extraordinary about acknowledging the existence of an actual existent?

Loftus can't preemptively classify existential claims about the devil as extraordinary claims. That's not something he's entitled to define ahead of time.

If the devil exists, then there's no presumption that he doesn't exist. There's no extraordinary onus to overcome.

So Loftus' maxim generates a dilemma. If, on the one hand, he already knows the devil doesn't exist, then shifting the burden of proof is superfluous. For if he's known not to exist, why bother discussing the odds of his nonexistence?

On the other hand, Loftus can't say in advance of the fact that his existence is extraordinary, for if he does exist, what's extraordinary about an existent existing? You can't use some fact-free maxim to prejudge a factual question. You can't use that maxim as a metaphysical shortcut. For you have to know what reality is like to apply the maxim. Even if the maxim were sound, it can't predict what the world is like. It can't forecast what's ordinary and what's extraordinary.

That requires prior knowledge. But if you have prior knowledge of the particulars (one way or the other), then the maxim is gratuitous.

If supernatural beings don't exist, then their existence is unexpected—but if they do exist, then their existence is not unexpected.

So even if the maxim (that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence) were sound, you can't use that maxim to prejudge what's extraordinary. You can on-

ly apply that in case you already know what's actual or possible in any given case. An abstract maxim is uninformative. It has no predictive power. A blind maxim.

VII. Miracles

Loftus says

In my world, miracles do not happen. What world are *you* living in? (79).

1) Loftus completely disregards the massive ostensible evidence to the contrary.⁵⁶ He assumes what he needs to prove.

2) Even on its own terms, his claim raises the question: if miracles occur, to what extent will we experience their occurrence?

Let's take a paradigm-case:

Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years. And the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he had, "Put your hand under my thigh, that I may make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac." The servant said to him, "Perhaps the woman may not be willing to follow me to this land. Must I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" Abraham said to him, "See to it that you do not take my son back there. The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my kindred, and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your offspring I will give this land,' he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there. But if the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine; only you must not take my son back there." So the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master and swore to him concerning this matter.

Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia to the city of Nahor. And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water. And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. Let the young woman to whom I shall say,

⁵⁶ Cf. C. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Baker 2011).

'Please let down your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master."

Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, came out with her water jar on her shoulder. The young woman was very attractive in appearance, a maiden whom no man had known. She went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up. Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please give me a little water to drink from your jar." She said, "Drink, my lord." And she quickly let down her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking." So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw water, and she drew for all his camels. The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the LORD had prospered his journey or not (Gen 24:1-21).

Let's examine some features of this miracle:

i) This miracle is an answer to prayer. It's what we call a coincidence miracle. Outwardly speaking, it seems to be a perfectly natural event. Yet it's actually a miracle of timing.

ii) Abraham's servant is the only direct witness to this miracle. Others could witness the event, but only he could perceive the special providential character of the event.

That's because it involves a private understanding between just two parties: God and Abraham's servant.

Abraham's servant asked for a sign. And, outwardly speaking, there's nothing "extraordinary" about the sign. What makes it miraculous is the conjunction between the petition and the answer.

iii) Abraham's servant shared his prayer with others, but that's after the fact. That's dependent on his testimony.

Likewise, you and I only know about it because it was recorded for posterity in Scripture. It's not the type of miracle that leaves any trace evidence of its miraculous character.

iv) In a way, the resultant births of Jacob and Esau are just as miraculous as the birth of Isaac. Yet Isaac's birth was overtly miraculous whereas their birth was covertly

miraculous.

There was nothing miraculous about the immediate circumstances of their conception. Yet their conception was contingent on a miraculous answer to prayer—further back. If God hadn't guided Abraham's servant to find Rebekah, Jacob and Esau wouldn't be born.

v) In addition, there's a chain of events leading up to Rebekah's arrival at the well that day. For instance, unless her parents were born, unless they married each other, unless they happened to be living there or move to that area, where she was born and bred, she wouldn't be there to come to the well that day. So there's a series of seemingly ordinary events leading up to that particular event. The miracle of timing wasn't confined to coordinating her arrival with the arrival of Abraham's servant on that particular day, at that particular time of day.

Behind that lay a carefully coordinated series of events stretching back for centuries, so that all the salient variables would line up to yield the desired result. Many prior events had to occur, and occur just so, for that one event to occur. So many other things had to happen at a particular time and place for this event to happen at a particular time and place. God's hand is behind the entire process. Not just one "coincidence," but an interconnected sequence of opportune "coincidences." Yet to a human observer, there was nothing special about any of this.

vi) Not only does this miraculous answer to prayer presuppose an orchestrated past, but it also has long-range future repercussions. For one thing, it contributes to a genealogy. Because Isaac and Rebekah married, they had Jacob and Esau. And, of course, as a delayed effect of that event, Jacob and Esau also found wives, by whom they had kids, and grandkids, and great-grandkids, &c. So you have a family tree that branches out in a very different direction than if that prayer went unanswered.

vii) And, of course, this isn't just anyone's family. This event has worldwide consequences. It's a link in the lineage of the Messiah. Moreover, it's a conduit of the Abrahamic promise.

Billions of human beings experience the effect of that answered prayer. And yet the miraculous character of the precipitating event is indiscernible. Unless we had a record of the event, including an interpretation of the event, we'd have no idea that this was a miracle.

Mere empirical experience is blind to the ulterior significance of this event. It looks like any other "natural" event. Yet that's just one answer to prayer.

In terms of antecedent probabilities, the evidence doesn't point in one direction or

another.

3) Apropos (2), what distinguishes a miracle from a natural event is that you can't extrapolate from past conditions to the occurrence of a miracle. For it lacks causal continuity. It doesn't belong to the chain of events.

One potential objection to this definition is that it doesn't cover coincidental miracles. Miracles of timing. These may involve natural factors, but the timing is opportune in a way that suggests personal prevision and provision. Natural events were coordinated to yield this unexpected, but fortuitous outcome.

Yet there's a sense in which a miraculous coincidence is both predictable and unpredictable. In principle, it would be possible to anticipate that outcome if you knew the prior conditions.

On the other hand, what makes it a miracle is not merely the event itself, but the conjunction of that event with a human need. We couldn't anticipate being in the situation where we need that particular event, and we couldn't anticipate that event occurring just when we need it.

Be that as it may, is there a presumption against believing that some events are unpredictable? That you can't extrapolate some events from past conditions?

That would only be implausible if you subscribe to a closed system. So the presumption is only as good as the metaphysical claim which undergirds it. And the past doesn't create any such presumption, for the very question at issue is whether all future events are inferable from past events. Put another way, whether any particular event is antecedently inferable from past conditions.

Undoubtedly many events are the end-result of past conditions. But that's not something you can know in advance. That's only something you can know after the fact. Which is also true of miracles. Subsequent validation or falsification.

Of course, there's a sense in which miracles are predictable. But not because we can infer a miracle from past conditions. Rather, a miracle is predicable in case God predicts a miracle, or promises a miracle. Predicable because the agent who ultimately performs the miracle has advance knowledge of his future actions. ("Future" in relation to us, if not to himself.) He knows what he will do.

VIII. Dwindling probabilities

Loftus says:

If we rightly define the larger viewpoint as the one having the greater num-

ber of extraordinary claims chained together as a cluster, where the whole cluster can only be as probable as the weakest link (83).

An obvious problem with this characterization is that Biblical miracles aren't a string of independent, unrelated events. Rather, they have a common source in the purpose and power of God. That's a unifying principle.

Loftus' mischaracterization is like reducing poker to the odds. But if you try to play poker by simply playing the odds, you're going to lose. That's because there's more to winning or losing at poker than random card combinations. There's also the strategy of the poker player. What a rational agent does with the options.

Same thing with chess. If Capablanca plays a game of chess, you can't go back and handicap each move based on the sheer number of forking paths. For behind each move is a mind—the mind of the chess player.

IX. Dueling with a double-edged sword

Loftus says

Christians must also show that the doctrines they derive from the supposed biblical events are true. However, this task is fatally hamstrung by virtue of the fact that their interpretations of the biblical texts are historically situated and culturally conditioned, as is evident from the number of Christianities that have existence and exist today (78).

Assuming (arguendo) that this diagnosis is correct, Loftus' objection curves back on his own position. For he's cited many prooftexts to show that Christianity is "wildly improbable." But his appeal is fatally hamstrung by virtue of the fact that his interpretation of biblical texts is historically situated and culturally conditioned.

VIII. Involuntary brain mechanisms

Loftus says (quoting Robert Burton)

Certainty and similar states of "knowing what we know" arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason (79).

Well, I admit that goes a long way in clarifying the mindset of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Hector Avalos, Thom Stark, Robert Price, Richard Carrier, Keith Parsons, et al. All the same, it does seem counterproductive for John Loftus to preemptively discredit himself and his teammates so early in the game, but who am I to disagree?

IX. Double burden of proof

Loftus says

That miracles took place even though believing in them demands a near impossible double burden of proof. What believers must show is that an alleged biblical miracle could not have happened within the natural world because it was impossible (or else it's not considered miraculous). Then they must turn right around and claim such an impossible event probably took place anyway (102; cf. 79).

Several problems:

i) Loftus is confusing the classification of an event with the occurrence of an event. It's not as if we have to decide whether or not an event is miraculous before we can decide whether or not it occurred. Is it not more logical to classify an event after the fact?

ii) Christians don't have to operate with a ready-made definition of a "miracle." Christians can simply affirm the occurrence of every reported event in Scripture. It's not necessary to sort them into a preexisting classification scheme.

Actually, it's infidels who've decided ahead of time that certain types of events can't happen.

iii) Loftus is equivocating. Of course Christians don't claim an "impossible" event probably took place anyway. It's only "impossible" on Loftus' atheistic definition.

He's fabricated a false dilemma by building methodological naturalism into his definition of a miracle. But that's hardly the operating definition of the Christian.

These are Loftus' programmatic claims. His specific examples only serve to illustrate the improbability of the Christian faith assuming these programmatic claims are sound. His specific examples have no independent evidentiary value. For as he himself has chosen to frame the issue, it's his programmatic claims that probabilify the specific examples. It's not the examples themselves which (allegedly) make the Christian faith "wildly improbable," but only when taken in conjunction with his self-refuting rules of evidence, his tendentious definition of what's extraordinary, and so forth.

So the Christian is under no obligation to address any of Loftus' specific examples. We could justifiably pass over his 25+ examples in silence.

For the sake of completeness, I will respond to some of his stock objections in Appendix 8, even though it's unnecessary.

Jason Engwer

I've already addressed some of John Loftus' claims in my introduction to TEI. And Steve Hays has said much of what needs to be said in his responses to Loftus above and in the appendices. Loftus cites his previous books to support his claims in TEC, and we've reviewed those books. I'll just make several points here.

I want to reiterate something I said in the introduction. Critics of Christianity often seem to be impressed by lists of Biblical difficulties, like the lists Loftus has produced in the chapter currently being reviewed. The suggestion is often made that there must be something wrong with a belief system that can have so many objections brought against it.⁵⁷ But we live in a large, complicated universe. No credible belief system is going to have an easy explanation of everything. Just as Loftus can list dozens of things he considers problematic about Christianity, I can list dozens of objections to his belief system. We've given that many examples in our review of TEC so far, and we'll be discussing more as the review continues. Any belief system can be given a surface-level appearance of being "wildly improbable" (104) by approaching the subject the way Loftus does.

In addition to what Steve has said above about the notion that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, it should be noted that we addressed that issue in TID.⁵⁸ The authors of TEC repeatedly raise the subject again without furthering the discussion. Why do they keep repeating such a vague concept without interacting with the counterarguments? Probably because they don't have an answer to the counterarguments, yet the notion that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence is so easy to state and so effective at misleading people who don't give the issue much thought.

Loftus often appeals to the fact that so many ancient Jews rejected Christianity, or the resurrection in particular, and he does so again in TEC. He reminds us, "And they were there!" (80)

He doesn't provide much of an explanation of what the early Jewish rejection of Jesus' resurrection is supposed to prove. Is he saying that if there was good evidence for the resurrection, then those non-Christian Jews would have been compelled to become Christians? Should we conclude that the evidence for the Holocaust isn't

⁵⁷ See, for example, Paul Tobin's comments to that effect in TCD, 151.

⁵⁸ e.g., 149-153, 166-167, 222-223; see, also, <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/01/onus-of-miracles.html> and <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/02/extraordinary-disclaimers-demand.html>

good, or that the evidence that the United States government didn't orchestrate the events of September 11 isn't good, since some people deny those things?

Or is Loftus saying that Christianity shouldn't have been rejected by such a large number of Jews if the evidence for it was good? Billions of people believe in a good God or gods, even though they know about the natural disasters, human tragedies, etc. that Loftus mentions in his argument from the problem of evil. Should we conclude that the evidence Loftus cites isn't good, since billions of people disagree with his position?

Or is he saying that early Jewish rejection of Christianity proves the insufficiency of the evidence due to the fact that Jews have so much in common with Christians, thus suggesting that they would have been easy to convince? Then what about Loftus' disagreements with his fellow atheists? For example, the authors of TEC disagree with one another concerning the existence of objective moral standards. Does the fact of their disagreement with each other prevent them from thinking that their position is correct and supported by good evidence? Does it prevent them from arguing for their position at length, as Richard Carrier does in TEC? Ancient Jews and Christians had a lot in common, but what Christians were asking Jews to add to and change in their Judaism was highly significant. The differences between Judaism and Christianity weren't minor. It's easy to think of many potential reasons why ancient Jews would reject Christianity, even if it was supported by good evidence. Loftus needs to explain in more detail what the ancient Jewish rejection of Christianity supposedly proves.

As we've documented elsewhere, the early Jewish enemies of Christianity, as well as the early Gentile opponents of the religion, often corroborated what the early Christians were saying.⁵⁹ The early dispute between Christians and Jews wasn't over *whether* Jesus performed miracles, but *how* He did so. The dispute wasn't over *whether* the tomb was empty, but *how* it became empty. Does Loftus think that Jesus performed miracles by the power of Satan? That Jesus' tomb was empty, because His disciples stole the body? Does he accept facts like Jesus' performance of miracles and empty tomb, but remain undecided on how He performed those miracles and how the tomb became empty? Does he agree with the ancient non-Christian sources who affirmed Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the darkness at the crucifixion, etc.? Loftus and his colleagues frequently reject conclusions that the early Christians and their enemies agreed about, even on non-supernatural matters. "And they were there!"

We're told that "Christians must continually retreat to what is possible rather than what is probable" (92). I replied to that objection when it was raised by Robert Price in TCD.⁶⁰ Think of all the possibilities people like Loftus appeal to when explaining the origin of life, giving an evolutionary explanation of how life developed, dismissing every report of a miracle, etc.

⁵⁹ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/03/what-early-non-christians-said-about.html>

⁶⁰ TID, 146

He often tells us how he thinks God could have improved upon the universe. He tells us that God could have made humans in such a way that information is "automatically imprinted in our brains at birth" (97). See also his comments about other potential non-evidential means of conversion in point 12 on page 103. Yet, when Christians appeal to God's ability to convert individuals to Christianity apart from objective argumentation, much like in Loftus' information imprint scenario, people like Loftus and his colleagues protest. Only objective argumentation will do, they say.⁶¹

Loftus repeatedly brings up issues like Luke's census and the darkness at the crucifixion (100) without interacting with the counterarguments.⁶² Even when people have recently replied to him at length on a subject, like the alleged false eschatology of the early Christians⁶³, he repeats his conclusions without advancing the discussion (102).

He makes the false claim that Paul and the author of Revelation are the only New Testament authors who claim to have seen the risen Jesus (102). He also misrepresents what the New Testament says about Paul's experience of seeing the risen Christ. I've responded to him on these subjects in the past.⁶⁴ Not only is he repeating some erroneous arguments he's used before, but he also keeps getting one of his Biblical citations wrong (by referring to Acts 26:9 rather than 26:19, a mistake he also made at his blog). He should spend more time reconsidering his arguments and less time uncritically repeating what he's said before.

⁶¹ e.g., TEC, 197

⁶² <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/08/is-lukes-census-historical.html>;
<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/05/non-christian-corroboration-of-darkness.html>

⁶³ See chapter 12 in TID. Loftus posted a brief, evasive response to me on the subject in a thread at TheologyWeb. See <http://www.theologyweb.com/campus/showthread.php?140190-Triablogue-Responds-to-Loftus-New-Book>.

⁶⁴ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/08/resurrection-witnesses-and-acts-2619.html>

Chapter 4

Steve Hays

I) Avalos says

Modern biblical scholarship has demonstrated that the Bible is the product of cultures whose values and beliefs about the origin, nature, and purpose of our world are no longer held to be relevant, even by most Christians and Jews (107).

That's a demonstrably false claim.⁶⁵

II) On p108, he makes some assertions about Biblical cosmology and the historicity of the OT. He footnotes his allegation by appealing to the essays by Paul Tobin and Ed Babinski in TCD. But this is duplicitous, for Avalos has repeatedly said nonspecialists lack the expertise to assess the evidence. By his own yardstick, Tobin and Babinski are unqualified to make the case.

III) Avalos says

Our modern medical establishment has discarded the supernatural explanations for illness found in the Bible... (108).

1) The Bible doesn't attribute all illnesses to supernatural causes.

2) There are physicians who think some illnesses do have a supernatural cause.⁶⁶

IV) Avalos says

There is no independent evidence for the life or teachings of Jesus in the first century CE... (108).

He footnotes this allegation by appealing to Bart Ehrman's *Jesus Interrupted*. But this disregards critical reviews of Ehrman's book.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ E.g. W. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*; G. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically*; Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*; M. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century*; J. Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible*.

⁶⁶ E.g. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Healing and the Scriptures* (Oliver-Nelson 1988); K. McAll, *A Guide to Healing the Family Tree* (Queenship Publishing 1996); Yap, P. "The Possession Syndrome in Hong Kong and in Catholic Cultures."

<http://sunzi1.lib.hku.hk/hkjo/view/19/1900147.pdf>

⁶⁷ E.g. <http://www.reformation21.org/shelf-life/jesus-interrupted.php>;
<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/search?q=interrupted>;

V) Avalos says

Biblical authors generally believed that women were subordinate to men (108).

Since Avalos is an avowed moral relativist, what's wrong with that?

In the same vein, Avalos says:

In some cases, the Bible's philosophy is so barbaric and violent that it defies explaining why anyone would consider it sacred at all (111).

Since Avalos is a moral relativist, why does he find the "barbarity" and "violence" of Scripture objectionable in the first place?

V) Avalos thinks Deut 32:8-9 affirms polytheism.

1) I'll deal with that claim in response to Gericke.

2) Assuming (arguendo) that Hector's interpretation is correct, how does that make Deut 32:8-9 "barbaric" or "violent"? After all, he cited this as his "first example" to illustrate that allegation. Where's the logical connection?

VI) Avalos continues to lobby for his eccentric belief that Mt 19:12 literally commands self-castration. One wonders why Avalos suffers from this phallic fixation. Does the fact that he was (presumably) circumcised as a newborn make him feel sexually inadequate? Perhaps he needs to see a therapist.

It's also less than clear why a moral relativist has moral compunctions about "genital mutilation."

VII) Avalos attributes "anti-Jewish statements" to the NT.

i) Since the NT is, itself, a Jewish document, the allegation is nonsensical.

ii) If the NT is "anti-Jewish," then the OT is "anti-Jewish" too, since the OT is a running indictment of Israel's moral failings.

iii) Apropos (ii), the renowned Jewish literary critic George Steiner is acutely aware of this tension:

Rigorously viewed, the fate of Judaism is a postscript to the penalty clauses in God's contract (that fine print, again). It is a sequence of demonstrative footnotes, of marginalia, to the text of God's (non-) reply to Job and to the texts of the Prophets. Everything is there, spelt out from the start. The rest has been unbearable fulfillment.

What is there to add to Amos...God's promise is unequivocal:

I will send fire upon Judah, and it shall devour the palace of Jerusalem.

As the shepherd takes out of the mouth of the lion two legs or a piece of an ear so shall the children of Israel be taken out...

The city that went out by a thousand shall have a remnant of a hundred, of that which went out by a hundred, ten shall remain...

The script has been "acted," first across the valley of the shadow and of the night of dispersal and massacre which climaxed in the "whirlwind" of the 1940s, in the Shoah...⁶⁸

iv) The Bible is a Jewish book from start to finish. By attacking the Bible, Avalos is the one guilty of making anti-Jewish statements.

v) Avalos disregards the pro-Jewish statements in the NT. For instance, many NT scholars think Rom 11 teaches a future restoration of Israel (e.g. Craig Keener, Douglas Moo, John Piper, Tom Schreiner). There is also a restoration motif in Lukan theology.⁶⁹

VIII) Avalos says

The findings of textual critics devastate any claim that the Bible has been transmitted faithfully from any original text (114).

Of course, many textual critics beg to differ. For instance:

I dealt with this issue in my ETS 2005 paper, "The Integrity of the Early New Testament Text: A Collation-based Comparison". In general, any claim that suggests absence of the physical autograph equals absence of textual reliability or biblical authority is bogus. The manuscript copies we possess remain substantially identical to the autographs. As demonstrated in my paper, the earliest extant (non-Byzantine) papyri compared against the text of Byzantine minuscule mss copied a thousand years later share a verbal identity ap-

⁶⁸ G. Steiner, *No Passion Spent* (Yale 1996), 310-311, 313.

⁶⁹ R. Bauckham, "The Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts," *The Jewish World Around the New Testament World* (Baker 2010), 325-70.

proximating 92% — including orthographic and non-translatable differences. With such a large percentage of common text, even over more than a millennium of transmission, it is clear that the autograph text substantially has been preserved, even among disparate copies representing quite different textual traditions. On the same principle, dispute hardly should arise as to whether the autograph text similarly was preserved during the much shorter period between autograph composition and the earliest extant mss. Transmissional observations suggest an equally reliable transmissional history during the short period from which no evidence exists. In addition, all doctrinal essentials are clearly present within the ca. 92% average base text; no doctrine is established or negated within the remaining ca. 8% where differences occur. Also, most variants are quite minor and generally stylistic in nature. If the orthographic, non-translatable, and minor stylistic variants are excluded, the overall agreement among the earliest and latest mss rises substantially. The existing documents accurately represent the autographs in all essential points. The text we now possess is sufficient and substantial for establishing and maintaining all doctrinal positions held within orthodox Christianity, skeptics and postmodernists such as Ehrman, Epp, Parker, or the media to the contrary.⁷⁰

IX) Avalos says

The most important fact to consider in trying to reconstruct an “original” is that we do not possess the autograph of any biblical writing...this means all we have are copies of the originals, so we usually cannot reconstruct an ancient autograph that is no longer available—nor could we recognize the autograph even if we found it. The “original text” proves to be a mirage unless we have access to the entire transmission process from inception to current copy (115).

1) I don’t possess the autograph of the essay (i.e. chapter 4) that Avalos allegedly sent to Prometheus Books. According to Avalos, I could not recognize his autograph even if I had it. What’s worse, I don’t have access to the entire transmission process from the autograph he originally sent to Prometheus Books to the published copy. So the Hectorian autograph is just a mirage.

2) His footnotes try to bolster his sundry claims by referring the reader to other writings. But I don’t have the autographs, or access to the entire transmission process, of the other writings he cites.

What is more, some of those copies cite other copies. For instance, he refers the reader to Babinski’s chapter on “The Cosmology of the Bible” in TCD. In that chapter,

⁷⁰ http://www.daveblackonline.com/interview_with_maurice_robinson2.htm; cf. C. Evans, “How Long were Biblical Manuscripts in Use?” <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/eva358021.shtml>

Babinski quotes Wayne Horowitz, who quotes ANE primary sources. But are the ANE primary sources autographs, or copies?

X. Avalos has some sections on liberal Bible scholarship. He critiques the artificial criteria of the Jesus Seminar. He makes the point that theological liberals have no reason to privilege the Bible above other religious texts. He makes the additional point that if you deny the authority of Scripture, then there's no reason to fret over the original intent of a document you feel free to disregard.

These criticisms are valid as far as they go, but they have no traction for conservative Christians.

XI. Avalos says

Abolishing human reliance on sacred texts is imperative when those sacred texts imperil the existence of human civilization as currently confirmed (129).

i) His statement is self-refuting. Since human civilization, as currently configured, includes reliance on sacred texts, abolishing such reliance would simultaneously abolish human civilization as currently configured.

ii) In addition, it's not sacred texts in general that "imperil" civilization. The sacred texts that currently "imperil" civilization are Islamic texts. It's not Jews and Christians, or even Hindus and Buddhists, who are imperiling civilization as currently configured.

But Avalos is too cowardly to go after the real threat.

iii) As an avowed moral relativist, Avalos can hardly invoke a moral imperative to preserve civilization as currently configured, even if that were imperiled by sacred texts.

Jason Engwer

Let's consider Jesus as a test case for Hector Avalos' argument. I'll start with some broader issues, then narrow my focus.

Here are some of Avalos' comments about textual criticism and the Biblical text:

So even if 99.9 percent of modern Christians said that the Bible was relevant to them, such relevance is based on their illusory assumption that modern versions do reflect the original "Bible" to some extent....

The findings of textual critics devastate any claim that the Bible has been transmitted faithfully from any original text....

The most important fact to consider in trying to reconstruct an "original" is that we do not possess the autograph of any biblical writing (i.e., the very first text that the author himself/herself wrote), and this much is admitted by the staunchest religionist apologists. This means all we have are copies of the originals, so we usually cannot reconstruct an ancient autograph that is no longer available – nor could we recognize the autograph even if we found it. The "original text" proves to be a mirage unless we have access to the entire transmission process from inception to current copy....

We have seen how textual critics, even after knowing that the original text is probably irrecoverable, do not announce to most churches that their Bibles are at best constructs that cannot be traced earlier than the second century for the New Testament and the third century BCE for the Hebrew Bible....

...there are a small number of Christian scholars who do realize that modern Bibles are constructs that may bear little similarity to "the original." (109, 114-115, 128, n. 11 on 382)

He uses a hypothetical example involving two groups of manuscripts (115). One group has the term "seal of God" in a passage, and the other group has the term "lamb of God". We can conclude that each group came from an earlier manuscript, but which of those earlier ones, if either, was the original? He asks, "How would we know?"

One way to answer that question is by saying that we know the original Biblical text in the same way Avalos and his colleagues claim to be able to identify the original texts of other documents. The authors of TCD and TEC often quote ancient sources as if they have reliable copies of the original text. Richard Carrier has a doctorate in Greco-Roman intellectual history, and in chapter 15 of TCD he cites many ancient documents as if their text has been reliably preserved. Other contributors to TCD did the same.⁷¹ In TEC, Richard Carrier relies on a fifth-century quote of a first-century source (56, n. 7 on 372). He also cites many other ancient sources, like Justin Martyr and Origen (60). Avalos cites some ancient sources as well, such as an account about Origen relayed by Eusebius (113, n. 20 on 382). Ken Pulliam and David Eller quote Tertullian, as if they know what he wrote (194, 276). Matt McCormick cites the ancient Greek historian Herodotus as if he knows what Herodotus wrote (199-200), and he refers to the historian as "an established and respected historical source that provides us with a great deal of reliable information about the past" (200). Robert Price cites Josephus and relies on a quotation of Celsus provided by Origen (224, 229). Etc. The authors of TCD and TEC often trust extra-Biblical texts

⁷¹ See the examples I cite in TID, 6.

for which we have far less evidence than we have for the New Testament documents.

It might be suggested that the authors of TCD and TEC didn't intend to imply that they trust the textual transmission of the documents mentioned above. Rather, they were referring to what would be true under Christian assumptions. Or they were referring to what's commonly believed, even though they don't believe it.

One problem with that sort of explanation is that the passages in question in TCD and TEC don't state or imply such a qualification. And how likely is it that all of these authors, writing in so many contexts, repeatedly communicated their point so poorly and in the same misleading way? It's more likely that they meant what I've suggested they meant above.

Secondly, the notion that they don't actually trust the text of these extra-Biblical documents would sometimes undermine their argument or raise further questions. For example, what would Richard Carrier be proving about the development of science in ancient times in chapter 15 of TCD if he doesn't have reliable copies of the ancient texts in question? If he doesn't think the texts are generally reliable, similar to how Christians view the New Testament text as reliable, then how *does* he view those texts, and what effect does that view have on his argument? Furthermore, why would Carrier get a doctorate in Greco-Roman intellectual history if he doesn't think he has substantially reliable copies of the original documents? Maybe he thinks the documents still represent Greco-Roman thought to some extent, even though the texts can't be traced back to the authors they're traditionally associated with. One example of the impact such a view would have is the issue of dating. The dating of a document or a view expressed within a document, for instance, is often important. If you think the view expressed in an ancient Greek document can be traced back to the person traditionally thought to have written it, that's one thing. But if you think the view can only be traced back to the earliest manuscript we have, say several centuries later than the traditional author in question, that's something else. The difference is significant. These kinds of questions have important implications for the nature of Carrier's work and his arguments and conclusions. We can ask similar questions about Avalos' citations of Origen and Eusebius and his appeal to the views of "early Christianity" (n. 20 on 382), for example.

Third, if Avalos wants to apply pyrrhonic acid to ancient Christian documents, it's not enough for him to then apply it to other ancient documents as well. He also has to let it eat through his beliefs about more modern history. As Steve Hays mentioned in his review of Avalos' chapter, does Avalos consult the original manuscripts of the books he reads? How can we know what Avalos has written, since we don't have the original copy he sent to the publisher? When Avalos accepts what a historical book tells him about the Civil War or what a science journal reports about an experiment in the twentieth century, for example, does he consult the original documents? Or is he trusting what later sources tell him about earlier sources, either without having consulted the original documents or without even being able to do so if he wanted to

do it? Surely he frequently trusts later sources without consulting the original documents or without their even being available, just like the rest of us.

Does Avalos want scientists, historians, philosophers, and other scholars to adjust their conclusions to align with what he's argued about ancient sources? For example, let's say that a document traditionally attributed to a first-century Roman source reports an earthquake that the author witnessed. Modern scientists take that report into account when forming their conclusions about the severity of earthquakes, their frequency, etc. And historians take the report into account when forming their view of ancient history, when drawing implications from that earlier history for later eras, etc. But what if our earliest manuscript of the document in question dates a few centuries later than the purported author? Does Avalos think that scientists, historians, etc. should adjust all of their conclusions to align with the assumption that we don't have a reliable copy of the original text? The dating of an event, whether an earthquake or something else, is often significant in fields like science and history. Avalos' approach has major implications in such contexts.

Though Avalos focuses on the manuscript evidence for the Biblical text, we have far more to go by. In our everyday lives, we often trust our own memories and the memories of other people. We assume our own memories are generally reliable, and we trust relatives, coworkers, newscasters, and other people to accurately remember what they're reporting for the most part. People are usually honest. In many areas of life, there isn't much or any reason to lie. It's in a liar's interest to tell the truth enough to appear credible, in order to lie more effectively when he wants to. Even in circumstances where dishonesty is widespread, there often are exceptions. Not everybody is dishonest. We don't assume the general or universal dishonesty of people as our default position. And there are natural and manmade structures in place to assist us in remembering things and being honest. An individual or group who wants to suppress the truth can be kept in check by another individual or group who wants the truth to come to light. If you think you have more money in your bank account than you actually do, your bank has a motive to correct you if you try to withdraw too much. The unworkable logistics of gathering together all copies of a book owned by hundreds or millions of people will prevent a publisher from covering up a mistake or even attempting to cover it up. Political parties keep each other in check, as do businesses, coworkers, religions, and other elements of society.

We trust what our parents tell us. We trust school teachers and newspapers. We trust the memories of people who conduct scientific experiments, and we believe that they and the individuals who passed on historical accounts about those experiments were being honest. We attribute works of literature to Plato, Josephus, Suetonius, Thomas Aquinas, and other alleged historical figures, even if we don't possess the original documents. We build scientific theories and political systems on our beliefs about the past, including ancient historical accounts and more recent ones from previous generations. We trust Roman sources to give us a lot of reliable information on Roman history, and we trust American sources to give us a lot of reliable information on American history, even though those sources are biased and some-

times unreliable. In these and other contexts throughout our lives, we take into account factors like the general reliability of human memory, the general honesty of people, and the presence of competitive forces in society.

Apply the same principles to the textual transmission of the New Testament. Even if our earliest manuscripts only go back to the second century, we also take factors like the ones mentioned above into account.

We would consider, for example, the general honesty of the ancient Christians.

We'd also look at how they handled other texts. As Steve Mason notes, "in general, Christian copyists were quite conservative in transmitting texts".⁷²

And we'd ask how likely it is that the earliest Christians had radically different standards than the Christians of the second century onward, from whom we have extant New Testament manuscripts. If those later Christians preserved the text so well, is it likely that the earlier Christians were much worse? Or is it likely that they were about the same? Essential continuity seems more likely than some sort of radical discontinuity. Why should we think that radically careless and/or dishonest Christians so quickly gave birth to later generations of Christians who were much more careful and honest?

And we have early Christian and non-Christian sources telling us about the state of the text prior to our earliest manuscripts. Sources like Polycarp and Aristides give us information about the nature of the documents prior to our earliest copies. (If somebody doubts the text, dating, or other characteristics of the Christian and non-Christian sources I'm referring to here, like Polycarp and Aristides, then we can apply the same principles to those sources that I've said we should apply to the New Testament. What I'm addressing here is how we get from early extra-Biblical Christianity, sources like Clement of Rome and Irenaeus, to earlier Christianity and the New Testament. If somebody wants to raise questions about later sources and later timeframes, then we can apply the same principles to that context.) Extra-Biblical sources not only quote the New Testament documents at times, but also describe the documents to some extent, either directly or indirectly. For example, Clement of Rome describes a letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians. Justin Martyr describes the gospels.

More indirectly, the beliefs of the early sources give us an indication of what probably was taught by their predecessors, including the New Testament authors. If men like Ignatius and Irenaeus believe in concepts like Jesus' crucifixion under Pontius Pilate and His resurrection, then it's unlikely that the apostolic documents they refer to were claiming that Jesus was a third-century B.C. woman who lived in China, died of natural causes, and remained dead. We can reach some reliable conclusions about the general framework of the documents based on what the early sources believed.

⁷² Josephus And The New Testament (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 232

And we can ask questions such as how likely it would be that documents like Paul's letters would be significantly altered while the author was still alive. The oversight of a document by its author and his allies is a factor that has to be taken into account.

Or how likely is it that the original documents would be so lost as to leave no discernable trace in the historical record while being so widely replaced by an inauthentic text that was agreed upon by all of the relevant sources? Is it more likely that the early Christians simultaneously suppressed the original text and attained such widespread acceptance of a replacement? Or is it more likely that what was originally written was substantially preserved? Why propose *two* highly unlikely scenarios (such widespread suppression of the original text and such widespread acceptance of a replacement) when the *one* scenario of widespread preservation of the original text fits the evidence so well?

How likely is it that heretical sources and individuals who weren't professing Christians would corroborate the New Testament text as much as they do, if it isn't authentic?

These are just several examples of the sort of evidence we have to take into account, aside from the manuscript evidence. We've expanded on these points and others elsewhere.⁷³

Avalos asks "How would we know?" what the original text was (115), but his chapter in TEC doesn't say much about the non-manuscript evidence. As with other ancient documents, like the ones Avalos and his colleagues cite as if they're trustworthy, we don't judge the New Testament text solely on the basis of manuscripts. The manuscripts exist in a larger context that's also taken into account.

What about the hypothetical example Avalos cites, involving one group of manuscripts with the phrase "seal of God" and another with the phrase "lamb of God"? His example doesn't have much significance. The context of the phrases in question and the extra-manuscript evidence I've described above may lead us to a conclusion about which reading is more likely. Even if we can't discern a probable reading based on our current evidence, it doesn't follow that we don't have a probable reading for a significant amount of the remainder of the New Testament. One ambiguous passage doesn't make the entire New Testament ambiguous. If we think the evidence pertaining to the ending of Mark's gospel is insufficient, for example, we can still reach reliable conclusions about the large majority of the New Testament text.

⁷³ For further discussion, see Triablogue's material on New Testament textual issues at <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/03/reliability-of-new-testament-text.html>.

Once we realize that we have sufficient evidence for the text of many ancient documents, including the New Testament, we can narrow our focus to what those sources tell us about Jesus. And what they tell us is problematic for Avalos.

He writes:

There is no independent evidence for the life or teachings of Jesus in the first century CE, which means that most modern Christians are not even following Jesus' teachings. (108)

His conclusion doesn't follow from his premise. How would "independent evidence for the life or teachings of Jesus" be needed in order for Christians to be following Jesus' teachings?

And how is he defining "independent evidence"? He seems to be referring to non-Christian sources. If so, he'll have to argue for his conclusion that the passages about Jesus in Josephus don't qualify as the sort of evidence he's describing.⁷⁴

What about non-Christian testimony that's reflected in Christian sources? As I noted above, the contributors to TEC sometimes cite such material. Richard Carrier cites a passage in Seneca preserved by Augustine (56). Robert Price cites a passage in Celsus preserved by Origen (229). Modern scholars frequently reach conclusions about non-Christians on the basis of what's reported by Christian sources.⁷⁵ There are many reasons to trust much of what Christians report about non-Christians, and I won't discuss those reasons here. Judgments have to be made according to the evidence we have in each case. The point I'm making here is that Christian testimony about non-Christians is one of the categories of evidence for the historical Jesus that has to be taken into account (the gospel of Matthew tells us what first-century Jews believed about the empty tomb, Julius Africanus tells us what Thallus reported regarding the darkness at Jesus' crucifixion, etc.).

And why exclude the Christian sources themselves? Because Christians are biased? So is everybody else. We frequently accept what biased Roman sources tell us about the Roman empire, what biased Jewish sources tell us about the Holocaust, what biased relatives of a crime victim tell us they witnessed, etc. Bias is a factor to be taken into account, but there are other factors as well, and those other factors can outweigh bias.

Why limit ourselves to the first century? While the lateness of a source *diminishes* its evidential weight, it doesn't *eliminate* the source's significance. Just as Christians would tend to pass down arguments from generation to generation, so would non-Christians. It's not as though the enemies of Christianity would have waited until the

⁷⁴ <http://www.bede.org.uk/Josephus.htm>

⁷⁵ e.g., Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, Suetonius (London, England: Bristol Classical Press, 2004), 51-59; <http://christiancadre.blogspot.com/2009/06/tacitus-other-reference-to-early.html>

late first or early second century to start coming up with arguments to use against the religion. And they weren't just going by their memories of events they experienced or oral traditions passed down. They had access to written sources as well, including ones from previous generations and ones not available to us today. If Jewish opponents of Christianity in Matthew's day and in Justin Martyr's day acknowledge that Jesus' tomb was found empty, that's most likely because earlier Jews believed the same, which is what Matthew tells us (Matthew 28:15). Critics of Christianity, including the authors of TEC, often cite sources like Josephus and Tacitus against Christian claims. In some cases, like Luke's census, a source like Josephus or Tacitus is writing several decades or more than a century after the event in question. When Tacitus corroborates Jesus' execution under Pontius Pilate, Justin Martyr's Jewish opponents corroborate the empty tomb, or Celsus corroborates Jesus' performance of apparent miracles, the second-century dating of those sources diminishes their significance. But it doesn't *eliminate* their significance.

We often reach conclusions on the basis of evidence that's far from ideal. Wouldn't it be good to have ten, twenty, or fifty eyewitness accounts of an event in first-century Rome? Yes, but if the non-eyewitness testimony of Tacitus is all we have, we often accept that testimony anyway. In the modern world, wouldn't it be good to have video footage of a crime? Better yet, why not multiple cameras from multiple angles? Yes, but we'll often convict people on the basis of much less evidence. Objecting that we don't have more evidence doesn't explain the evidence we have.

Avalos continues:

That is to say, if Source X and Source Y agreed that Jesus said Z, then all you have proved is that two independent sources agree that there was a tradition that "Jesus said Z." This does not mean that Jesus actually said Z. (119)

That's why we go on to consider other evidence. We would consider factors like the ones I discussed above when addressing the non-manuscript evidence for the text of the New Testament. Are the sources in question likely to have been honest? How reliable are their memories? What sources did they have access to? What does the preservation of their testimony suggest about how widely their testimony was considered credible in ancient times? Etc. We ask the same questions when evaluating Herodotus, Thucydides, Josephus, Suetonius, etc.

Avalos writes:

But there's more to consider, because the existence of other Gospels changes everything....

First, these "lost" Gospels confirm that early Christianity was so diverse and chaotic that we can no longer speak of "Christianity" but now must talk of "Christianities," a point made by, among others, Bart Ehrman in his book *Lost Christianities*....

However, such dates for canonical materials [from the early second to fourth centuries] overlap with at least some of the dates for noncanonical Gospels....

Thus, we cannot say that these Gospels have less "authentic" or "historical" material than the canonical Gospels – if they have any authentic or historical material at all. (122-123)

Why is the *existence* of other gospels as significant as Avalos claims? The theories of Holocaust deniers exist, but we don't consider their mere existence to be of much significance. Similarly, many competing claims and documents circulate on the web, on radio, in journals, and in other contexts regarding subjects like science and history. Yet, all of us, including Avalos, sort through such competing claims and documents in order to reach conclusions about what we think is probably true.

Bart Ehrman's arguments have been answered.⁷⁶ And comparing the canonical and non-canonical gospels involves far more than the dating of the manuscripts. See, for example, C.E. Hill's *Who Chose The Gospels?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). We would also consider how widely accepted the documents were⁷⁷, what external sources say about the origins of the documents, the nature of the claims the documents make, etc. For example, if Marcionites acknowledge that they disagree with what most of the apostles taught, then that admission has some significance in evaluating their credibility.⁷⁸ If Irenaeus appeals to evidence of a highly public nature to argue for his view of Christianity, whereas the Gnostics appeal to evidence of a highly private nature, then that difference has to be taken into account. We'd look

⁷⁶ Andreas Kostenberger and Michael Kruger, *The Heresy Of Orthodoxy* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2010)

⁷⁷ The fact that the people we today call orthodox were the majority is suggested by multiple lines of evidence. Those people are more prominent in the historical record, including in descriptions of Christianity in non-Christian sources, and all agree that they were the majority in later centuries. Their majority status in the earlier centuries would make more sense of their later prominence. When addressing heretics in the second century, Irenaeus often refers to them as highly fragmented and suggests that they were relatively small groups. As Eric Osborn noted, "He [Irenaeus] contrasts the universal spread of the rule [core doctrines of orthodoxy] with the local sectarian Gnostic phenomena." (Irenaeus Of Lyons [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 23) Even Celsus, who often spoke hyperbolically of Christian diversity and sectarianism, recognized that there was a "great church" and "those of the multitude" (in Origen, *Against Celsus*, 5:59, 5:61), probably the orthodox mainstream that sources like Irenaeus and Tertullian refer to. Celsus may have a similar concept in mind concerning Judaism when he refers to "the multitude of the Jews" (in Origen, *Against Celsus*, 5:61).

⁷⁸ e.g., Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4:3; On the credibility of Marcion, Thomas Scheck writes, "In spite of the many attempts in the modern period to rehabilitate Marcion, his critical endeavors [quoting J. Trigg] 'embody a priori theological judgments not founded on any historical, linguistic, or textual criteria we would recognize as valid.'" (Origen: *Commentary On The Epistle To The Romans*, Books 1-5 [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Of America Press, 2001], 21) See, also, <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/05/marcion-and-new-testament.html>. Tertullian claims that no church with a lineage from the apostles agreed with Marcion's view of God (*Against Marcion*, 1:21), which would be a major problem for the credibility of Marcionism at so early a date.

at how the documents were received in antiquity. The canonical gospels were much more widely accepted, and accepted on a higher level, than the other gospels Avalos cites.⁷⁹ What does Avalos think of the internal and external evidence we have for documents like the Gospel Of Judas and the Gospel Of Mary, besides the dating of the manuscripts? Does he think the evidence is comparable to or better than the evidence for the canonical gospels?⁸⁰ How does he think the two compare in terms of their Jewishness, genre, concern for historiography, etc.? The vast majority of the evidence relevant to comparing the canonical and non-canonical gospels isn't mentioned by Avalos, even in summary form.

He goes on:

The quest for the historical Jesus is an abject failure. Further progress is futile because we simply don't have *any* preserved accounts of Jesus from his time or from any proven eyewitnesses....

Intellectual honesty should compel at least the liberal scholars to announce aggressively to the world that Jesus cannot be found, and that any notion of following actual words or deeds of Jesus is vacuous. (123-124)

Should we reject what Josephus reports about Herod the Great, what Tacitus reports about Roman emperors who were deceased at the time he wrote, etc.? If so, then Avalos is disagreeing with his fellow skeptics, who often cite sources like Josephus and Tacitus in such contexts (e.g., Josephus regarding events surrounding Jesus' birth). And as I mentioned above, Avalos appeals to an account about Origen reported by Eusebius. But Eusebius isn't a "proven eyewitness" of Origen, and he was writing after Origen's time.

The vast majority of scholars think that at least some of the letters attributed to Paul were written by him, and he claims to have been an eyewitness of the risen Christ. A large percentage of scholars think one or more of the non-Pauline documents was

⁷⁹ See Hill's discussion of the subject in his book cited above. Irenaeus tells us that some heretics rejected some New Testament documents (Against Heresies, 3:11:7), but that most "do certainly recognise the Scriptures; but they pervert the interpretations" (Against Heresies, 3:12:12). In his homilies on Luke's gospel, Origen notes, "There are countless heresies that accept the Gospel According to Luke." (Joseph Lienhard, trans., Origen: Homilies On Luke, Fragments On Luke [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Of America Press, 1996], 67) Harry Gamble writes, "This means that what was at stake between gnostic and non-gnostic Christians was not principally which books were authoritative, but rather how the scriptures were to be rightly interpreted. In point of fact, gnostic Christians employed virtually all the books that were used in the church at large. The difference lay not in the documents, but in different hermeneutical programs." (in Lee McDonald and James Sanders, ed., The Canon Debate [Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002], 293)

⁸⁰ On the evidence for the earliness and historicity of the canonical gospels, see, for example, Craig Keener, A Commentary On The Gospel Of Matthew (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999); Craig Keener, The Gospel Of John: A Commentary, Volume I and Volume II (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003); Richard Bauckham, Jesus And The Eyewitnesses (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006)

written by an eyewitness to Jesus' life. If Avalos doesn't think any of these documents qualify as accounts from "proven eyewitnesses", then that opinion diminishes the quality of the evidence for him, but not for the many scholars who disagree with him.

As I said earlier, objecting that we don't have more evidence doesn't explain the evidence we do have. I want to close my review of Avalos' chapter by considering some of the evidence we have for the historical Jesus.

Paul was a contemporary of Jesus who wrote within a few decades of Jesus' death. He sometimes mentions material about Jesus that can be dated earlier, such as a creed he cites in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 15. He had been an enemy of Christianity, but claimed to have seen Jesus risen from the dead. He knew some of Jesus' disciples and at least one member of Jesus' immediate family, James. He also tells us that such people agreed with him about what he considered the foundational elements of the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15:11, Galatians 2:9). That claim of apostolic unity was corroborated by a wide variety of other sources over the next several decades.⁸¹ Paul was honest enough to publicly acknowledge his disagreements with those other church leaders on lesser matters (Galatians 2:11). He was willing to suffer for what he was teaching (for example, 2 Corinthians 11:23-33), a fact that reflects well on his sincerity. The aspects of the faith that he refers to as commonly accepted include information about Jesus' death and resurrection and the perception that He was the Messiah (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Paul tells us that the message he was proclaiming, which involved such information about Jesus, was the same message Christians accepted prior to his conversion (1 Corinthians 15:3, Galatians 1:23). In other words, he's dating the information to a period within a few years of Jesus' death. He names multiple eyewitnesses of Jesus' pre-resurrection life who accepted such information about Jesus, and he refers to other such eyewitnesses who aren't named. He also cites other information about Jesus in a manner that suggests its widespread acceptance: His Davidic ancestry (Romans 1:3), His death by crucifixion (1 Corinthians 1:23), His words and deeds at the Last Supper (1 Corinthians 11:23-25), etc. It should be noted that, in some of these contexts, Paul was addressing audiences who were critical of him on other matters, namely the Corinthians and Galatians. He reminds the Corinthians of the evidence for his apostleship (1 Corinthians 9:1, 2 Corinthians 12:12). It doesn't seem that his claims were accepted uncritically. They aren't accepted uncritically by modern scholars either. Rather, the reason why so many scholars continue to take Paul's testimony so seriously is because of the quality of the evidence, like what I've outlined above.

A lot could be said about other early sources, such as the gospels and Acts. I'll just mention one example, one that's easy to explain and has significant implications.

⁸¹ the gospels; Acts; 2 Peter 3:15-16; Revelation 21:14; First Clement 5, 42, 44; Ignatius (Letter To The Ephesians, 11; Letter To The Magnesians, 13; Letter To The Romans, 4); Papias (in Eusebius, Church History, 3:39:4); Polycarp (Letter To The Philippians, 9); Aristides (Apology, 2); The Epistle of Barnabas (5)

In the gospels, Jesus frequently refers to Himself as the Son of Man, several dozen times. The title is rarely applied to Him elsewhere in the New Testament. Despite their differences on other matters, the gospels agree that Jesus referred to Himself by that title, even though it was so unpopular in early Christian literature outside of the gospels. The best explanation for the prominence of the title in that context is that Jesus did refer to Himself as the Son of Man. And that tells us something about how Jesus viewed Himself. See Daniel 7:13-14.

Even if Avalos is unconvinced about some or all of the information about Jesus provided by these early sources, other scholars who are convinced can cite evidence in support of their conclusions that would be widely accepted in other fields of historical scholarship. The notion that there's something wrong with those scholars, because they aren't as radically skeptical as Avalos, is absurd. To be consistent, Avalos ought to call for some sort of end to many other fields of modern scholarship as well, not just Biblical studies. And he ought to call for an end to the sort of skeptical inconsistency, including his own, that I documented above.

He tells us:

Our argument is that there is really nothing in the entire book Christians call "the Bible" that is any more relevant than anything else written in the ancient world. (109)

Apparently, he thinks the gospel of Matthew is no more relevant than an ancient census return. Romans isn't any more relevant than an ancient grocery list.

I've already outlined some of the reasons for thinking that Jesus is more relevant to the modern world than Avalos suggests, such as the evidence for His authority claims and resurrection in the gospels and Paul's letters. Many modern scholars would cite other reasons for thinking highly of Jesus, such as His fulfillment of prophecy⁸², the Shroud of Turin⁸³, and Jesus' influence on the world since Biblical times.⁸⁴ Given the significance of issues like the existence and character of God and the afterlife, it makes sense for thousands of scholars and billions of people to think that Jesus and the Bible are more relevant than Avalos claims. The Bible has major implications for our lives if it's true, or even if it's partially true in some contexts, and the evidence for its truthfulness is better than Avalos suggests.

⁸² <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/03/evidence-of-biblical-prophecy.html>

⁸³ See Gary Habermas' discussion on the February 20, 2011 edition of the Stand to Reason radio program, which can be accessed at http://www.str.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Radio_Archives. In a July 10, 2011 email to me, Habermas cited two books he would recommend on the subject: Mark Antonacci, *The Resurrection Of The Shroud: New Scientific, Medical And Archaeological Evidence* (New York: M. Evans & Co., 2000); Mary and Alan Whanger, *The Shroud Of Turin: An Adventure Of Discovery* (Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House, 1998). He said that the book by Antonacci is "probably the best".

⁸⁴ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/12/light-to-nations.html>

I. Rhetorical tactics

One of the common rhetorical tactics that various contributors to TEC employ is emotional manipulation. They attempt, in various ways, to shame the reader into sharing their view of Christianity. For all their rationalistic affectations, they rely on ridicule more than reason.

There are variations on this theme. Gericke adopts the lordly tone of a boarding school headmaster who enjoys humiliating his grade school students. It makes him feel tall to make them feel small. He abuses his authority by exploiting his power over the young student body.

Of course, this rhetorical pose is only effective if we live for Gericke's approval. If we cater to his self-importance. Otherwise, the bluster and condescension backfire. Gericke resembles a cat puffing its fur to make itself look big and threatening to the dog. I'm tempted to throw a bucket of water on Gericke to reduce him to his actual proportions—which are far less menacing than the hissing, bristling fur ball he presents to the bemused reader.

II. Critical detachment

One way to evaluate a position you're inclined to disagree with is to assume that it's true for the sake of argument, then ask yourself what follows. Assuming it's true, what, if anything, would differ if it were false?

If an omniscient, omnipotent God, subsisting outside of time and space, were to reveal himself to Bronze Age people, what would we expect?

Is it surprising if he comes down to the level of his audience? If he uses period architecture, technology, social roles, and spatial metaphors to depict who and what he is in relation to mankind?

These are analogies. Like any analogy, you must make allowance for the dissimilarities as well as the similarities.

This is what theologians call divine accommodation. But it runs deeper than mere accommodation. For one thing, God created these metaphors in the first place. Made an emblematic universe.

For another thing, metaphors are true. But true within the confines of the intended analogy.

III. Cultural anthropology

When a cultural anthropologist studies another culture, he doesn't assume a hostile stance at the outset. He doesn't take his own culture as the standard of comparison, then say to himself, "How could these primitive, barbarous savages believe anything so stupid!"

No. He begins by asking himself what were the environmental challenges facing this people-group? How did they cope? How did they have to adapt to survive or flourish? How do their customs and social institutions reflect problem-solving strategies in relation to various environmental pressures?

Even if we just assume for the sake of argument that the OT is divinely inspired, its laws will be adapted to living conditions in the ANE.

Symbolic anthropology is a subdivision of cultural anthropology. A foreign civilization may be unintelligible to the outsider, yet it has its own logic—which is intelligible to the insider. An outsider must master the cultural code language. The collective system of meaning which confers hidden significance on various activities. Art. Ritual. Folklore. Dreams.

Imagine if Gericke subjected Maya, Inca, or Aztec civilization to the same indignant, uncomprehending scrutiny.

This doesn't mean another civilization is above criticism. But understanding precedes evaluation. And you can't simply take your own culture for granted as the universal arbiter of right and wrong.

Shouldn't John Loftus, in his editorial capacity, have asked Gericke to take the Outsider Test?

IV. Polytheism

Gericke has a section in which he attributes polytheism to Scripture.

1) For instance, he cites "divine council" passages to prove OT polytheism. But that's naïve.

It may well be that Scripture is using mythopoetic imagery at this point. Imagery that has its background in the ANE pantheon.

But in the OT it no longer retains that significance. Rather, it's been adapted to depict OT angelology. Angels are creatures, not "gods."

2) He also cites OT passages that refer to "gods." But his appeal is grossly simplistic:

i) One reason the OT refers to “gods” is because these “gods” were worshipped as “gods” by Israel’s pagan neighbors. We do the same thing today. Take *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary*.

Did the authors give their book that title because they believe Mesopotamian “gods” really exist? No. The authors call them “gods” because that’s how they were viewed by Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians.

ii) He also disregards the various OT passages which treat heathen deities as non-entities. Of course, he tries to explain that away by attributing this to later redaction.

But in that event he begins with his theory, not with the evidence. The evidence doesn’t select for his theory; rather, his theory selects for the evidence. Counterevidence is simply discarded.

iii) In Scripture, demonology underwrites idolatry. Although the specific “gods” of paganism are nonentities, they stand for something real. A demonic realm. But demons are creatures—fallen creatures.⁸⁵

iv) Gericke also admits that the word “god” has a wide semantic range. It covers everything from Yahweh through angels and demons to ghosts.

So it’s equivocal to seize on that admittedly polysemic word, as if that carries the same denotation in every occurrence.

v) He says Deut 32:8-9 denotes two different gods. However, that claim ignores the obvious explanation: this is a typical case of Hebrew parallelism, where the two divine names are parallel designations for the same deity.⁸⁶

vi) He also fails to take the literary genre into account. As one scholar explains:

A more tenable explanation, I suggest, is that the first two commandments, which tacitly assume the existence of other gods, belong to the genre of religious commandments, whereas Moses’ statement in Deut 4:39 (“there are no other gods”)—not cited by Enns—and the monotheistic prophetic statements that he does cite, pertain to the genre of theological statements. The statements about other gods in the Psalms and in Josh 24, as well as in the first two commandments, pertain—so it seems to me—to the epistemological reality that people fabricate non-existent gods and fatuously worship them (cf. 1 Cor 8:4-6); the theological statements pertain to the ontological reality

⁸⁵ Cf. D. Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology* (Baker, 2nd ed., 2000), 29-30; 30n33; A. Steinmann, Daniel (Concordia 2008), 492,502-03; M. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” <http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/DT32BibSac.pdf>

⁸⁶ Cf. D. Block, *The Gods of the Nations: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology* (Baker, 2nd ed., 2000), 26n19.

that other gods do not exist. In other words, the statements about other gods tacitly assume human depravity, not henotheism (i.e., the worship of only one God, while assuming the existence of others).⁸⁷

vii) He says the “sons of God/the gods” in Gen 6:1-4 means “male gods”. But this is a notoriously enigmatic text, and there are various possible candidates for the bene Elohim, viz. fallen angels, Sethites, demoniacs, “heroic” polygamous kings. Just read some standard commentaries on Genesis (e.g. Currid, Waltke, Walton).

V. Selective quotation

1) He also quotes David Clines out of context. He attributes the following statement to Clines:

Let us next recognize that the God in the Pentateuch is a character in a novel. God in the Pentateuch is not a “person”; he is a character in a book. And there are no people in books, no real people, only fictions; for books are made, not procreated...

But that’s profoundly deceptive, for it fosters a misimpression of what the author meant, in the teeth of what he intended to say. Here’s what Clines went on to say:

Let us next recognize that the God in the Pentateuch is a character in a novel. God in the Pentateuch is not a “person”; he is a character in a book. And there are no people in books, no real people, only fictions; for books are made, not procreated. Even when the characters have the same name as real people and remind us vividly of the real people whose names they bear, they are still made of paper. Even if I should write my autobiography, the readers of my book will not be encountering me, but only the fictive character I have chosen to create in my writing.

That’s completely different, is it not? For Clines, even autobiographical writing is fictitious. Even a history or biography about real people is fictitious in the specialized sense that they function like literary characters in a novel.

So Clines’ statement is neutral on the historicity of the OT. No doubt Clines has a liberal view of Scripture, but that’s not the point he’s making in this statement.

2) In the same section, Gericke quotes Isa 41:21-24, then says it’s a pity that Yahweh doesn’t apply the same criteria to himself.

But as a matter of fact, Yahweh does. In Isaiah 40-48, Yahweh is appealing to his deeds. To historical precedent, viz. creation, the Exodus.

⁸⁷ B. Waltke, "Revisiting Inspiration and Incarnation," *WTJ* 71 (2009), 88-89;
<http://peterennsonline.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/71.1.Waltke.Revisiting%20Inspiration%20and%20Incarnation.pdf>

VI. “Yahweh’s body”

Gericke has a section on Yahweh’s “body.”

1) He thinks the “image of God” (Gen 1:26-27) implies the corporeity of God. But that’s not what it means in context.

It’s ironic that he cited David Clines a few pages earlier, for Clines wrote a seminal paper on the *imago Dei* which certainly didn’t construe the phrase as having anything to do with God’s “body.”⁸⁸

2) He cites Exod 33:20-23. But that’s an angelophany. And the whole point of that passage is to distinguish between what God is like in himself, and self-manifestations.

And he commits the same blunder with Ezk 1:27-28. Yet Ezekiel goes out of his way to buffer the theophany from God in himself: “the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.” That’s at three steps removed from God in himself.

3) He thinks divine speech in Gen 1 is nonsensical. But divine speech is a creative metaphor in Gen 1.

He also overlooks the fact that “speech” sometimes denotes interior monologue (e.g. Gen 2:18).

4) He thinks God needs rest (Gen 2:1; Exod 31:17). But that disregards the hierophanic connotations of Sabbath “rest” in Scripture. The point is what “resting” signifies in this religious context. A type of sacred time and sacred space.⁸⁹

5) He thinks God needs to travel to obtain information (Gen 3:8-11; 11:5-7; 18:17).

i) But that fails to appreciate the role of rhetorical questions or interior monologue in Biblical narrative.

ii) He misses the biting irony of Gen 11. From the viewpoint of the builders, the tower is so “towering” that it reaches up to heaven. A veritable skyscraper.

But from the viewpoint of God, the tower is so miniscule as to be invisible from heaven’s height. God must come down to be able to make it out.

The depiction is patently satirical.

⁸⁸ D. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *TynB* 19 (1968), 53-103;
http://98.131.162.170//tynbul/library/TynBull_1968_19_03_Clines_ImageOfGodInMan.pdf

⁸⁹ Cf. J. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (IVP 2009), chap. 7.

iii) He thinks God needs to test people to find out what makes them tick (e.g. Gen 22).

But this overlooks the canonical function of Gen 22. There's a reason we're reading this account. It's not just a private transaction between God, Abraham, and Isaac. For there's a hidden audience outside the narrative. The narrator is recording this incident for the benefit of the reader. For posterity. It's designed to teach the reader the duty to trust in God no matter what.

The reader is given a chance to overhear what others said centuries before. Even a chance to eavesdrop on God's private deliberations.

iv) Gericke acts as if Gen 3:22 reflects a threat to God. But that misses the point. Immortality is a blessing to unfallen creatures, but a curse to fallen creatures.

6) A general deficiency in Gericke's treatment is the way he disregards Scriptural evidence that God is not a physical being with humanoid features. There is, for instance, the fact that heaven and earth are unable to contain God (1 Kgs 8:27; cf. Jn 4:20-24). But if Yahweh were a Zeus-like figure, then he would have fairly compact dimensions.

Then there's the whole aniconic tradition in OT piety, which points to God's essential invisibility.

Likewise, God incarnate stands in contrast to God discarnate (Jn 1:14,18; cf. Isa 31:3).

VII. "Yahweh's mind"

Gericke has a section on "Yahweh's mind."

1) Gericke says

Note also that none of these divine psychological characteristics were in their biblical contexts understood as being mere metaphorical depictions or the result of any supposed divine "accommodation." Nor can they be rationalized and explained away as the product of the deliberate and intentional "anthropopathic" representation of something that is in reality supposed to be ineffable. These ways of looking at it come only when we have to repress the fact that we no longer believe in God, aka the god of the Bible (143).

Several problems:

I) Gericke is simply asserting his conclusion to be true. But he hasn't actually shown how they were understood in their biblical context. Merely quoting Bible verses doesn't ipso facto show you how they were understood by the author or the original audience.

Take the statement that “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”

What does that mean? All we have is the writer’s bare statement. We don’t have direct access to the writer’s intentions. The statement itself doesn’t automatically tell you what he meant by that statement.

ii) Bible writers didn’t think God was just a scaled up version of man (cf. Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29). So, yes, there’s reason to think they sometimes employ anthropomorphic or anthropopathic depictions of God.

iii) Gericke posits a false dichotomy. It’s not a stark choice between treating God as ineffable or else treating all God-talk as anthropomorphic. Rather, a sensitive interpreter will judge on a case-by-case basis.

iv) We can also turn his accusation around. Gericke summarily dismisses alternate interpretations because it’s polemically necessary for him to make Yahweh seem ridiculous—the better to excuse his apostasy.

2) Gericke never considers the implications of what would follow if, *ex hypothesi*, Yahweh were real. But if Yahweh really exists, then we ought to worship Yahweh, not because he needs it, but because he’s inherently worshipful.

It’s not for his benefit, but our own. We should revere what is right and good and true. We should be thankful to benefactors.

Why should we worship God? Because God is great. The *summum bonum*, as well as the source of all finite goods.

The better part of sanity is to have an honest, accurate self-image. Not to imagine I’m more than I am, or less than I am. To know where I stand in relation to other beings.

3) On p143, Gericke fails to draw an elementary distinction between morality or immorality and ritual purity or impurity. But to be ritually impure is not to be guilty of intrinsic moral wrongdoing. Rather, cultic holiness involves an ascribed status. Conversely, defilement is a symbolic category, not an ethical category.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Gericke asks why giving birth to a girl leaves the mother unclean for twice as long as giving birth to a boy (Lev 12:4-5). In one sense the question is unanswerable since the passage doesn’t say why that is. We can only speculate. One possibility is that Lev 12:4-5 is proleptic: A mother gives birth to a future mother; hence, it doubles the period to purify both women, counting mother and child as two women rather than one. This doesn’t discriminate against women. Bodily secretions in general contract ritual impurity, whether that involves women (e.g. menstruation, childbirth) or men (e.g. nocturnal emissions).

A negative function of the purity laws was to erect a barrier between Israel and her neighbors, to discourage assimilation with the idolatrous cultic and occultic practices of her pagan neighbors. A buffer against syncretism.⁹¹

A positive function of the purity laws was to graphically depict the holiness of God by erecting a series of concentric barricades between God and his people. For instance, concrete spatial metaphors distance God from sinners. Subdivisions of sacred space which set tangible, albeit emblematic, boundaries to remind sinners of where they stand in relation to God.⁹²

4) Gericke's assertions notwithstanding, the function of the sacrificial system was not to feed God (cf. Ps 50:7-15). God doesn't need human beings (Acts 17:25).

5) Gericke attributes a triple-decker universe to the OT, defaulting to Babinski's chapter in TCD. Since, however, I wrote a refutation of Babinski in TID, Babinski's argument is hardly a given.

6) Gericke tries to make hay about mythopoetic imagery in Scripture. But he's projecting his own assumptions onto the Bible writers. He imputes certain intentions to Bible writers without bothering to argue for his interpretation.

The presence of some mythopoetic imagery in Scripture is hardly a revelation. Moreover, this often occurs in a polemical context where Bible writers are demythologizing prevalent heathen beliefs.⁹³

VIII. "Yahweh's world"

Gericke has a section on Yahweh's world.

1) Among other things, he says

Yahweh comes down on Sinai (literally, Exod 17-19), and Elijah goes up in a chariot (literally, 2 Kings 2)...That is why Jesus allegedly went up with a cloud and will return on one—because heaven was literally up there (146).

Several problems:

i) Gericke interprets Biblical imagery in a flat-footed way, then cites that as a reason why Christians ought to disbelieve the Bible. So this is a two-step argument: we should agree with his interpretive practice, then agree with him that this renders Scripture incredible.

⁹¹ Cf. "Holy and Holiness, Clean and Unclean," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (IVP 2003), 428-29.

⁹² Cf. T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (Baker 2002), §16.3.

⁹³ Cf. E. Smick, "Mythopoetic Language in the Psalms," *WTJ* 44 (1982), 88-98;
http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/19-Psalms/Text/Articles/Smick-MythopoeticPs-WTJ.pdf;

But Gericke doesn't get to impute or dictate to us the interpretation he'd like us to hold.

ii) "Yahweh" doesn't literally come down on Sinai. Rather, there are "manifestations" of Yahweh. In the Exodus account itself, a theophany (or kratophany) is not the same as God in himself. Rather, we're dealing with angelophanies as well as natural phenomena (e.g. earthquakes, thunderstorms) that symbolize the presence of God (cf. 1 Kgs 19:11-12).

That's why Moses can both see and not see Yahweh. Moses can't see Yahweh in himself. He can only see a visible token of the invisible God.

We have the similar distancing formulae in Ezk 1. The prophet "sees" Yahweh in a vision. That simulates visual perception. And what he "sees" isn't God in himself, but a symbolic phenomenon: the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.

Moreover, the "cloud" at Sinai is not an ordinary storm cloud. Rather, this is a literary allusion to the Shekinah, which led Israel through the wilderness (Exod 13:21-22; 14:19-20,24; 16:10; 24:15-18; 40:34-38).

iii) Gericke also fails to distinguish between a literal phenomenon and a figurative description of a literal phenomenon.

2 Kgs 2 uses mixed metaphors to describe the translation of Elijah. Martial imagery (i.e. the angelic "army") combined with meteorological imagery (i.e. a whirlwind and/or thundercloud).

Mixed metaphors are possible precisely because metaphors aren't literally descriptive. Therefore, you can combine jarring figurative imagery. Indeed, that's a literary clue to figurative language.

The imagery is in some sense analogous to the actual phenomena. Storm clouds produce thunderbolts which resemble fiery spears. Thunderclouds also move and rumble, like the dust clouds and "thundering" hooves of horse-drawn chariots, with their spearmen. So these are distinct, but overlapping metaphors. The composite imagery is trading on the complementary connotations of both picturesque metaphors. It's more ideographic than picturegraphic.

It's not a realistic description. Rather, it's highly evocative picture-language. Personified clouds as airborne charioteers, with "spears" of lightning (cf. Ps 18:7-15; Isa 66:15-16; Ezk 1:4,16; Hab 3:8-11). And at the risk of stating the obvious, clouds lend themselves to this imaginative treatment.

iv) Jesus didn't go up in a cloud. Rather, Jesus levitated above the ground to a point where he was then enveloped by the Shekinah. Even liberal commentators like Howard Kee understand that.⁹⁴

2) Gericke says

Many contemporary theologians go out of their way to insist that all religious language referring to the divine and the supernatural world is to be understood as being metaphorical or symbolic. "God" was just "accommodating" himself (Calvin). But the theory that all language dealing with the divine world is to be understood as mythical or metaphorical so that humans can grasp it becomes a postbiblical generalization when it is thought of as being applicable to all OT texts. For while some references to human artifacts used by Yahweh are indeed of this type, a naïve literalism is also present in many instances. It is only those who cannot admit to themselves they no longer believe in Yahweh as depicted in the Bible who need to resort to such reinterpretation to make the deity seem less obviously impossible. Believers in God need to repress the fact that their deity used to be Yahweh, whose entire reality is so obviously absurd that it needs continual revising to hide the fact... (145).

Several problems:

i) By his own admission, this goes back at least to Calvin. Is Calvin a "contemporary" theologian?

ii) Gericke's characterization is a straw man. The point is not that "all" God-talk is metaphorical or symbolic. The point is not that "all" OT texts about God or the supernatural are metaphorical or symbolic.

The point, rather, is that OT writers often use theological metaphors for God, as well as figurative or mythopoetic language (which is more prominent in certain literary genres).

And the rationale for their practice is not necessarily that God is beyond literal predication. Rather, metaphors are highly evocative and allusive. That's a way of relating God to common experience, as well as layering theological descriptions with subtextual associations that evoke similar events in Bible history.

iii) Gericke also begs the question. Whether or not "naïve literalism" is present in many OT passages is the very issue in dispute. That's not something he can stipulate at the outset. And quoting passages to prove that contention is circular, since the question at issue is whether his own interpretation is guilty of naïve literalism.

⁹⁴ H. Kee, *To Every Nation Under Heaven* (Trinity Press International 1997), 35; 308n5.

iv) Moreover, we could turn his objection around. It's not as if Gericke is a disinterested party. He's a militant apostate. He has an ax to grind. So we could just as well (or better) say that he resorts to naïve literalism to make the deity seem obviously impossible. He needs to make Yahweh out to be "obviously" absurd to rationalize his apostasy. He needs to repress more reasonable interpretations.

3) This section of his chapter also suffers from a lopsided emphasis on one theological model to the exclusion of others.

i) Gericke filters everything through the monarchical model. But God's kingship is just one of several different metaphors or social roles that Scripture uses to model God. In the OT, God is a king, shepherd, potter, farmer, father, husband, redeemer, judge, light, and rock.

ii) That should suffice to alert the reader to the fact that you can't take all these descriptions literally, since these don't compose a single picture of God. Rather, they draw images from different walks of life.

Gericke tries to depict Yahweh as a sky god dwelling in his air castle, with royal courtiers tending to his every whim. But the image of a celestial potter or farmer doesn't really fit into that framework. That's far more down-to-earth (as it were).

iii) Moreover, if we assume, for the sake of argument, that Yahweh is real, then Yahweh would be an authority figure. He would be our social superior. Therefore, it would be appropriate to depict God in regal terms.

iv) The reason God uses angelic intermediaries isn't simply dependent on the monarchical model. Rather, that accentuates the holiness of God. Holiness, both as an ethical attribute, which distances God from sinners, along with holiness as an ontological attribute, which accentuates the transcendence of God in relation to human creatures.

v) In addition, heaven isn't just a "royal palace in the sky." Take Isaiah's inaugural vision. The divine throne room is also a temple. Indeed, cosmic temple imagery is a standard way of depicting God's abode. That's not reducible to the kingly motif.⁹⁵

vi) Apropos (v), his treatment of Eden (147) suffers from the same myopic reductionism. Eden isn't just a garden, but an earthly temple. A microcosm of the cosmic temple. Adam and Eve aren't merely farmers. Rather, they are also guardians of the temple precincts. Eden is sacred space.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ E. g. G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (IVP 2004).

⁹⁶ E. g. G. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story," R. Hess & D. Tsumura, eds. *I Studied Inscriptions From Before the Flood* (Eisenbrauns 1994), 399-404.

There's an extensive body of literature on v) - vi). Why does Gericke fail to take that into account? Is he ignorant of the standard literature? Or does he simply suppress evidence that runs counter to his agenda?

4) Commenting on Isa 43:10, he strangely says "this text clearly implies that...there is a temporal period before Yahweh existed when no other god existed either... (149).

But it says nothing of the kind. Just the opposite. It makes the point that no "god" preexisted Yahweh. There was no "god" before him. There was no time before him.

5) Gericke says

Humanoids and religious practices have been around for tens of thousands of years. Yet we are now told to believe in what is supposed to be the "real God" even though his Iron Age (1200-500 BCE) character and supernatural setup appeared on the scene late in the history of religion at some point during the second half of the second millennium BCE... (148).

That's deeply confused. It confuses the date of the Pentateuch with the date of events recorded in the Pentateuch. It's like inferring that if a 20C historian writes a biography of Julius Caesar, then Julius Caesar suddenly appeared on the scene in the 20C.

According to the Pentateuch, God was on the scene from the get-go. That's a separate issue from when we date the record of his activities.

6) Gericke says

It's impossible to even imagine Yahweh being worshipped by, say, the Eskimos (149).

Does he imagine there are no Christian Inuits or Eskimos?

Yes, a certain amount of Biblical imagery is taken from the ANE landscape. As such, readers from very different places have to make the necessary mental adjustments. But so what?

When you read Homer or Lady Murasaki, you, the reader, must adjust to a very different world. Does Gericke have such a provincial outlook that you can only read writers who mirror your parochial experience? No one's more ethnocentric than a "free thinker."

VIII) Human sacrifice

Gericke thinks the Bible condones human sacrifice.

i) He cites Exod 13:2 and Lev 27:28-29.

a) However, he fails to draw a rudimentary distinction between human sacrifice and the death penalty for a capital offense. Judicial execution is hardly equivalent to human sacrifice (e.g. Exod 22:20; Deut 13:12-18).

b) Owing to the custom of primogeniture, firstborn males were highly valued in Israelite society. Therefore, they must be redeemed to demonstrate the fact that God has a prior claim on all our prized possession. Everything belongs to him. Everything we have is on loan from God.

c) In cases where God actually demanded the firstborn for himself, that took the form, not of human sacrifice, but a special vocation or calling—like the priesthood or prophethood (e.g. Num 3:41; 18:15-17; 1 Sam 1:11).

ii) He trots out the threadbare case of Jephtha.

a) This appeal fails to distinguish between a normative character and a foil character.⁹⁷ Jephtha functions as a foil. Indeed, the purpose of Judges in general is to document the cyclical apostasy of Israel.

b) Jephtha was a battle-hardened soldier. That can make one ruthless and callous.

c) His mother was a prostitute. She may well have been a Canaanite (since it was a capital offense for a Jewess to be a prostitute), in which case Jephtha was a religious half-breed.⁹⁸

iii) He also trots out the threadbare case of Abraham and Isaac (Gen 22).

a) But that's a counterfactual command.

b) And the point of the passage isn't human sacrifice, but an apparent contradiction between God's promise and his command to sacrifice Isaac. That's what makes it a test of faith.

c) The account foreshadows a vicarious principle which will be more fully elaborated in the Mosaic cultus.

iv) He cites the sacrificial death of Christ.

a) But that's a special case. And since Christ is God incarnate, that's as much a case of divine self-immolation as human sacrifice. That subverts pagan notions of human sacrifice to appease the deity. For in this case, the deity places himself on the altar.

⁹⁷ L. Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Baker 1987), 72.

⁹⁸ For more background, cf. T. Butler, *Judges* (T. Nelson 2009), 280.

b) It's true, though, that the life of sinners is forfeit. God is the judge. They deserve to die (or worse).

But even in principle, merely human sacrifice can never appease Yahweh, for the sacrificial victim is unclean.

That's why the Mosaic cultus confines animal sacrifice to "clean" animals. A sinner can't atone for his sin. That's the dilemma: because he's a sinner, he needs atonement—but because he's a sinner, he's disqualified himself from offering himself to atone for his sins.

IX. Moral evil

In the final section of his chapter, Gericke says

Yahweh...can do evil when he wants, whether natural, moral, or metaphysical (see Exod 4:11; Lam 3:38; Isa 45:7; Amos 3:6; Eccl 7:13-14; etc.). Ancient believers were not as spoiled as those today who believe a god has to be perfectly good... (150-51).

Several problems:

1) Gericke hasn't shown how his prooftexts portray God doing moral evil.

i) Exod 4:11 refers to natural evil (blindness).

ii) In context, Lam 3:38 and Amos 3:6 refer to punitive natural evils. Historic judgments on willful, impenitent sinners.

iii) Eccl 7:13-14 is quite generic, viz. "good times" and "bad times."

In context, Isa 45:7 is more complex:

a) The antithetical parallelism with "peace" (shalom) makes the counterpart "disaster." Not moral evil.

b) It also involves a contrast with the impotent pagan idol-gods, who can't do anything one way or the other.

2) Gericke hasn't begun to demonstrate that Yahweh was morally evil from the viewpoint of Bible writers. Rather, Gericke is simply imputing his own viewpoint to Bible writers. Because he thinks these verses make Yahweh look bad, he simply assumes that Bible writers see things the same way he does. But that's not exegesis—that's projection.

3) Indeed, Bible writers habitually blame Israel for all her woes.

4) If the Bible is uninspired, it's odd that Bible writers don't shift the blame. Why do Bible writers habitually defend the justice and holiness of God? Why is Israel always in the wrong?

Contrast that with pagan mythology, which frequently depicts the gods in highly unflattering terms. Why the difference?

5) If Gericke thinks that Yahweh is evil, then Gericke needs to justify his own moral foundations. After all, many infidels, including his co-contributors, Hector Avalos and David Eller, are moral relativists.

Jason Engwer

Jaco Gericke appeals to a wide variety of Old Testament passages to support his argument that the God of the Bible is significantly different than the God of modern Christianity. Notice the number of Biblical books he cites and their dating. He sometimes cites material from books and portions of books that skeptics typically date to the closing centuries of the B.C. era or later. He even cites Daniel 11 (134), a passage skeptics date to around the middle of the second century B.C. At one point, he claims that the New Testament account of Mary's conception of Jesus involves sex between Mary and God, who was thought to have sexual organs (138).

He acknowledges that some parts of the Old Testament affirm traditional Christian concepts, like monotheism (133-134), but he claims that we see traces of contrary views in some places. He suggests that editors attempted to cover up beliefs that later Judaism and Christianity would reject, but that their efforts were only partially successful (138).

Consider the implications of his use of such a wide variety of Old Testament passages. Apparently, we're supposed to believe that so many editors of so many books, spanning centuries of time, kept failing to cover up the earlier beliefs that Gericke discusses. Supposedly, polytheism can be found in the Old Testament by taking the references to "gods" in passages like Exodus 12:12 and Psalm 82:6 as contradictions of monotheism (133). One wonders how that got past all of those editors of the Old Testament text. Gericke seems to want us to believe that all those editors spanning that long period of time were absurdly incompetent.

The book of Daniel was popular in ancient Jewish circles. Gericke attributes a non-traditional view of God to Daniel 11, a chapter that skeptics typically date to the second century B.C. How did Daniel become so popular if it contradicted mainstream Jewish belief? Gericke's argument implies that a non-traditional view of God was the popular view at that point. But does the other evidence we have from the late B.C. and early A.D. eras suggest that something like the non-traditional view of God referred to by Gericke was so popular?

One way he could try to get around the points I've made above is by suggesting that passages like Exodus 12, Psalm 82, and Daniel 11 could be read in a manner consistent with monotheism. That's why monotheistic editors left such passages in place and monotheistic Jews accepted such books. And Steve has argued for consistency between passages like these and monotheism. But if the passages are so consistent with monotheism, then why should we think they were originally intended to be inconsistent with the concept?

Gericke is asking us to accept multiple unlikely scenarios. First, we're to believe that such anti-traditional views of God were so popular in ancient Israel as to be included in so many parts of the Old Testament, even as late as the middle of the second century B.C., as well as in portions of the New Testament. Second, we're to believe that such a large number of documents originally advocated a variety of anti-traditional views of God, yet those alleged original documents left few traces in the historical and manuscript records. Third, we're supposed to believe that the editors of the text were so incompetent as to leave an anti-traditional view of God as intact as Gericke thinks it is.

We could take the same sort of approach toward more recent sources. If somebody today refers to a "sunrise" or "the hand of God", we could conclude that he believes the sun actually rises and that God has a physical hand. If he denies an actual rising of the sun and God's physicality in other places, while continuing to sometimes use phrases like "sunrise" and "the hand of God", then he must be contradicting himself.

It's more likely, though, that he's being consistent. The same is true of the Biblical authors. A large number and variety of Biblical books contain, in the same book, references to a traditional view of God and the alleged anti-traditional passages Gericke cites. That's probably not because some ancient editors were highly incompetent or the Jewish people allowed editors to add traditional passages while requiring that anti-traditional ones be kept intact. Rather, the two types of passage weren't inconsistent to begin with. Why create the sort of complicated scenario Gericke suggests, with so many layers of text, incompetent editors, etc., when a simpler scenario will do?

Similar observations can be made concerning the New Testament. Paul repeatedly refers to the right hand of God the Father (Romans 8:34, Ephesians 1:20). Yet, even within the same book, he can both refer to the right hand of God (Colossians 3:1) and to God as invisible (Colossians 1:15). Similarly, John refers to the Father as having a hand (John 10:29), yet he also refers to Him as a spirit in a context that emphasizes non-physicality (John 4:24).

What are we to make of how the Old Testament books relate to each other under a scenario like Gericke's? When one book refers to another—if a later author refers back to the writings of Moses or Jeremiah, for example—what's being referenced? For example, if Gericke is going to cite Daniel in support of a non-traditional view of

God, then what are we to think of Daniel's citation of Jeremiah? If Jeremiah had been redacted to support a *traditional* view of God by the time Daniel was written, then why would the author of Daniel, who allegedly held a *non-traditional* view of God, cite Jeremiah favorably? Or if it's argued that the positive reference to Jeremiah was added to Daniel later, then why don't we find multiple versions of Daniel in the textual record and other extant historical sources? If it's argued that Jeremiah wasn't redacted yet when Daniel was written, or that Daniel cites a non-redacted version that was circulating with the redacted one, then the same question can be asked about Jeremiah that I just asked about Daniel. These kinds of questions can be multiplied.

Another way to see the unreasonable nature of Gericke's reading of these documents is to examine more closely the passages he cites. Consider his argument for Yahweh's possession of a physical body, for example.

He claims that man's creation in the image of God means that "God created humans to look like himself" (137). Gericke's argument implies that God would have a body that's the same size as ours. He doesn't suggest that God's body would be smaller or larger, and suggesting that His body is of a different size would weaken Gericke's appeal to the simplest reading of the text. He also cites Exodus 31:18 (138), which involves God's writing on tablets with His finger. And Exodus 32:15 tells us that Moses was able to carry the tablets. The implication is that God has a body about the size of ours. A finger of a much larger body would be able to write on such small tablets if only a tiny portion of the tip of the finger were used, but that's a less likely scenario. A finger the size of ours would be more appropriate. Similarly, we're told that Moses spoke face-to-face with Yahweh in the entrance of his tent (Exodus 33:9-11). The implication, again, is that God's body is the size of ours. If we grant that for the sake of argument, so far there's no problem for Gericke's position. But let's continue on through Exodus to see how well Gericke's argument holds up.

Christians argue that God sometimes took on a body or the appearance of a body or was described in bodily terms, but that He didn't have a permanent body. Gericke, however, takes these passages as references to a body that was permanent. He tells us that Exodus 33:20-23 disproves modern Christian attempts to argue that God doesn't have such a body (140). And that's where a problem arises for Gericke's position. Verse 22 refers to the covering of Moses with God's hand. Was His hand the size of Moses' body, if not larger? If so, then the larger body in Exodus 33:20-23 is different than the smaller body in the previous passages. The implication is that there isn't any one permanent body that's being described. Rather, the bodies Yahweh takes on are just further temporary manifestations or descriptions, similar to the burning bush earlier in Exodus. Ironically, the passage that Gericke highlights at the conclusion of his section on Yahweh's body (Exodus 33:20-23) supports a modern Christian view rather than his own.

Maybe Gericke's next theory will be that there were competing views of God's body. The original view that God's body was the same size as human bodies was partially

redacted by a series of incompetent editors who put in references to God's larger body while failing to remove all of the traces of the smaller one.

If God's body is larger than ours, then *how much* larger? Here we see more layers of text and more incompetent redaction by the Biblical editors. On the one hand, God's body is so big that He needs the ark of the covenant for a footstool (1 Chronicles 28:2). On the other hand, His body is even bigger than that, to the extent that He needs a footstool the size of the earth (Isaiah 66:1).

And that raises another question. Why did Isaiah appeal to fulfilled prophecy and other evidence for the superiority of his God? You'd think that Yahweh's enormous legs hanging down from the sky would be more than enough proof.

But let's move on to another of Gericke's arguments. He claims that passages like Genesis 3:8-11 prove that God had to "travel to obtain information and to verify reports" (138).

One problem with Gericke's reading of Genesis 3 is that God only asks questions in that passage, without any accompanying reference to His being ignorant of the answers. The conclusion that God was ignorant comes from Gericke, not from the text. We often ask people questions when we know the answer (e.g., 2 Kings 5:25). Parents often do it with children, such as when the children have done something wrong, in order to give them an opportunity to confess. And if we go on to chapter 4, we see what appears to be such an instance (Genesis 4:9-12). When Cain refuses to answer God's question, God provides the answer. Apparently, He knew the answer, but asked Cain for it anyway. We could stop here and note that Gericke's reading of chapter 3 is inconclusive. But it's worse than inconclusive.

Consider the context. Genesis opens with references to God's power as creator, and it closes with references to His sovereignty and His knowledge of the future, including knowledge of such complicated and unusual events as those that occurred in Joseph's life (Genesis 50:20). Throughout Genesis, God predicts the future, guides individuals to where they should be to fulfill a significant historical role, and provides interpretations of dreams. He's described as having extensive knowledge of what's in people's hearts (Genesis 6:5, 20:6). He has an immense amount of power and knowledge. Shortly before the passage Gericke cites in Genesis 3, God creates animals and knows how to bring all of them to Adam (2:19). Just after Gericke's passage, God provides Adam and Eve with a prediction of the future (3:14-19). In such a context, how likely is it that God asked the questions He did out of ignorance?

Genesis 18:14 asks, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" Gericke apparently thinks the answer Genesis gives us in other passages is, "Yes, like knowing where Adam is in the Garden of Eden, what's happening at the Tower of Babel, and what's in Abraham's heart." Remarkably, one of the passages he cites as evidence of God's ignorance is Genesis 18:17 (138), which comes so shortly after verse 14! And it gets worse. In verse 18, God's knowledge of the future is mentioned. Apparently, Gericke

wants us to believe that an anti-traditional view of God was left intact in verse 17, between such significant affirmations of the traditional view in verses 14 and 18. Those ancient Biblical editors must have been quite obtuse. I wonder if Gericke also thinks Proverbs 26:4-5 is self-contradictory.

Returning to Genesis 3, though, God's response just after the verses Gericke cites suggests that He knew more than Adam and Eve were telling Him. He condemns Adam for listening to the voice of his wife (3:17), even though Adam didn't mention that his wife said anything to him. It does seem that God knows the answers when He asks the questions in Genesis 3, as He does in chapter 4.

Gericke could try to get around these problems for his view by suggesting that an earlier version of Genesis included God's questions, but not the context I've highlighted above. But how would he know that? Even if we somehow knew that an earlier source circulated that only contained God's questions in Genesis 3, which is something we *don't* know, it wouldn't follow that the beliefs of the author of Genesis should be equated with the supposed beliefs of the originator of that earlier source. The Biblical view of God is defined by books like Genesis, not by alleged earlier versions of those books or sources reconstructed out of Gericke's imagination. Even if we granted Gericke's suggestion that he's correctly identifying and interpreting earlier sources, it wouldn't follow that the Biblical authors meant to endorse the original intent of the individuals behind those sources. If I use a phrase or figure of speech made popular by, say, Thomas Edison or Albert Einstein, it doesn't follow that I have all of the same concepts in mind that Edison or Einstein did. Similarly, if an atheist like Gericke uses a phrase made popular by the Bible, we don't assume that he agrees with all of the surrounding concepts in that Biblical passage. Gericke needs to address Genesis as a book (and Exodus, Leviticus, etc.), not highly speculative reconstructions of supposed earlier versions of the book or alleged sources for it. Given the state of the evidence, it doesn't make sense to isolate alleged polytheistic passages from monotheistic ones, supposed references to God's body from passages referring to His non-bodily nature, etc. Isolating these passages makes about as much sense as isolating a person's reference to a sunrise from his other comments reflecting a knowledge that the sun doesn't actually rise. Criticizing Christians over the view of God presented in a pre-Genesis source doesn't make sense if that source is a highly speculative construction of your imagination and Christians aren't claiming that such a pre-Genesis source was inspired. Rather, they're claiming that *Genesis* was inspired.

I want to close this review of Gericke's chapter on a point of agreement. He writes that there's "a primitive type of evidentialism" in the Old Testament (151). The authors cite fulfilled prophecy and other miracles as evidence for the existence of their God. Gericke doesn't think the evidence they offer holds up to scrutiny, but he acknowledges that they were concerned about evidence and claimed to have it. Contrast Gericke's acknowledgment of that fact to Richard Carrier's claims about the absence of concern for evidence in early Christianity (62-63). When the early Christians claimed that Jesus fulfilled prophecy, that claim involved a continuation of the

concern for evidence that Gericke rightly notes in the Old Testament era. Other aspects of early Christianity, like the miracles of Jesus and the apostles and a concern for eyewitness testimony, also reflect a concern for evidence that was already present in Judaism.

Chapter 6

Steve Hays

I) Tarico views Biblical theism as a psychological projection. Of course, that's hardly a new allegation. That goes back to Feuerbach.

One problem with this allegation is that the same reasoning is reversible. One can just as well, or better, argue that atheism is a psychological projection.⁹⁹

II) Another problem with this allegation is that, on two levels, Tarico is also projecting. To begin with, Tarico is a child psychologist, and she projects that image throughout her analysis. She adopts an "adult" tone of voice. She casts herself as the only grown-up in the room and the reader in the role of a young patient. She thinks she "comes down" to the level of the reader but really talks down to the reader, patiently correcting the reader's childish misconceptions.

We mustn't let her down. Mustn't disappoint her. We need her approval.

There are certain tactics she employs to infantilize the reader—the better to make the reader submissive and compliant.

1) One is the use of the third-person plural to subliminally make the reader share her viewpoint. Using the third-person plural to subconsciously coerce the reader into going along with what she says. Identify with her perspective. It's a subtle, but calculated, way to manipulate the reader into assuming the writer's viewpoint.

2) Another is the use of language intended to embarrass the reader into agreeing with her. If you believe that, then shame on you! Bad boy! Naughty! Naughty! What will Mommy think? Make Mommy proud!

To take a few examples:

Then the ark is taken from town to town, but the men of each town get hemorrhoids, which must have been particularly wretched in the days before toilet paper and Preparation H (155).¹⁰⁰

This is what makes us laugh at the joke, because the little boy notices it when his mom doesn't expect him to; and it is what makes biblical literalists squirm about the other stories. We expect God not to be the kind of guy who

⁹⁹ Cf. P. Vitz, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism* (Spence Publishing Co., 2000).

¹⁰⁰ Incidentally, her interpretation is questionable. Many scholars think the affliction in 1 Sam 5 was bubonic plague, not "hemorrhoids." But Tarico's interpretation is driven by her need to come up with illustrations that will make the Christian reader "squirm" (in her own words).

needs anger management classes. He shouldn't need to breathe deep and leave the room lest he, heaven forbid, do something he will regret (156).

III) A second level at which Tarico is projecting is the way she betrays her own resentments. For instance:

If you have more authoritarian parents, you are more likely to see God as a strict father (158).

Their image of God as the most powerful person imaginable was modeled on an Iron Age Chief or King who wielded absolute power over his subjects and who was beyond accountability (169).

...stronger men and more beautiful women are more anger prone than their less beefy and more ordinary counterparts (170).

It is a testament to our narcissism as a species that so few humans are embarrassed to assign to divinity the attributes of a male alpha primate (177).

Combine this with the fact that Tarico is an apostate, raised in fundamentalism, and it's natural to psychoanalyze her atheism as a reactionary feminist projection. Yahweh reminds her of the patriarchal religious environment of her childhood. The male authority-figures in fundamentalism. She rankles at male headship, so Yahweh is a placeholder for her father, pastor, and elders.¹⁰¹

IV) Tarico says

Claiming that in the Bible God's emotions are simply metaphors makes God a bad writer. A good writer doesn't use metaphors that he or she knows will be taken literally. Communication isn't just about transmission—it is about knowing your audience. Today many Christians take the notion of God's emotions literally, as have most of their spiritual ancestors. To say that God was communicating in metaphor through the Bible writers is to say that God needed communications training (161).

1) That's simplistic. According to Scripture, there are both analogies and disanalogies between God and man. God is like us in some respects, but unlike us in other respects. The Bible itself draws those distinctions.

Readers as well as writers have responsibilities. Readers have an obligation to take these Biblical distinctions into account when they read the Bible.

¹⁰¹ This is not to deny the fact that male headship can be abused. Some women have legitimate grievances in that respect. In a sinful world, those in authority—whether dominant males or dominant females—can abuse their authority.

2) Moreover, as literary critics like Robert Alter have documented, the Bible employs various narratological conventions which the original audience understood. That was part of their cultural code language.¹⁰²

3) Actually, a good communicator speaks on more than one level when addressing a varied audience. Different members of the audience vary in their ability to understand.

4) We also need to draw a broad distinction between illocutionary discourse, which is primarily intended to furnish factual information, and perlocutionary discourse, which is primarily directive rather than assertive. Hortatory passages are performative language, designed to have a perlocutionary effect. To persuade, deter, elicit a response. Discourse can be intended to inform, but it can also be intended to motivate appropriate behavior.

V) Tarico says

In the book of Matthew, Jesus is traveling along and he sees a fig tree. He is hungry, so he goes over to it. But it is bare because—as the writer tells us—figs aren’t in season. So Jesus gets angry and curses the tree, and it withers and dies on the spot...In all these stories, what jumps out at most of us is a sense of disproportionality (156).

Tarico misses the point. Fruitless fig trees were already emblematic in Jewish culture (e.g. Isa 34:4; Jer 8:13; 24:1-10; Hos 2:12; Joel 1:7). Jesus turns the fig tree into a concrete parable or object lesson.¹⁰³

VI) Tarico says

In Second Kings, for example, the prophet Elisha gets mad because some kids (boys, of course) are making fun of him... (156).

1) Were they “kids”? “Boys”? The same term is used for soldiers in 1 Kgs 20:14-15.

2) By mocking a prophet of God, they were mocking God. Yes, that’s a punishable offense.

VII) Tarico tries to psychoanalyze Christians, but that’s a double-edged sword. Why is Tarico obsessed with Christianity? After all, Islam poses a far greater threat to what she values than Christianity. Most modern-day Christians have a live-and-let-live attitude towards infidels. As long as infidels don’t try to impose their values on the majority, Christians are quite tolerant. We don’t go around beheading infidels.

¹⁰² R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, rev. ed., 2011).

¹⁰³ It can also be argued that although it was early in the season, when fig trees were in leaf, they could bear green, but edible figs.

So why is she so obsessed with Christianity? Why doesn't Loftus edit a book attacking Islam?

Because this is personal. Many of them are apostates. They left the church. They are bitter. Angry.

It's not coincidental that Tarico is an apostate, as are most other contributors to TEC (e.g. Avalos, Loftus, Gericke, Parsons, Price, Pulliam, Carrier). This is payback.

Put another way, their motivation is essentially emotional rather than intellectual or ethical. That's why they single out Christianity. Not because that poses a greater tangible threat to them than Islam. But because they continue to find it psychologically threatening to them—the way some middle-aged men and women continue to rebel against their long-dead parents. Tarico's atheism reflects arrested development.

Jason Engwer

A lot of what we said in response to Jaco Gericke's chapter is applicable to Valerie Tarico's chapter as well. She focuses on passages of scripture that refer to human characteristics of God, often treating them tendentiously, while neglecting the qualifications the Bible provides elsewhere.

As with Gericke, we should note the number and variety of Biblical passages Tarico cites. She isn't just claiming that the view of God she's criticizing was popular during a brief period of Jewish history, then developed into something more reasonable. Rather, she cites everything from the Pentateuch and Job (169) to Revelation (168). She's criticizing "the Bible writers" (161-162) in general. That makes her neglect of Biblical qualifications about Divine emotions even more inexcusable than if her claims were more restricted. And how likely is it that Biblical authors writing at the close of the B.C. era or the opening of the A.D. era would hold a view of God as undeveloped as the one Tarico attributes to them? Other authors of TEC, like Richard Carrier and Robert Price, noted how cultures outside of Israel could have influenced the Biblical writers. We know that there were Greek philosophers during the Biblical era who believed in the impassibility of God. Even if we set aside the New Testament for the sake of argument, the concept of impassibility is found in Christian sources at least as early as the second century.¹⁰⁴ In that sort of context, why should we think the Biblical authors were ignorant of or knowingly rejected the concept?

¹⁰⁴ For documentation of ancient non-Christian and Christian belief in Divine impassibility, see Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia Of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999), 566-567.

She refers to emotions as "intricate chemical reactions designed to activate and direct bodily responses to the external environment" (167). A few pages earlier, however, she had said that "emotions have a physical component, a psychological component, and a behavioral component" (164). She mentions effects of emotions that don't have to be physical, such as focus (164) and persistence (168). Thus, the language of emotions would be relevant even to a non-physical being.

And given that the Bible refers to God's non-physicality¹⁰⁵, it doesn't make sense to apply Tarico's comments about "chemical reactions" and such in an unqualified way. Yet, she says:

If we look at the internal record of the Bible itself, it would appear that earlier documents were taken literally by later writers....

Today, many, many Christians take the notion of God's emotions literally, as have most of their spiritual ancestors. To say that God was communicating in metaphor through the Bible writers is to say that God needed communications training. (161)

And she sets Yahweh alongside "Shiva, Zeus, Mithra" (161).

She tells us that the Biblical authors wouldn't have understood "the chemistry and function of emotions" (177). But they knew that there's a physical dimension to emotions (sensations in the body, the reddening of the face, etc.). When they referred to God as non-physical, yet described Him in emotional terms, they knew that God wouldn't experience emotions the same way humans do. Tarico acknowledges that the Biblical writers wouldn't have thought of emotions as we do today (177), and they wouldn't have assumed that even what they knew about emotions was entirely applicable to God. So, what's supposed to be problematic about describing God in emotional terms in that context?

Tarico can't claim that she's only objecting to some of the passages about Divine emotion, not all of them, since she sometimes frames her objections in general terms. And when she objects to particular passages, she needs to interact with the counterarguments relevant to those passages, which is something she repeatedly fails to do. Dismissing the counterarguments as "convoluted apologetics" (156) isn't enough.

In addition to describing God in emotional terms, the Bible likens God to a hen, a mother, a husband, a rock, etc. We don't assume that He's supposed to be identical to those entities in every conceivable way.

¹⁰⁵ e.g., Deuteronomy 2:7, 1 Kings 8:27, Job 9:11, Psalm 139:7, Jeremiah 23:24, Matthew 28:20, John 4:21-24, Acts 17:27, Colossians 1:15, 1 Timothy 1:17

In addition to non-physicality, scripture refers to relevant qualifiers like omnipotence (Genesis 18:14, Ephesians 1:11), omniscience (Psalm 147:5, John 21:17), consistency (Numbers 23:19, Hebrews 13:8), lack of need (Isaiah 40:28, Acts 17:25), and sinlessness (Deuteronomy 32:4, 2 Corinthians 5:21). If Tarico is going to claim that she isn't neglecting such qualifiers, then why does she so often present the issue so simplistically (e.g., 161), and where does she demonstrate that the Bible's *qualified* references to Divine emotion are wrong?

There are disagreements about how to define emotions. Is love a feeling? If so, to what extent? Is peace an emotion? Or should we define it more as, say, a lack of conflict? Just as there are ambiguities in the emotional language we use today, there would have been ambiguities during the Biblical era as well. Yet, we use the language of emotions anyway. Sometimes ambiguous language is effective at communicating something, despite its ambiguity.

The Bible often distinguishes between Divine or heavenly conditions or emotions and those that are earthly. God's love is everlasting and distinguishes Him from other beings (Psalm 136, 1 John 4:8, 4:19). Though His love is often described in emotional terms, we know that it's different than our love to some extent. God's compassion surpasses that of a mother (Isaiah 49:15), even though motherly language is sometimes used to describe His love (Isaiah 66:13). Similarly, God gives a peace that the world doesn't give (John 14:27, Philippians 4:7). Godly sorrow and the world's sorrow differ (2 Corinthians 7:10). There's a joy that comes from God (John 15:11). The Bible recognizes distinctions between different types or levels of emotion, including a distinction between Divine and human emotions.

Where's Tarico getting her moral standards by which she judges the Christian God? Why should we agree with her that some of the emotions of the Biblical God "aren't very nice" (174)?

Her evaluation of the Biblical passages is often tendentious, simplistic, and misleading. Take her assessment of the account of the ark of the covenant in 1 Samuel 6. "Such a fuss over a golden box!" (155) That's sort of like referring to a nation's flag as "a strip of cloth" or a wedding ring as "a piece of metal".

Where the Bible doesn't describe the existence, nature, or extent of Divine emotions, Tarico inserts some of that information into the text. And she blames the Bible for it. (She accuses the Biblical authors of projection, but she does some projecting herself.) She faults the Biblical God for getting "angry" and "mad" and making "a rather big fuss" in passages like 2 Kings 2:23-24 and Matthew 21:18-19. The text doesn't describe God in such terms, but Tarico tells us that God "apparently" was "mad" and "needs anger management classes" (156). She writes:

In all these stories, what jumps out at most of us is a sense of disproportionality. God's reaction seems so out of scale with the transgression! (156)

There is some disproportionality. Tarico's interpretation is disproportional to the text. If God was emotional in some sense over the events of 2 Kings 2, we aren't told what the range of emotions was or what motivated it, much less are we told that it was a matter of being "mad" and making "a rather big fuss" in a way comparable to a "guy who needs anger management classes" and needs to "breathe deep and leave the room" (156). The same can be said of Matthew 21.

Tarico might say that she's judging the God of the Bible the same way we'd judge anybody who behaved that way in the modern world. But God has rights, knowledge, and other characteristics that humans don't have.

In the case of Matthew 21, what would be objectionable even if the person who behaved that way *wasn't* God? As Steve Hays noted in his review of Tarico's chapter, Jesus seems to be providing an object lesson about the condition of Israel. Tarico doesn't address that aspect of the account, nor does she justify her suggestion that Jesus was inappropriately angry.

Since Tarico gets to read so much into the Bible, should we approach her chapter the same way? How about, "On page 157, Tarico hysterically shrieks about..." Or, "On page 174, Tarico bitterly whines that..."

Think of how much easier it would be for philosophers and theologians if they took the approach of Gericke and Tarico. No need to integrate all of the data. Disregard qualifiers. Don't be so concerned with nuance. If a passage doesn't say something, read it into the text anyway. When the editor of TEC repeatedly refers to the Trinity as a "three-headed monster" (89, 99), and he tells us that "any god will do" as a creator of the universe (97), is it surprising if some of the other contributors to the book think that the God of the Bible is so much like Zeus?

Chapter 7

Steve Hays

Ken Pulliam's chapter on penal substitution is an exercise in déjà vu. That's because Pulliam and I debated this issue before he died. His chapter is basically a rehash of arguments he used with me. I'll reproduce our exchange in Appendix 5.

Chapter 8

Steve Hays

I. McCormick asserts a parallel between the Resurrection and the statistically insignificant rate of healings at Lourdes to undercut the Resurrection. But it's hard to see the precise analogy. Lourdes is predicated on Marian apparitions. If, however, "Our Lady of Lourdes" didn't appear to Bernadette, then we wouldn't expect the spring to possess curative powers.

II. McCormick says

As social and political beings sharing a planet made smaller everyday by technology, our lives and our fates are deeply intertwined. Those connections place more and more responsibility on each of us for the safety, health, education, and future of the others (196).

That's a veiled threat to outlaw Christianity.

III. McCormick raises the issue of whether the Resurrection is falsifiable. In the same vein, he questions Christians who can't give a rational defense of their faith.

1) The issue of falsifiability isn't a simple one.

i) At one level, Christianity is hypothetically falsifiable (e.g. 1 Cor 15:17).

ii) However, historical evidence is not a value-free criterion. Historical evidence must be underwritten by many metaphysical assumptions.

2) There's an elementary distinction between the psychological state of justified belief and the analytical act of justifying your beliefs. We know many things that many of us are unable to philosophically or scientifically justify.

Sometimes that's due to a lack of individual aptitude. Or it may be in the nature of the case. Take certain private experiences. These may be veridical, yet their inherent privacy resists proof.

3) Apropos (2), most folks aren't intellectuals: including most Christians. Therefore, if the Christian God exists, then it must be possible to know or experience the Christian God without recourse to sophisticated arguments.

Even as an atheist, McCormick needs to ask himself what would be the case if, for the sake of argument, God did exist. As a philosophy prof., he ought to know that.

III) McCormick says

Despair over lost loved ones is known to induce hallucinations rather than deter them, as Habermas suggests (204).

But that just begs the question. Why assume postmortem apparitions are hallucinatory? McCormick is making things far too easy on himself.

IV) McCormick says

People frequently put themselves at great risk and even sacrifice themselves for extreme and unworthy causes (204).

1) But that's not the issue. The issue is whether people consciously put themselves at grave risk for a known lie.

2) Moreover, it's quite inadequate to make sweeping statements about "people" in general. Some people are more rational than others.

V) McCormick tries to generate a dilemma for Christians. Let's begin with one horn of the alleged dilemma:

Many Christians who would defend the resurrection historically will deny real witchcraft at Salem, black magic during the Inquisition, confrontations with the angel Moroni, or a mass resurrection of cooked fish. It is this asymmetrical acceptance of one historical case of magic while rejecting others that is of interest to us here. What will become evident is that the skeptical principles that we apply to historical reports about fantastic, supernatural, and implausible events must be applied with uniformity to all historical cases, not just to those that we wish to reject because of prior religious convictions (200).

1) Historical evidence is not the only line of evidence for the resurrection. Another line of evidence is the argument from prophecy.

2) Christians can just withhold judgment in many cases. If I haven't studied the Inquisition or the Salem witch trials, I have no informed opinion one way or the other. Indeed, a hallmark of rationality is not to make premature judgments on insufficient information. No one has the time or resources to personally investigate every historical claim—or denial thereof. So we prioritize.

3) The first horn of McCormick's dilemma is, itself, a false dilemma. A Christian can be open to the possibility that Joseph Smith did have a numinous encounter. But that doesn't make Moroni an angel of God. That's not the only supernatural option.

Likewise, a Christian can be open to the possibility that there was black magic in Colonial America, yet also regard the rules of evidence (i.e. spectral evidence) as unreliable.

Let's consider the other horn of the alleged dilemma:

A more radical attempt to salvage the resurrection entails biting the bullet and accepting magic both at Salem and Jerusalem.

If magic was real in Salem and Jerusalem, then by extension of this liberal threshold, the world is awash in spiritual forces, magic, demons, psychic events, miracles, and other supernatural occurrences...One problem with accepting all the other movements is that so many of them lay claim to exclusivity. Lots of them, on the basis of their historical miracles, claim that theirs is the "one true religion" and "one true God," and others must be rejected as false. If we let them all in, then we have a number of conflicting doctrines that the lowered criteria for reasonable historical supernatural claims says we must all accept as true (211-212).

1) But the second horn of his alleged dilemma is, itself, another false dilemma. A Christian can be open to other supernatural or paranormal events without having any antecedent presumption regarding their frequency. Maybe the world is awash in such things, maybe not. That's not something you can stipulate ahead of time. That's something to be discovered. Or the extent may simply be unknown.

2) Exclusivity is rather rare. Indeed, people who dabble in the occult or the paranormal tend to be pluralistic or syncretistic.

3) The argument from miracles was never a sufficient condition to attest a prophet of God.

4) Miracles don't ipso facto attest doctrine. That goes back to Hume, but it's simplistic. For one thing, many religions are not that doctrinal to begin with. They're more into ritual. Orthopraxy more than orthodoxy. Very formulaic. Using the right words in the right order. Using the right ingredients. Using the right gestures. Worshiping at the right time, in the right place. Legitimate lines of succession. That sort of thing. The symbolism is all-important.

Indeed, that's much closer to "magic" than McCormick's tendentious use of the term.

5) Let's take some concrete examples. "And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time" (Lk 4:5).

This clearly qualifies as a miracle in the usual sense. It's a supernatural event. But it's a Satanic miracle.

According to Hume's argument, a Satanic miracle would cancel out a divine miracle. But how does that follow?

i) To begin with, does Satan perform this miracle to attest a system of doctrine? No. That's not his intention. Rather, his intention is to divert the Messiah from his mission.

ii) Suppose, though, we say that, regardless of his motives, a side-effect of this miracle is evidentiary. If so, then what does this Satanic miracle attest?

a) The existence of the devil.

b) The power of the devil.

c) The character of the devil.

So does this Satanic miracle cancel out a divine miracle? I don't see how. All these things are consistent with Biblical demonology.

Let's take another example from Scripture: the demoniac in Acts 16:16. This clearly qualifies as a miracle in the usual sense. A supernatural aptitude. But it's a demonic miracle.

According to Hume's argument, a demonic miracle would cancel out a divine miracle. But how does that follow?

The slave-girl is probably heathen. But does this miracle attest the truth of heathen religion? Ironically, this pagan demoniac is bearing witness to the Apostles!

But assuming that it does, indirectly, attest something about paganism, what would that be?

i) Demons are real

ii) Possession is real

iii) Demons have superhuman powers

iv) Paganism is demonic.

So does this demonic miracle cancel out a divine miracle? I don't see how. All these things are consistent with Biblical demonology. Yet another example would be the miracles of the Egyptian magicians (Exod 7-8).¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ For a detailed example of how I evaluate miracles outside my faith tradition, cf. <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2007/01/miracle-of-sun.html>

6) Miracles, per se, can't contradict each other. Put another way, events can't contradict each other. At most, you can have contradictory interpretations regarding the respective significance of two or more events.

VI) McCormick says:

The real magic view would run contrary to the views of historians, scholars, and the rest of us who endorse some naturalistic explanation (211).

That's not an argument. That's just a circular appeal to secular groupthink.

In the same vein, McCormick says:

The embarrassing part is that this person has said something that the vast majority of thoughtful, educated adults find utterly ridiculous... (212)

1) Once again, that's not an argument. That's just a lame appeal to peer pressure.

2) Moreover, the vast majority of "thoughtful, educated" adults are not entitled to pass judgment on the Salem witch trials since they haven't seriously investigated the issue.

McCormick pays lip-service to evidentiary standards, then encourages people to make ignorant snap judgments about the past. He talks up historical evidence, yet—according to him—we don't need to sift through the historical record to dismiss Colonial witchcraft out-of-hand. What a lark!

VII) McCormick says

Accepting that Jesus and the women at Salem were magical beings forces you to accept a world that is teeming with spiritual and supernatural powers. The world you inhabit with cell phones...and spacecraft that can leave the solar system is also overrun with ghosts, demons, magical spells, fairies, elves, and psychic powers. The dissonance between the two realms demands some substantial justification. How is it that both of these radical kinds of forces and entities cohabit in our world, and why is it that despite their ubiquity, we cannot find any compelling evidence for these spooky occurrences? (212-13).

1) McCormick posits a dichotomy between the two without bothering to offer anything resembling an argument for his assertion. How is the coexistence of cell phones and demons discordant?

2) He deliberately includes folkloric creatures like fairies and elves to prejudice the reader, as if all these things are equivalent.

3) Evidently, McCormick has made no effort to acquaint himself with leading paranormal researchers.¹⁰⁷

McCormick says:

Richard Carrier points out that in Herodotus's book on the Persian Wars, he reports without a hint of doubt "that the temple of Delphi magically defended itself with animated armaments, lightning bolts, and collapsing cliffs; the sacred olive tree of Athens, though burned by the Persians, grew a new shoot an arm's length in a single day; a miraculous floodtide wiped out an entire Persian contingent after they desecrated an image of Poseidon; a horse gave birth to a rabbit; and a whole town witnessed a mass resurrection of cooked fish (199-200).

Before commenting on Herodotus and Carrier, it's ironic that in a section entitled "Taking Evidence Seriously," McCormick doesn't bother to independently fact-check his sources. Instead, he simply defaults to Carrier.

In a footnote, Carrier adds that

Herodotus is just an example. Ancient and medieval literature was filled with incredible stories no one believes anymore.¹⁰⁸

By way of comment,

1) Blanket rejection of paranormal reports is just as irrational as blanket acceptance of paranormal claims. Rationality is discriminating, not indiscriminate.

2) Did ancient people, per se, believe incredible stories? For instance, did Ovid (*Metamorphosis*) or Hygenus (*Fabulae*) credit all the stories they told?

3) It's also revealing to see the way Carrier handles his sources. Let's examine one of his examples:

Then, it is said by the men of the Chersonese, as one of those who guarded them was frying dried fish, a portent occurred as follows,—the dried fish when laid upon the fire began to leap and struggle just as if they were fish newly caught: and the others gathered round and were marvelling at the por-

¹⁰⁷ E.g. W. Kay & R. Parry, eds. *Exorcism and Deliverance: Multi-Disciplinary Studies* (Paternoster 2009); R. Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion* (Coronet 2012), chap 9; S. Braude, *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and the Philosophy of Science* (University Press of America, rev. ed. 1997); *ESP and Psychokinesis: A Philosophical Examination* (Brown Walker Press, rev. ed. 2002); *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations* (University of Chicago Press 2007);

<http://www.sheldrake.org/homepage.html>

<http://philofreligion.homestead.com/PostmortemSurvival.html>

¹⁰⁸ TCD, 310n1.

tent, but Artayctes seeing it called to the man who was frying the fish and said: "Stranger of Athens, be not at all afraid of this portent, seeing that it has not appeared for thee but for me. Protesilaos who dwells at Elaius signifies thereby that though he is dead and his body is dried like those fish, yet he has power given him by the gods to exact vengeance from the man who does him wrong."¹⁰⁹

- 1) Does Herodotus indicate that a "whole town" witnessed this incident? No.
 - 2) Does Herodotus indicate that this was a "massive" (i.e. "mass resurrection") incident? No.
- Notice that Carrier is, himself, embellishing the account.
- 3) Herodotus merely attributes this story to the Chersonese. He doesn't vouch for it.
 - 4) Were "cooked" fish revived? No. That's not the claim. The claim, rather, is that preserved fish were revived on contact with the flame.
 - 5) The story is just a play on words. Herodotus is attempting to forge a link between preserved fish (i.e. salted, dried, pickled) and embalmed bodies,¹¹⁰ using *tarichos* as a linking word.

McCormick says

I am going to argue that...by conventional epistemic standards we already endorse in other comparable cases like the Salem Witch Trials, we should not believe that Jesus was resurrected (195).

William Philps, the governor of Massachusetts, got involved. A court was established...Thorough investigations were conducted. Witnesses were carefully cross-examined (207-08).

They deliberately gathered evidence and made a substantial attempt to objectively sort out truth from falsity (208).

We have signed, sworn testimonies of the very eyewitnesses claiming to have seen the magic performed...We even have whole volumes written by witnesses to the trials such as Cotton Mather and John Hale (209).

Does that accurately characterize the state of the evidence? Let's examine the actual primary sources that he alludes to:

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hh/hh9120.htm>

¹¹⁰ Par. Hist. 2:85-89; <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hh/hh2080.htm>

Cotton Mather:

And yet I must humbly beg you that in the management of the affair in your most worthy hands, you do not lay more stress upon pure specter testimony than it will bear...I would say this: if upon the bare supposal of a poor creature's being represented by a specter, too great a progress be made by the authority in ruining a poor neighbor so represented, it may be that a door may be thereby opened for the devils to obtain from the courts in the invisible world a license to proceed unto the most hideous desolations upon the repete and repose of such as have yet been kept from the great transgression

I still think that when there is no further evidence against a person but only this, that a specter in their shape does afflict a neighbor, that evidence is not enough to convict the [word missing] of witchcraft.

It is the opinion generally of all Protestant writers that the devil may thus abuse the innocent; yea, 'tis the confession of some popish ones. And our honorable judges are so eminent for their justice, wisdom, and goodness, that whatever their own particular sense may be, yet they will not proceed capitally against any, upon a principle contested with great odds on the other side in the learned and godly world.

I am suspicious lest the devil may at some time or other serve us a trick by his constancy for a long while in one way of dealing. We may find the devil using one constant course in nineteen several occasions, and yet he be too hard for us at last if we thence make a rule to form an infallible judgment of a twentieth.¹¹¹

And Sir William Phips arriving to his government, after this ensnaring horrible storm was begun, did consult the neighbouring ministers of the province, who made unto his Excellency and the council a return, (drawn up at their desire by Mr. Mather the younger, as I have been informed) wherein they declared:

"We judge, that in the prosecution of these and all such witchcrafts, there is need of a very critical and exquisite caution: lest by too much credulity for things received only upon the devil's authority, there be a door opened for a long train of miserable consequences, and Satan get an advantage over us; for we should not be ignorant of his devices.

"As in complaints upon witchcrafts, there may be matters of enquiry, which do not amount unto matters of presumption; and there may be matters of presumption, which yet may not be reckoned matters of conviction.

¹¹¹ K. Silverman, ed. *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather* (Louisiana State U), 36, 41, 42.

“Presumptions, whereupon persons may be committed, and much more convictions, whereupon person may be condemned as guilty of witchcrafts, ought certainly to be more considerable, than barely the accused person’s being represented by a spectre of the afflicted.

Now, upon a deliberate review of these things, his Excellency first reprieved, and then pardoned many of them that had been condemned.

In fine, the last courts that sate upon this thorny business, finding that it was impossible to penetrate into the whole meaning of the things that had happened, and that so many unsearchable cheats were interwoven into the conclusion of a mysterious business, which perhaps had not crept thereinto at the beginning, they cleared the accused as fast as they tried them; and within a little while the afflicted were most of them delivered out of their troubles also; and the land had peace restored unto it, by the “God of peace, treading Satan under foot.”¹¹²

William Phips:

I continued there for some time but when I returned I found people much dissatisfied at the proceedings of the Court, for about Twenty persons were condemned and executed of which number some were thought by many persons to be innocent. The Court still proceeding in the same method of trying them, which was by the evidence of the afflicted persons who when they were brought into the Court as soon as the suspected witches looked upon them instantly fell to the ground in strange agonies and grievous torments, but when touched by them upon the arme or some other part of their fless were immediately revived and came to themselves, upon [which] they made oath that the Prisoner at the Bar did afflict them and that they saw their shape or spectre come from their bodies which put them into such paines and torments: When I enquired into the matter I was enformed by the Judges that they begun with this, but had humane testimony against such as were condemned and undoubted proof of their being witches, but at length I found tht the Devill did take upon him the shape of Innocent persons and some were accused of whose innocency I was well assured and many considerable persons of unblamable life and conversation were cried out upon as witches and wizards. The Deputy Govr. notwithstanding persisted vigorously in the same method, to the great dissatisfaction and disturbance of the people, until I put an end to the court and stopped the proceedings, which I did because I saw many innocent persons might otherwise perish and at that time I thought it my duty to give an account thereof that their Ma'ties pleasure might be signified, hoping that for the better ordering thereof the Judges learned in the law in England might give such rules and directions as have

¹¹² C. Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (Banner of Trust, 1979), 1:210-12.

been practized in England for proceedings in so difficult and so nice a point; When I put an end to the Court there ware at least fifty persons in prision in great misery by reason of the extream cold and their poverty, most of them having only spectre evidence against them and their mittimusses being defective, I caused some of them to be let out upon bayle and put the Judges upon consideration of a way to reliefe others and to prevent them from perishing in prision, upon which some of them were convinced and acknowledged that their former proceedings were too violent and not grounded upon a right foundation but that if they might sit againe, they would proceed after another method, and whereas Mr. Increase Mathew and severall other Divines did give it as their Judgement that the Devill might afflict in the shape of an innocent person and that the look and touch of the suspected persons was not sufficient prooffe against them, these things had not the same stress layd upon them as before, and upon this consideration I permitted a spetiall Superior Court to be held at Salem in the County of Essex on the third day of January, the Lieut Govr. being Chief Judge. Their method of proceeding being altered, all that were brought to tryall to the number of fifty two, were cleared saving three, ad I was informed by the Kings Attorney Generall that that some of the cleared and the condemned were under the same circumstances or that there was the same reason to clear the three condemned as the rest according to his Judgement. The Deputy Govr. signed a Warrant for their execution and also of five others who were condemned at the former Court of Oyer and terminer, but considering how the matter had been managed I sent a reprieve whereby the execution was stopped untill their Maj. pleasure be signified and declared.¹¹³

John Hale:

John Hale aged 56 yeares Testifieth 6. 7 [sic] . 1692 That for severall yeares agoe formerly were storys told concerning Dorcas Hoar her beeing a fortune teller. And that she had told her owne fortune, viz that she should live poorely so long as her husband willm Hoar did live, but the said will should dye before her, & after that shee should live better. Allso the fortune of Ens: Corning & his wife who should dye.first & that shee had had a book of fortune telling. About twenty two yeares agoe the s'd Dorcas manifested to me great repentance for the sins of her former life & that she had borrowed a book of Palmstry, & their were rules to know what should come to pass. But I telling her that it was an evill book & evill art shee seemed to me to renounce, or reject all such practices: whereupon I had great charity for her severall yeares. But 14 yeares agoe last spring I discovered an evillractice had been between a servant of mine & some of s'd Hoars children in conveying goods out of my house to the s'd Hoars . and I had a daughter Rebecca then between 11 & 12 years old, whome I asked if she knew of the Hoars stealing: she told me yea,

¹¹³ http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/asa_lett.htm

But durst not reveale it to me, & one reason was, she was threatened that Goody Hoar was a witch & had a book by w'ch shee could tell what s'd Rebecca did tell me in my house & if the s'd Rebecca told me of the stealing, the said Hoar would raise the devill to kill her, or bewitch her, or words to that effect. (but whether she said that Dorcas her selfe or her children told Rebecca those words I remember not) I asked Rebecca if she saw the book she said yea, she was shewed that book & their were many streaks & pictures in it by w'ch (as she was told) the said Hoar could reveale secretes & work witchcrafts. I asked her how big the book was, she said it was like a gramer, that lay on the table. And said shee now I have told you of the stealing Goody Hoar will bewitch me. I perswaded my daughter not to think so hardly of Goody Hoar . But she replied I know Goody Hoar is a witch (or to the effect) & then told storys of strange things that had been acted in or about my house, when I & my wife were abroad to fright s'd Rebecca into silence about the theft, w'ch s'd Rebecca judged to be acts of s'd Hoars witchcraft the particulars I have now forgotten. I called to minde that the s'd Hoar had told me of a book of palmstry she had, but not the bigness of it; therefore that I might be better satisfyed I asked Thomas Tuck if he knew Goody Hoar to have a book of fortune telling & he said yea shee had, such a kind of book w'ch he had seen w'th streaks & pictures in it and that it was about the bigness of such a book poynting to a gramer, or book of like magnitude. this confirmed me in the opinion that my daughter had seen such a book. And after my daughters death a freind told me that my daughter said to her shee went in fear of her life by the hoars till quieted by the script'r. Fear not them w'ch can kill the boady &c.

About those times other things were spoken of the s'd Hoares suspicians of her witchcraft whereupon a frend of mine did as I was informed acquaint Maj'r Denison w'th them, for his consideration & as I was informed Maj'r Denison took an opportunity to examine s'd W'm Hoare about a fortune book his wife had & W'm Hoar answered the book was John Samsons & his wife had returned the book long agoe & so the matter was left for that time. When discourses revived of Goody Hoars fortune telling of later times, & she beeing comited to Boston I did last may speak w'th her of may things that I had known & heard of her. Shee told me that he owne fortune that she spake of, she was told by a shipmaster when she was first marryed. & Ens: Corning fortune viz that his first wife should dye before him (w'ch is since come to pass) she sapke it from observing a certain streak under the eye of s'd Corning or his wife: But as I take it it was his wife had the streak. And for seeing the devill, or any spirit but ones, & that was soon after old Thomas Tuck dyed (w'ch I take to be about ten yeare since) & that shee took it to be the Ghost of Thom: tuck coming to speak w'th her about some land s'd Tuck had told her of before his death. But that shee fled from the Ghost & got away.

The fortune book she said was about the bigness of a child's Psalter (w'ch agrees w'th that of a gramer) But owned no other but that of John Samsons w'ch he had from her as she said above 20 years agoe & that shee had not told fortunes since the time I had layed before her the evill of it. w'ch is about 20 or 22 years since. I lately spake w'th John Samson & he told me that he had a book of Palmstry when he lived at Goody Hoars w'ch shee had seen: but that it was a book in quarto. & he sold it at Casco-Bay about 30 yeares since & had not seen it since.¹¹⁴

Let's now take stock of the actual documentary evidence:

- 1) The trial evidence was spectral evidence.
- 2) Cotton Mather thinks spectral evidence ought to be inadmissible in capital cases.

Keep in mind, too, that Mather is probably understating his degree of opposition. He was writing at a time when a commoner had to adopt an obsequious tone when addressing his social superiors.

- 3) The other ministers whom Gov. Phips consulted also thought spectral evidence ought to be inadmissible in capital cases. They warn against the "credulous" acceptance of spectral evidence.

- 4) They carefully distinguish between a judicial inquiry, a presumption of guilt, and conviction. And they do so in contrast to the way in which the witch trials were conducted.

- 5) In the Salem witch trials, from what I've read, the spectral evidence amounted to some plaintiffs in the witness box who claimed to see doppelgängers of the accused in the courtroom. But nobody else in the courtroom saw what they said they saw. So they were "eyewitnesses" to invisible (alleged) phenomena. Their claim was not corroborated by other spectators in the courtroom.

- 6) McCormick makes it sound as if Gov. Phips instigated the proceedings, when—in fact—he halted the proceedings, then reversed the prior verdicts because spectral evidence was unreliable.

- 7) Hale's testimony consists of hearsay evidence about an occult book (or two) that Dorcas Hoar allegedly had in her possession. He also relates hearsay testimony in which his daughter mentioned some "strange things" that allegedly transpired in their house when Hale and his wife were away. Likewise, hearsay testimony by a neighbor's wife who also mentioned some spooky experiences she (allegedly) had.

¹¹⁴ <http://tinyurl.com/6jp3dta>

He was not an eyewitness to magic. Except for the recollection of a conversation he once had with Dorcas Hoar, the rest of his testimony, including key details, is all secondhand.

8) At this juncture it looks like McCormick has systematically misrepresented the very sources he cited to document his claims. Is this deliberate prevarication, or is he so blinded by his hostility to the Christian faith that he's unable to accurately present, much less assess, the documentary record?

Jason Engwer

Skeptics often compare the evidence for Jesus' resurrection to the evidence for the miracles of Apollonius of Tyana, Marian apparitions, or some other figure or movement whose miracles are supposed to be problematic for Christians. Supposedly, Christians shouldn't attribute miracles to those other sources, so they shouldn't attribute miracles to Jesus either. Matt McCormick's form of the argument parallels Jesus' resurrection to the miracles associated with the Salem Witch Trials.

A similar argument was made in TCD. Richard Carrier paralleled Jesus' resurrection to some miracles reported by Herodotus. McCormick approvingly cites Carrier's discussion of the subject (199-200). Much of what we said in TID, in response to Carrier, is applicable to McCormick's argument as well.¹¹⁵

There are advantages and disadvantages to using the Salem miracles as a parallel.

The Salem events are more recent, come from a culture more similar to ours, and involve a large number of extant documents. McCormick often appeals to such factors, like when he refers to how "we have hundreds of the actual documents that were part of the evidence" (209). I suspect that one of the reasons why McCormick uses the Salem example is that the Salem Witch Trials are among the most cited misdeeds of Western Christianity, along with the Crusades and the Inquisition. People living in a context like the twenty-first-century United States tend to have a highly negative reaction to any mention of Salem, even if they don't know much about the subject. There's a tendency to want to distance ourselves from what happened. So, when somebody like McCormick tells us that we shouldn't want to argue that witchcraft actually occurred at Salem, most of his audience will be willing to prematurely agree. I'm not referring to a general tendency to disbelieve miracle accounts. I'm referring to the negative view of Salem that people already have for *other* reasons. Therefore, the Salem case has some advantages for McCormick.

On the other hand, why is affirming that witchcraft occurred at Salem supposed to be as problematic for Christianity as McCormick suggests? (And framing the issue in

¹¹⁵ See 151-156 and 165-166 in TID.

terms of witchcraft is misleading anyway, for reasons I'll discuss below.) A Christian worldview allows for supernatural activity of an evil nature (the magicians who opposed Moses, mediums, demon possession, etc.). The Salem case also has some other disadvantages, which McCormick says little or nothing about.¹¹⁶

Whatever his reasons for choosing the Salem example, and whatever we think of the quality of that case, it's the one he chose. He does appeal to other cases as a fallback position (214), but he doesn't develop the argument for those alternatives as much as he develops his Salem argument. Since he focuses on Salem, so will I.¹¹⁷

As I mentioned above, one of the advantages of the Salem example is that people are more predisposed to agree with McCormick about the alleged non-miraculous nature of the events than they would be in other cases. In a context like the modern United States, with all of the negative treatment the Salem Witch Trials have received, who would want to associate themselves with the Salem accusations of witchcraft? Another advantage the Salem example gives McCormick is that people, especially McCormick's audience, tend to be far more ignorant of the Salem events than they are of the events surrounding Jesus' resurrection. We live in a largely Christian culture, in which people often hear about Jesus' resurrection and much of the evidence relevant to it. Most people own multiple Bibles. Easter is a somewhat major holiday in our society. Etc. But how much do people know about the Salem Witch Trials? Not nearly as much. McCormick gets to take on the role of our guide through the evidence. We're ignorant, but he'll inform us. Not only are we reluctant to affirm the Salem miracles because of their negative reputation and because of our ignorance of the subject, but we're also inclined to assign some degree of credibility to somebody like McCormick, who portrays himself as having studied the issue more than we have. If he says that we shouldn't think the Salem miracles occurred, what position are we in to disagree? Furthermore, we live in a culture in which we often hear about the historical credibility of Jesus' resurrection, but don't hear nearly as much, if anything, about the historical credibility of witchcraft at Salem. Those who are highly unfamiliar with the evidence in one of the two cases, or both of them, might believe what they perceive as the general societal and scholarly consensus. If there seems to be a consensus that Jesus' resurrection is to be taken seriously, whereas witchcraft at Salem isn't, people will tend to go along with that consensus without looking into the issue much further, if at all. Then McCormick comes along and tells us that if we were to look closer at the evidence, we'd see that both the resurrection and the Salem miracles should be rejected. Are we in much of a position to disagree with him?

¹¹⁶ Some of those disadvantages, like the fact that some of the Salem witnesses recanted, were raised by Russell DiSilvestro in a debate with McCormick. That debate occurred several months before TEC was published, but McCormick says little or nothing in the book about some of the more significant points raised by DiSilvestro. The debate can be viewed at <http://vimeo.com/15351235>. See, also, the problems with the Salem case discussed by Steve Hays in his review of McCormick's chapter.

¹¹⁷ We've addressed other forms of the argument, such as appeals to Sabbati Sevi and Marian apparitions, at Triablogue. See the examples cited at <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/01/non-christian-miracle-accounts-in.html>.

For reasons like those, McCormick's argument will initially seem to carry a lot of force for many people. But another issue comes up at this point.

Shouldn't McCormick inform his audience of the relevant details of the Salem case? If people know a lot more about the resurrection, and tend to know so little about Salem, shouldn't McCormick be telling his readers a lot about the Salem evidence? If he doesn't, it might be because he doesn't know the evidence well himself, he knows his conclusions overstep the evidence, or he didn't want to take the time, effort, or space to go into the relevant details.

And it turns out that McCormick doesn't tell us much about Salem. He often refers to "magic", "magical events", etc. (e.g., 208), but he doesn't go into much detail. An exception is his reference to how "[little] girls ran about and froze in grotesque postures, complained about biting and pinching sensations, and had violent seizures" (207). That sort of behavior by young children doesn't seem to rise to the level of something like Jesus' empty tomb or the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. And McCormick doesn't give us much else to work with. If you want to find out significantly more about the alleged miracles of Salem, you have to do the research yourself. He tells us that the people in Salem concluded that witchcraft occurred, that there are "thousands" of relevant documents (209), that trials were held, etc., but he doesn't go into much detail on those matters either. We would need to know more about the standards of evidence applied in those trials, the nature of the documents in question, etc., but McCormick tells us little about such things. Earlier in the chapter, he cited the work that scholars like Gary Habermas and N.T. Wright have done regarding Jesus' resurrection. But the sort of detailed analysis that such scholars have applied to the resurrection hasn't been applied to the Salem events by McCormick. His comparison is vague and preliminary.

And he doesn't even tell us what he thinks happened in Salem. He insists that whatever happened wasn't supernatural, but he doesn't justify that conclusion, nor does he explain what supposedly *did* happen. He appeals to "the conventional standards of evidence, common sense, and the advancement of our understanding of the natural world" (210) as justification for taking a naturalistic view of both the Salem events and the ones surrounding Jesus' resurrection. But he never bridges the gap between that vague assertion and his conclusion. After the vague claim I just quoted, McCormick goes on to add that we have similar evidence for other paranormal phenomena, and it would be unreasonable or problematic for Christianity to conclude that those other miracles occurred, so Christians shouldn't think that they did occur (211-212). He doesn't give us much of an argument for the Salem phenomena, and he gives us even less of an argument for the others. Whether the evidence for those miracles is comparable to or better than the evidence for the resurrection, as well as whether that fact is problematic for Christianity in a relevant way, depends on details that McCormick doesn't provide. He brings up a lot of *potential* problems for Christianity without developing any of them enough to prove that it *is* a problem. The reader, rather than McCormick, is expected to do the heavy lifting.

After insisting that there's a naturalistic explanation for Salem, but failing to provide us with one, McCormick writes:

What the Salem example illustrates is that one need not believe or defend any particular alternative natural explanation, such as the rotten rye grain/hallucination theory, in order to conclude reasonably that they weren't witches. We believe that it is reasonable to think that there were no real witches at Salem even without knowing exactly what happened. In historical matters, there is always much that we do not know. The Salem case shows that we don't need to have a fully articulated naturalistic explanation in place, with all the requisite supporting evidence, in order to believe reasonably that there is one. (215)

He goes on to note that we've often found naturalistic explanations for events that we didn't initially know how to explain on such terms (215-216).

If something like a hallucination theory involving rotten rye grain can explain the Salem phenomena, then the Salem evidence isn't comparable to the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Hallucination theories are highly inadequate to explain the resurrection evidence.¹¹⁸

And there's a difference between saying "we do not know" and saying that we *do know* that whatever happened was naturalistic. McCormick isn't just claiming ignorance. He's claiming ignorance about some things, but knowledge about others. And he never justifies his claim to know (or think, believe, etc. if we want to avoid the term know) that what occurred was naturalistic.

Appealing to a possible future naturalistic explanation doesn't accomplish much. If future evidence favors a naturalistic explanation, then we can adopt such an explanation at that point. But that potential for a future naturalistic explanation doesn't tell us what the best explanation is now. Many things have been explained naturalistically with the passing of time, but many things haven't been. And a general tendency favoring naturalistic explanations would only be one factor to take into account among others. It wouldn't be the only factor in determining what we should believe. The details of the case in question would have to be taken into account as well.

There's a difference between denying that an event occurred and affirming its occurrence, but arguing that it was naturalistic. If McCormick wants to acknowledge that something that would commonly be considered a miracle occurred in the Salem case or in the case of Jesus' resurrection, but wants us to view it as naturalistic or ambiguous, that's significantly different than arguing that nothing beyond our current understanding of nature occurred. He should tell us which position he holds.

¹¹⁸ See, for example, <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/11/naturalistic-delusions.html>.

Calling the event in question naturalistic doesn't answer all of the relevant questions. Why did this highly unusual naturalistic event, or series of such events, happen with Jesus rather than with, say, a farmer or housewife who didn't have the sort of religious significance Jesus had? Why did it take the form of a resurrection (or series of perceptions of a resurrection, for example) rather than something else? Let's say that Jesus was just a carpenter who didn't have any religious significance. One day, an injury he had sustained healed instantly for no apparent reason. It would be one thing to dismiss that event as some sort of anomaly, something naturalistic with no larger implications. But it's something else to dismiss something as religiously significant as a resurrection in a life as religiously significant as Jesus' life was. The more often such events are dismissed as naturalistic, the more problematic that explanation becomes.

How do we avoid concluding that multiple such events would be needed to explain the resurrection alone? Jesus' appearance to Paul, for example, involved a glorified body, which constitutes more than just a return to physical life. Thus, multiple apparent miracles would be involved. Or if it's argued that Jesus didn't naturalistically rise from the dead, but instead there was a series of naturalistic perceptions of a resurrection among the resurrection witnesses, then that series of perceptions among multiple individuals would involve more than one event. What we're addressing here is the resurrection alone. If the skeptic wants to appeal to the same sort of reasoning to explain other aspects of early Christianity (Jesus' other miracles, the miracles of the apostles, etc.), the problem gets worse.

McCormick keeps framing the issue in the Salem case in terms of a choice between naturalism and witchcraft. But there are other options. From a Christian perspective, there are many potential explanations. Demonic activity or the paranormal abilities of a human could be mistaken for witchcraft, for example. Which explanation would be best from a Christian perspective depends on the details of the evidence, and McCormick doesn't give us many details.

I want to expand on something I mentioned earlier. McCormick repeatedly makes vague references to trials that were held in Salem, thousands of documents, eyewitnesses, etc. But he doesn't provide much context. How many of those thousands of documents have more than minor relevance to the issue at hand? What did the eyewitnesses claim to see? And so on. The evidence pertaining to Jesus' resurrection has been submitted to a high level of scrutiny, and Christians have been expected to answer a large number of questions about the details, interact with many counterarguments, etc. McCormick doesn't provide anything close to that level of depth in his treatment of the Salem evidence.

The Salem evidence is better than the resurrection evidence in some ways. It doesn't follow that any miracles occurred at Salem, much less that miracles occurred there that are inconsistent with Christianity. In some instances, the higher quality of evidence for Salem has little relevance. For example, having better textual evidence for

the Salem documents than we have for the resurrection documents has little significance if the textual evidence for the latter is adequate. If we can trust the large majority of the New Testament text¹¹⁹, what's the significance of saying that we have even better evidence for the text of the Salem documents?

McCormick provides no explanation for the Salem events, fails to prove that we should think something naturalistic occurred, fails to demonstrate that Christian standards should lead us to conclude that something supernatural occurred, and fails to prove that supernatural phenomena in the Salem case would be inconsistent with Christianity. We could stop here, and a rejection of the bulk of McCormick's argument would be justified. I want to go on to address some other issues, though.

As I mentioned earlier, McCormick has a fallback position of appealing to other miracle accounts, in case the Salem example fails to accomplish what he wants. During the course of his chapter in TEC, he mentions everything from claims that Michael Jackson rose from the dead (204) to "statues of the Lord Ganesh drinking milk", the "otherworldly powers" of "gurus, New Age spiritualists, and other quasi-religious leaders", and the miracles associated with the founding of Islam and other major religions (214). How does a Christian sort through all of these alleged miracles? You wouldn't know from reading McCormick. He shows little awareness of the answers Christians have given, and he doesn't give the subject much consideration himself.

Before I say more about a Christian approach to miracle accounts, I'll note that McCormick hasn't provided us with an acceptable alternative. His vague dismissal of the supernatural (212-213) is highly problematic and suggests that he doesn't know much about the evidence, as I mentioned in my introduction to TEI. He asks, "Do the demons and miracles only manifest themselves when there are no credible witnesses or skeptics present?" (213) The fact that he asks that question suggests that he doesn't know much about the paranormal data. McCormick takes the easy approach of asserting, without much of an argument, that there hasn't been any good evidence for any miracle yet, accompanied by a claim that any miracle account would have to overcome an extraordinarily high prior improbability in order to be accepted. He doesn't justify either position, and both are dubious.¹²⁰ His approach is easy, but easiness and truthfulness don't always coincide.

How should a Christian approach the subject? We can categorize miracle accounts according to factors like the nature of the evidence for them and their implications. Generally speaking, an eyewitness account is better than an account from somebody who wasn't an eyewitness. A more detailed prophecy fulfillment is more significant

¹¹⁹ A collection of some of Triablogue's posts arguing for that conclusion can be found at <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/03/reliability-of-new-testament-text.html>.

¹²⁰ Concerning good evidence for miracle accounts, see my introduction to TEI. Regarding an alleged high prior improbability of miracles, see, for example, our material on the notion that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence in TID (149-153, 166-167, 222-223). And see <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/01/onus-of-miracles.html> and <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/02/extraordinary-disclaimers-demand.html>.

than a less detailed one. A miracle accompanied by a message, such as an authority claim by the person who performed the miracle, has different implications than a miracle performed without any accompanying message. Etc. The more evidence we have for a miracle and the more significant its implications, the more seriously we take it. That's the approach I took in TID when responding to Richard Carrier's comments about some miracles reported by Herodotus.¹²¹ In the case of McCormick's Salem example, the existence of some supernatural phenomena at Salem that was perceived as witchcraft wouldn't be inconsistent with a Christian worldview, so there isn't much at stake from a Christian perspective. A Christian could be justified in not looking any further into the matter. Jesus' resurrection, on the other hand, has much larger implications. For example, Jesus and the early Christians made highly significant claims about who Jesus is, His influence in later history adds more credibility to what they claimed, and His resurrection is connected to a worldview and a system of other miracles that make it more credible and more significant than something like witchcraft at Salem or a resurrection of Michael Jackson. Other cases are more difficult to judge, but the same principles would be applied.

I want to move on to address McCormick's material on the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. He appeals to Richard Carrier's chapter on the resurrection in TCD and Robert Price's chapter in TEC. We've replied to both. And McCormick's own treatment in the chapter currently under consideration is highly problematic.

He begins with a reference to believing in the resurrection "on the basis of the Gospels" (197). What about the Pauline evidence? Or the evidence from the remainder of the New Testament outside of the gospels? What about the patristic evidence? Why no reference to corroboration from non-Christian sources, such as early Jewish acknowledgment of the empty tomb?¹²² What about the Shroud of Turin?¹²³ Later in the chapter, he addresses the evidence from James and Paul to some extent, but not much. Most of the non-gospel evidence I've mentioned isn't discussed.

He writes:

There's no reason to think that people only have those hallucinations that they desire to have, as Habermas suggests about Paul and James. Despair over lost loved ones is known to *induce* hallucinations rather than deter them, as Habermas suggests. And we have ample empirical evidence to show that people's memories are readily altered by context, expectations, and inte-

¹²¹ 165-166

¹²² <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/02/early-jewish-acknowledgment-of-empty.html>

¹²³ See Gary Habermas' discussion on the February 20, 2011 edition of the Stand to Reason radio program, which can be accessed at http://www.str.org/site/PageServer?pagename=Radio_Archives. In a July 10, 2011 email to me, Habermas cited two books he would recommend on the subject: Mark Antonacci, *The Resurrection Of The Shroud: New Scientific, Medical And Archaeological Evidence* (New York: M. Evans & Co., 2000); Mary and Alan Whanger, *The Shroud Of Turin: An Adventure Of Discovery* (Franklin, Tennessee: Providence House, 1998). He said that the book by Antonacci is "probably the best".

reactions with others. People frequently put themselves at great risk and even sacrifice themselves for extreme and unworthy causes – after Michael Jackson's death, more than a dozen of his ardent fans committed suicide (and enthusiastic disciples frequently post pictures and stories of seeing Jackson returned from the dead). (204)

In a discussion about historical probability, appealing to a series of unlikely scenarios is problematic if it's not accompanied by other data that render the overall argument probable. All that McCormick is giving us is a series of unlikely scenarios.

Gary Habermas' treatment of the hallucination theory is highly nuanced.¹²⁴ And Michael Licona has developed the argument further.¹²⁵ An argument for historical probability doesn't require that people "only" have hallucinations under certain conditions. And Habermas and Licona, as well as others who have addressed this subject, cite more than just the sort of general tendencies McCormick refers to. They also discuss the contexts in which the alleged hallucinations occurred, such as the character of Saul of Tarsus and the events surrounding his supposed hallucination. Other factors would have to be taken into account as well.¹²⁶

When McCormick cites studies that undermine the reliability of human memory, he's relying on the memories of the researchers who conducted those studies, as well as his own memory. Telling us that memory is sometimes unreliable doesn't get us far. The issues we should be concerned about in this context are the conditions in which memory is unreliable and how closely the resurrection accounts conform to those conditions. We need something like the research Richard Bauckham has done concerning memory studies and the gospels.¹²⁷ As with so many other issues, McCormick is far too vague here.

He rightly comments that "people frequently put themselves at great risk and even sacrifice themselves for extreme and unworthy causes". But it's much more difficult to be mistaken about a memory of interacting with a resurrected man than it is to be mistaken about something like a political or moral cause. And the issue, again, is probability. Do most people behave like suicidal Michael Jackson followers? Given what we know about the early Christians, including their lives prior to their alleged encounter with the risen Jesus, is placing them in the category of suicidal Michael Jackson followers the best explanation?

Much the same can be said of McCormick's criticism of N.T. Wright concerning the origin of the Christian view of resurrection (205-207). He suggests that the distinction between resuscitation and resurrection doesn't have much significance. It had

¹²⁴ http://garyhabermas.com/articles/crj_explainingaway/crj_explainingaway.htm

¹²⁵ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/11/naturalistic-delusions.html>

¹²⁶ See, for example, my discussion of Paul's conversion at <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/07/pauls-conversion.html>.

¹²⁷ *Jesus And The Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 319-357

significance to ancient Jews, regardless of what McCormick thinks of the distinction. And it's not just a matter of how a resuscitation physically differs from a resurrection. It's also a matter of other things associated with the two, such as the eschatological implications of a resurrection. Dismissing the physical differences between a resuscitation and resurrection as insignificant doesn't address the other differences. Whether McCormick has only the physical differences in mind or more than that, he needs to offer more of an explanation for why he thinks the differences aren't significant.

McCormick notes that ancient Jewish sources might have taught the concept of an individual resurrection prior to the general resurrection without having left traces of that teaching in the historical record. But who denies that possibility? The issue, again, is what's probable. The ancient Jewish sources aren't just silent on the timing of the resurrection. They repeatedly affirm their belief in a general resurrection rather than an earlier individual one.

McCormick says little about the Pauline evidence for the resurrection. He offers no explanation for the creed of 1 Corinthians 15 and repeatedly ignores it in his summaries of the resurrection evidence.

His treatment of the gospels is highly incomplete, even by the standards of a summary, as well as inaccurate and misleading. He claims that "we do not have any of the original Gospels, only copies from centuries later" (210). If he's saying that we don't even have any partial manuscripts, then he's wrong. We have partial manuscripts well before "centuries later". If he's only including complete manuscripts, then his point doesn't have much significance and is misleading. Discussions of manuscripts aren't normally limited to complete ones, so it would be misleading for McCormick to include such a qualifier without indicating that he had that qualification in mind. And why would complete copies be needed in this context? Incompleteness ranges across a wide spectrum. You could say that a manuscript is incomplete if it's missing just one portion of one word. And incomplete manuscripts can supplement each other. What's missing in one isn't missing in the others. Besides, manuscripts aren't the only evidence we have for the text. McCormick's comment is highly misleading.

He refers to the alleged unknown authorship of the gospels. No effort is made to interact with the counterarguments.¹²⁸

He claims that we "only" have accounts that are "unknown hearsay testimony decades after the fact" (214). He doesn't interact with the counterarguments for the authorship, sources, and historical credibility of the gospels. He usually ignores the early sources outside of the gospels. And his assessment of the timing of the sources ignores the creed of 1 Corinthians 15 and other sources that are commonly dated

¹²⁸ See the articles on authorship issues linked at <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/03/canon-of-scripture.html>.

less than "decades" after the time when the resurrection is supposed to have occurred.

He tells us:

Consider the millions of miracle claims alleged about Lourdes, France. The Catholic Church has officially recognized sixty-seven of them. A rough estimation of the general reliability of human miracle testimony from Lourdes comes out to be a mere .0000167. That is, in general, when humans give miracle testimony, their reliability is orders of magnitude worse than it needs to be for us to even provisionally accept it. This dismal fact alone seriously undermines the acceptability of early Christian reports about the miracles of Jesus. (n. 2 on 395)

Why Lourdes? Where is the number for "miracle claims" coming from? Why is "official recognition" from the Roman Catholic hierarchy the standard for judging the claims? How many of the claims did the hierarchy investigate, and what did it conclude about the ones it didn't officially recognize? How does the context of Lourdes compare to the context of early Christianity? McCormick mentions how often miracle claims associated with Lourdes are officially recognized by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, but why begin with that number? Why not something else, like general human reliability or the general trustworthiness of eyewitnesses who are willing to suffer for what they claim to have seen? We can come up with a wide range of numbers for a wide range of categories and choose any one of them as our starting point. What McCormick is doing is a common skeptical move. Choose something that will reflect negatively on Christianity as the starting point, so that there's some alleged initial improbability that Christianity has to overcome. Start out on a bad foot. Give people a negative first impression. But a Christian could replace the negative starting point with a positive one, like those I've mentioned above.

Keep a couple of things in mind when critics like McCormick propose these alleged initial improbabilities. First, a figure like the one McCormick cites above is just one factor among many that would have to be taken into account, even when determining a prior probability. Second, even an extraordinarily low prior probability can be overcome more easily than skeptics commonly suggest. All of us, skeptics included, accept many conclusions that initially seemed highly improbable.¹²⁹

Not only does McCormick ignore and misrepresent so much of the evidence related to the resurrection, but at one point he even makes the parenthetical comment "assuming that Jesus existed at all" (205). Contrast McCormick's radically negative assessment of early Christianity to his far more positive assessment of Herodotus. He tells us that we should reject Herodotus' claims about the supernatural, yet he refers

¹²⁹ J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations For A Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2003), 569-570;
<http://www.lydiamcgrew.com/Resurrectionarticlesinglefile.pdf>

to him as "an established and respected historical source that provides us with a great deal of reliable information about the past" (200). As Rosalind Thomas notes, Herodotus has been accused of lying "from antiquity".¹³⁰ His reliability is still debated in scholarly circles, and sometimes the disputes are "bitter".¹³¹ There's a lot of negative material circulating about Herodotus that McCormick could have adopted if he had wanted to. I don't object to a positive assessment of Herodotus. But McCormick's positive comments about him offer a stark contrast to, say, dating the gospel manuscripts "centuries" after the originals and treating the dispute over Jesus' existence as something so significant that it warrants being mentioned. He claims that there isn't sufficient evidence to believe even some of the most widely accepted conclusions about Jesus, such as the fact that some of His followers thought they saw Him risen from the dead.¹³² Apparently, even the Jesus Seminar is too conservative by McCormick's standards. Notice that he isn't just skeptical of the miracle claims of the early Christians. He's also skeptical of many of their non-miraculous claims, even ones accepted by the vast majority of liberal scholars.

McCormick underestimates the evidence for the supernatural, including Jesus' resurrection. He also underestimates Christianity's ability to explain extra-Biblical miracle claims. And he overestimates his worldview's ability to dismiss the supernatural. We do, in fact, live in a universe somewhat like the magical one McCormick derides, and his worldview is terrible at explaining it.

¹³⁰ Herodotus In Context (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1

¹³¹ *ibid.*, 8

¹³² See the question and answer segment of his debate with Russell DiSilvestro at <http://vimeo.com/15351235>. The relevant comments are around fifty-nine minutes into the video. To hear the four facts McCormick is addressing, start watching the video around minute twenty-eight.

Chapter 9

Steve Hays

I) In this chapter, Price ostensibly offers a naturalistic explanation for the Resurrection. In reality, Price dons his tinfoil cap and offers a conspiratorial reading of the Gospels. The Da Vinci Code without the popcorn.

His tactic is to rip isolated verses out of context, reinterpret them against the grain of what the narrator intended, then string them together into a naturalistic explanation.

The obvious fallacy with his tactic comes from the fact that Price has no independent information about the Resurrection to derive an alternative version of events. All he has are the four canonical gospels.

When he reinterprets certain statements in defiance of what the narrator meant, that doesn't amount to evidence for an alternative explanation—for the statements don't have an alternate meaning, in the teeth of what the narrator intended. Rather, the statements express the viewpoint of the narrator. They can't be divorced from the narrative viewpoint, then invested with a contrary meaning.

The statements are a verbal representation of whatever events the narrator thought the statements represent. They can't be detached from what the narrator had in mind, then reattached to a different set of events. For they never referred to that alternate set of events. And Price can't see behind the statements to what really happened. He lacks independent access to the events in question. All he has to go by are the Gospels. Indeed, he doesn't think they stand for any real-world events.

Price is like a man who turns the fingerpost. He can point it in a different direction, but this doesn't make it a real route pointing to a real destination by that name in that direction. The sign only signifies what it was meant to signify by the guy who originally put it there.

Likewise, you can go through a history book and reassign all the names to different people and places, thereby producing an alternate history, but that doesn't denote a real world alternative. That's just imaginary. You can retain all the old names, but they no longer stand for anything out there.

What did Price think he was going to accomplish? Is he so out of touch with reality that he imagines this exercise has any probative value? Either treat the gospels as history or fiction. If fiction, then you can't reinterpret fictitious statements as if that counts as evidence for an alternative explanation. For if the original statement doesn't tell you what really happened, if the original statement is fictitious, then

reinterpreting a fictitious source doesn't convert it into a genuine, alternative explanation.

Suppose I decide to modernize Dante. Instead of a medieval pilgrimage through hell, purgatory, and heaven, I make Dante an astronaut who travels to another galaxy, meeting a variety of alien life forms. If well executed, my updated reinterpretation would be very readable. But a creative reinterpretation of an originally imaginary journey is still imaginary.

Price has a dilemma. He relies on the gospels to construct his alternate version of events. But if the gospels are reliable, then the alternate version of events is false. If, on the other hand, the gospels are unreliable, then he can't rely on the gospels to construct a naturalistic alternative.

He's very selective about what he uses as evidence to construct his theory, but based on what? His only selection criterion is whatever he needs to prop up his cute little theory. The theory selects for what's useful to substantiate the theory. But that's viciously circular. Why those tidbits, and only those tidbits? And even then, he offers a subversive reading of his already selective appeal to the evidence.

If any reader finds that exercise convincing, it's only because he wants to believe Christianity is false, because he wants to believe that anything anyone says against Christianity is true.

Moving onto the particulars:

II) His theory suffers from some central contradictions. For he actually offers three, mutually exclusive naturalistic theories. He defends the swoon theory, he defends the reburial theory, and he defends the dying-and-rising-gods theory. But these cancel each other out. They can't all be true naturalistic explanations, since they don't naturally cohere.

If the reburial theory is true, then that falsifies the swoon theory. If Jesus was not only buried, but reburied, then he didn't merely swoon on the cross, recover in the tomb, and leave town.

Likewise, if the fate of Jesus is modeled on dying-and rising gods and demigods, then that's a completely different paradigm than either the swoon theory or the reburial theory. Even at a purely hypothetical level, his reconstruction bombs.

III) We have his rote appeal to parallelomania (220). He doesn't name the primary sources, date the primary sources, quote the primary sources, identify their genre, or relate them to the personal experience of the gospel writers.

IV) Price says (quoting Collingwood)

The critical historian...demands that assertions in ancient or modern sources be corroborated (221).

- 1) Does he corroborate his naturalistic explanation? No. What about multiple attestation for the “apotheosis narratives” of Hercules, &c.?
- 2) Did he corroborate the attribution to Collingwood? How does he know Collingwood made that statement?
- 3) Conversely, the Resurrection is multiply attested.

V) Price says

The ensuing doting of his relieved disciples upon the recuperating savior would only have fed the instinct to worship him (222).

- 1) What evidence is there that the disciples were instinctively inclined to worship Jesus? To the contrary, they were socially conditioned to reserve worship for Yahweh. They had a powerful predisposition not to worship Jesus.
- 2) Is Price admitting that Jesus did things which would overcome their culturally-conditioned inhibition against worshipping him? What things would that be? Miracles?
- 3) The gospels don't present the disciples as typically worshipful of Jesus. They are generally confused by Jesus. They have mixed feelings about Jesus. They don't know quite what to make of him. He does astounding things. Makes cryptic or deific statements. Has a certain indefinable aura.

And isn't that exactly what we'd expect? Suppose you were a 1C Palestinian Jew. Suppose Jesus was Yahweh incarnate. It would take a while for that fact to dawn on you. Except for the Transfiguration, Jesus seems ordinary on the outside. Not like Ezekiel's theophany, with the Shekinah, and the cherubim, and the fiery figure on the throne.

VI) Price says

All one has to surmise is that he waited a while, till he was better and stronger, to make grandiose pronouncements (222).

- 1) Did victims of scourging and crucifixion spontaneously recover from their massive injuries? Price has substituted miraculous self-healing for the miracle of the Resurrection.

2) And how did Jesus escape from a sealed tomb?

3) Or does Price deny that Jesus was scourged before he was crucified? Yet that's a natural event, not a supernatural event. And that's a realistic punishment for a Jewish peasant accused of sedition.

VII) Price cites Heb 5:7 to support the swoon theory. Yet that's acontextual since the author of Hebrews repeatedly affirms the death of Christ (2:9-10,14; 9:12-15).

VIII) Price says

It [the swoon theory] has since been redacted out in the course of the evolution of early Christian belief (223).

1) In other words, if the extant evidence directly contradicts Price's pet theory, then he simply postulates evidence to the contrary. He invents whatever he needs to float his theory. Yet a few pages before he quoted Collingwood's insistence on corroborative evidence.

2) But if it's okay to postulate evidence that disconfirms the Resurrection, then it's okay to postulate evidence that confirms the Resurrection. So let's postulate extra-biblical evidence for the Resurrection which the Jewish and Roman authorities "redacted out" when they persecuted the Christian movement. To postulate the suppression of evidence is a two-way street.

IX) Price says

There is the surprise of Pontius Pilate that Jesus had expired so quickly, implying that maybe he hadn't (223).

1) Of course, that's not a narrative implication. According to the narrative, Jesus had expired.

Price is like a crooked lawyer who questions a witness, then draws a deceptive inference from what they said, when he knows perfectly well that's not what they meant.

2) Given the fact that Jesus was scourged before he was crucified, that's not surprising. Consider the tremendous blood loss from scourging. Jesus could easily bleed to death on the cross. Not to mention the fact that he was speared.

It's not surprising that Pilate was surprised. Pilate was a busy, distracted Roman bureaucrat.

X) Price says

He is not dead but only drugged...After all, a sponge soaked in something odorous was being applied to his mouth... (223).

Does Price have any medical evidence that vinegar has the same effect as chloroform? Has he ever tested that theory?

XI) Price says

The mockery of the Sanhedrinists...is delightful irony indeed if Jesus is in fact going to demonstrate his divine Sonship by coming down from the cross alive (224).

But the swoon theory is a naturalistic explanation. Indeed, that's the whole point: to avoid a supernatural explanation (i.e. the Resurrection). So how would that demonstrate his divine Sonship? That wouldn't be ironic, either from the viewpoint of the narrator or the Sanhedrinists.

XII) Price says

I am not the first to note the surprising parallel between Mk 15:43-46 and the account of Josephus bar-Matthias (224).

Let's note the "parallels":

Jesus	Josephus's three friends
Taken down dead	Taken down alive
Speared	Not speared
Scourged	?
No triage	Triage
	2 out of 3 died

What this accentuates is the lack of any substantive parallel.

XIII) Price says

Why does Matthew tell us that Joseph was rich (Mt 27:57) (224)?

To explain how he could afford a private family crypt, which was available for the honorable burial of Jesus.

XIV) Price says

I believe it is meant to provide narrative motivation for grave robbers breaking into the newly sealed opulent tomb in which only the bruised and beaten scarecrow Jesus awaits... (224).

How could that be Matthew's motivation when:

- 1) Matthew says Jesus was scourged and crucified, not merely bruised and beaten.
- 2) Matthew says Jesus died on the cross.
- 3) Matthew says the tomb was guarded.
- 4) Matthew says an angel opened the tomb.
- 5) Matthew says Jesus rose from the dead.
- 6) Matthew says nothing about grave robbers, which would contradict everything else he says.

How can Price deny so much of what Matthew actually says, then infer Matthew's narrative intent? He could only infer Matthew's motive from Matthew's narrative, which goes out of its way to support the death and resurrection of Christ.

Either be consistently skeptical or take the narrative as it stands. Price's reconstruction is arbitrary and opportunistic. His theory doesn't jive even for the sake of argument.

XV) Price says

Luke's reunion scene [Lk 24:36-43]...may naturally be read as a striking parallel to that of Apollonius of Tyana...The point of the Apollonius scene (and I believe the point of the Lukan) is pointedly not that the hero has died and returned in some manner from the dead, but rather that he has escaped death. He did not die (225).

- 1) Since the account of Philostratus dates to the 3C AD, it has no bearing on Lukan intent.
- 2) Philostratus is operating within a specifically pagan framework, while Luke stays close to his Jewish sources.
- 3) Lk 24:36-43 doesn't exist in a vacuum. It's a follow up to Jesus' death by crucifixion in Lk 23.
- 4) In the very scene cited by Price, it's said that Jesus should "rise from the dead" (24:46).

5) The death and resurrection of Christ are central themes in Acts, the Lucan sequel to his gospel (Cf. 3:15; 4:2,10; 10:41; 13:30,34; 17:3,31-32; 23:6; 24:21; 25:19; 26:8,23).

XVI) Price says

Why does John change the story (225)?

1) The fact that John records additional details doesn't mean he "changed" Luke's story.

a) For one thing, there's no reason to assume he was adapting Luke.

b) For another thing, if—like Price—you attribute his information to an oral source, there's no reason to think he needed to change his oral source. He might as well be preserving what he found in his oral source.

2) Price undoubtedly thinks Luke made changes to Mark. Price relies on the Lukan version to help make his case. So why is John unreliable if he "changes" the story in Luke, but Luke is not unreliable if he changes the story in Mark?

Price says

This is likely why he [John] laughs off the speculation of Jesus' enemies that he might be planning to leave Palestine to travel among the Diaspora (John 7:35); that's what he must have done if he survived crucifixion (226).

No, that's a typical bit of Johannine dramatic irony, where the audience misinterprets a statement by Jesus. The reader and the narrator know better. That's one of the regular subthemes in the Fourth Gospel.¹³³

3) John didn't change Luke's story to add the bodily resurrection of Christ, for Luke already underscores the very same point (Lk 24:39-40; cf. Jn 20:25,27).

XVII) Price says

It is quite common for followers of slain heroes and leaders to claim their man did not die but only went into hiding (226).

1) NT writers don't claim Jesus went into hiding.

¹³³ Cf. D. A. Carson, "Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel," *TynB* 33 (1982), 59-91; http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/1982_understanding_misunderstandings_reformatted.pdf; http://98.131.162.170//tynbul/library/TynBull_1982_33_03_Carson_FourthGospel.pdf

2) If the tomb wasn't empty, it would be easy for Jewish authorities to exhume it to prove them wrong.

XVIII) Price says

One might even take the ascension story as a euphemism for his soon-following death. This is only to follow the lead of the texts themselves, as I see it (226).

1) What is there in Acts to suggest the Ascension is a euphemism for his "soon-following" death? The Resurrection of Christ is a major theme in Acts.

2) First, Price conjectures that Jesus survived crucifixion, then conjectures that Jesus succumbed shortly thereafter. So which is it? Did he suffer mortal injuries or not?

3) Both conjectures flagrantly deny what the NT emphatically affirms. So there's no textual evidence to support his conjectures—even for the sake of argument.

If Price denied the NT record outright, that would at least have some semblance of consistency, but he picks and chooses certain passages to the exclusion of others, and even so, he has to arm-twist the passages he chooses to make them say what he wants them to say rather than what the narrator meant them to say.

XIX) Price says

Let's assume Matthew is right [about the guarded tomb]...They must have checked. And if Jesus were reviving, there is no reason to believe they would have locked him in alive! (226).

Since the text doesn't have Jesus reviving in the tomb, Price can't bounce off that text to speculate about the reaction of the Roman guards if they found him reviving.

Price keeps acting as if these passages can be taken in more than one direction. But if Matthew has Jesus die on the cross, then rise from the dead, the text about the guarded tomb isn't open to Price's conjecture.

Price has withdrawn so far into his mirror world of imagined redacted layers and imagined literary parallels that he can no longer see his way out of the maze.

XX) Price says

As I read John's Easter account in 20:11-15, I do not need to impose some sort of Jesus-hating skepticism in order to "escape" the implications of the text (226).

Of course, we'd expect a Jesus-hating skeptic to deny his Jesus-hating skeptical motives. That's precisely the sort of preemptive disclaimer we'd expect a Jesus-hating skeptic to make.

XXI) Price says

If we were not so familiar with the text [Jn 20:1ff.] it would strike us as quite ludicrous to think one must draw the inference from the empty tomb that Jesus must therefore have been raised from the dead... (227).

That's not an inference which the reader draws from the text. Rather, that's something John explicitly and repeatedly tells the reader. It's not as if the reader is jumping to conclusions.

XXII) Price says

And though the evangelist (obviously) goes on to supply an alternate explanation, that of faith in the resurrection of Jesus, the text itself has already supplied a purely natural explanation of the empty tomb as well as the implication that Christians might not have been privy (or ever become privy) to Jesus' final resting place (227).

1) No, what John says, through the narrative action, is that Mary Magdalene drew a hasty inference: since the stone enclosing the entrance had been rolled away, someone moved the body.

Here John presupposes common knowledge on the part of the reader regarding unspoken background details. An "undesigned coincidence," which dovetails with the Synoptic accounts in which the women observe the tomb sealed, as well as the angel rolling away the stone.

2) John doesn't supply an alternate explanation based on "faith" in the Resurrection. Rather, John's correction is based on eyewitness testimony.

3) It's misleading to say a narrative supplies an "alternate" explanation. A narrator controls the flow of information in the first place. The viewpoint of the narrator is the normative viewpoint. If the narrative contains opposing viewpoints on the part of speakers within the narrative, their viewpoint represents the "alternative" explanation, and that's a foil.

XXIII) Price says

John himself tells us that the *prima facie* explanation was simple relocation of a corpse hastily stashed there for the moment (227).

1) John doesn't present that as the *prima facie* explanation. John presents that as a mistaken inference.

2) Moreover, even if Joseph intended to relocate the body at some point, that plan was preempted by the resurrection of Jesus. That's the narrative.

XXIV) Price says

...it is too late to find out where the body had been taken, perhaps because the disciples did not know of the role of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (227).

1) That's an illiterate way to read a narrative account. Even if various participants within the narrative suffer from compartmentalized knowledge, the narrator, by narrating what the various participants do, is privy to what each participant knows and does in relation to every other participant. A narrator, by relaying what other participants say and do, assumes a privileged vantage point over and above the other participants.

2) Moreover, the narrator includes himself among the disciples, as an especially well-positioned disciple. An eyewitness.

XXV) Price says

Maybe the custodian Mary asked had replaced the man who had approved the removal of the body on the earlier shift, and he simply did not know what to tell her (227).

The "custodian" whom Mary consults about the whereabouts of Jesus is none other than Jesus himself. Therein lies the deliberate dramatic irony of the situation. Price isn't even attempting to interpret the narrative on its own terms.

It's one thing to disbelieve the narrative, quite another to systematically misread the narrative. Price is thoroughly dishonest.

XXVI) Price says

The trouble is it [i.e. nonrecognition motif] has been inherited by Easter accounts that have been rewritten...

Of course, that's his escape clause. When the evidence cuts against his theory, Price will discount it on the grounds that the record was "rewritten" to suppress evidence favorable to his theory.

XXVII) Price says

All this nonrecognition business, which we should never have expected, inevitably invites the suspicion that the Easter encounters were actually sightings of, encounters with, figures only later identified with Jesus... (229).

Actually, I think the truth is just the opposite. Precisely because this is a recurring theme (Lk 24:13-35; Jn 20:14; 21:4), as well as something out of the ordinary, it resists a naturalistic explanation.

Like so many things in the Fourth Gospel, I think it circles back to the prologue. In particular, to the notion that God is unknowable except for when, where, and to whom, God chooses to make himself known (Jn 1:18). The risen Christ controls who knows him, and when they know him. Knowing the true identity of Christ is a gracious condescension on God's part (cf. Jn 6:44,65; 12:37:41).

Likewise, note the divine passive in Lk 24:16. See a similar motif in Lk 9:45 and 18:34.

Jesus often tones down this aspect of his divinity in the course of his earthly ministry; he often appears more ordinary than he really is, but now that he's put that behind him, he reverts to a more characteristically divine posture. Like the largely invisible, aniconic God of the OT (e.g. Exod 33:12-23), Jesus is inaccessible and unapproachable except where he initiates contact and reveals himself. The incognito God who remains largely concealed even when he reveals himself.

In these nonrecognition scenes, visual misperception is a concrete metaphor for spiritual misperception. For a similar incident in the OT, cf. 2 Kgs 6:17-20.

XXVIII) Price says

Mark (6:14; 8:28) supplies a striking precedent when he tells us (twice no less) that many people believed they were seeing or hearing about a resurrected John the Baptist, even though Mark claims to know better: it was a case of mistaken identity, since the figure is actually Jesus (229).

You can confuse one person with another when you haven't seen either person, or you only saw one. However, the risen Christ appears to people who already knew him before the Resurrection. So the alleged parallel is specious.

XXIX) Price says

The cognitive dissonance theorists showed how the disastrous failure of predictions by the Adventist/Millerites, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the sect of Sabbati Sevi... (231).

A basic problem with this comparison is that millennial cults which mispredict the future don't simply continue intact. To begin with, many millennial cults fade away.

And even those that survive suffer from schisms and coup d'états when the predicted outcome fails to materialize. They also come under fire from outside groups. Yes, you have some diehards who go down with the ship, but others abandon ship.

Jason Engwer

Robert Price holds a low view of the historicity of the gospels, but he argues that Jesus' resurrection doesn't follow even from a high view of their historicity. The issue of whether miracles are possible "just doesn't come up" (219), since we don't have reason to believe in the resurrection even if we take a high view of the historicity of the gospels and allow miracles.

Sound absurd? So are a lot of Price's other beliefs (that Jesus didn't exist, that Paul didn't write documents like Romans and 1 Corinthians, etc.). His argument in TEC is the latest in a long series of absurdities that make him popular in some circles.

But the argument may not be as absurd as it first appears. He may not be granting as much to the Christian as he seems to be granting.

Price can allow the possibility of miracles, but maintain that they have an extraordinarily low prior probability. Instead of claiming that a miracle is impossible, he may claim that it has, say, a one in a trillion likelihood. Miracles aren't impossible. They're *nearly* impossible. If that's the position Price is taking, then he's still well within common skeptical territory. He isn't granting much to the Christian.

And just how high of a view of the historicity of the gospels is he granting for the sake of argument? He refers to significantly different levels of historicity at different points. First, he refers to the conclusions argued by Christians like William Lane Craig and Gary Habermas in their minimal facts approach, facts such as the discovery of the empty tomb by some of Jesus' female followers (219). But later in the same paragraph, he refers to those who view the New Testament narratives as "virtually inerrant". If it's *their* view that he's granting for the sake of argument, then he's going far beyond the minimal facts cited by men like Craig and Habermas. Shortly after his second comment mentioned above, he refers to the notion that "some details may be legendary embellishments, but the core of the story should be granted". But that view is neither something like Craig's minimal facts approach nor "virtual inerrancy". Price is bringing up a few different perspectives, and, so far, he isn't explaining which one he's granting for the sake of argument.

But he goes on to refer to how Evangelical apologists want people to accept "all the details of the Gospel Easter narratives" (220). He criticizes that alleged Evangelical approach as unreasonable, but then says "yet, that is what I will be doing here" (221). The implication seems to be that he's granting what he just attributed to Evangelicals. He then says "I will take for granted the basically historical character of the 'events' prefacing the resurrection." (221-222) He seems to be granting a

highly historical view of at least the portions of the gospels most relevant to the resurrection, even to the point of implying that he's accepting "all the details". What's the problem, then?

The problem is that he goes on to repeatedly reject not only some of the details of the gospels, but even large portions of them. He rejects the gospels as we have them, claiming that earlier material was "redacted out" (223). He has Luke referring to how Jesus "did not die" in Luke 24:36-43 (225), even though other portions of Luke refer to Jesus' death at the crucifixion (Luke 9:22, 23:43, 23:46, 24:46). He rejects details in the gospel of John that are inconsistent with one of the theories he's defending (225). And so on. Either Price isn't being consistent with his claim that he would grant a high view of the gospels' historicity or the high view he's granting is so low as to allow him to reject so much of what the gospels say. And if the latter is the case, then some of his initial comments ("virtual inerrancy", "all the details", etc.) were misleading.

What's the significance of saying that you can defend alternatives to the resurrection if you reject so much of what the gospels report? And it gets worse. Price offers no explanation for the appearances to Paul and his travel companions, James, the more than five hundred in 1 Corinthians 15:6, etc. He's only addressing the gospel evidence, and he allows himself to reject much of what the gospels tell us. He isn't granting as much as his earlier comments suggested he would, and he isn't even attempting to explain some of the most significant evidence for the resurrection.

Price repeatedly misrepresents the approach and arguments of men like Craig and Habermas. He suggests, for example, that they argue as if their opponents accept the "virtual inerrancy" of the New Testament narratives (219). He repeatedly refers to how "modern New Testament scholars" want evidence for the New Testament claims rather than taking them for granted (220), contrasting such an approach with the one taken by Christians like Craig. But Craig and others who take the minimal facts approach don't suggest anything close to inerrancy, they argue for the minimal facts they're citing, and they appeal to widespread scholarly support for those minimal facts. The picture of men like Craig that Price develops in the opening of his chapter is inaccurate, to the point of being ridiculous.

Then there's his claim that the resurrection alternatives he's defending have "not the least improbability, even implausibility" (222). He claims that:

We have felt no need to posit special circumstances or to multiply hypotheses. The rise of resurrection faith is just no problem at all. (232)

Since he's defending everything from the Swoon Theory to the Reburial Theory to the Mistaken Identity Theory to the Cognitive Dissonance Theory, how is it that none of the theories have "the least improbability"? The theories are at some points inconsistent with each other. The Swoon Theory, as Price formulates it, has Jesus

surviving the crucifixion for "a while" (222), long enough to recover from His suffering and meet with His followers. The Reburial Theory, on the other hand, has Jesus' body in a "final resting place" (227) while His followers go to the wrong tomb just after the crucifixion. Is Price saying that Jesus' survival of the crucifixion and His being dead in a second tomb are each fifty percent likely? Neither scenario is improbable? But if neither can get above fifty percent, is that "no problem at all"? Price's theories are all improbable. They're all problematic.

When he proposes earlier versions of the gospels that were later redacted and are highly inconsistent with the versions we have, rejects details reported in the gospel of John, etc., such moves don't "multiply hypotheses", and they create "no problem at all"? That doesn't make sense.

Here are some of the claims Price makes, which have "not the least improbability" and cause "no problem at all":

The ensuing doting of his relieved disciples upon the recuperating savior [who survived the crucifixion] would only have fed the instinct to worship him. All one has to surmise is that he waited a while, till he was better and stronger, to make grandiose pronouncements. (222)

One might plausibly argue that Mark's story is actually borrowed from Josephus ("Joseph of Arimathea" = "Joseph bar-Matthias," which is in fact Josephus's actual name). But if not, the Josephus story [of a man surviving crucifixion while his crucified companions didn't] at least parallels the Markan version as I am suggesting we understand it. (224)

One might even take the ascension story as a euphemism for his [Jesus'] soon-following death [after He survived the crucifixion]. (226)

Maybe they [the guards at the tomb who found Jesus alive after He survived the crucifixion] would have fled as Mark's women did, victim to superstitious fear. Or maybe they would have helped the "broken man" to safety. (226)

Remarkably, Price cites Hebrews 5:7 as evidence of an early belief that Jesus survived the crucifixion (223). His reading of the passage is explicitly and widely contradicted by the rest of Hebrews, which repeatedly discusses Jesus' death on the cross. Price also ignores the fact that Jesus' Gethsemane prayers included a request to avoid the entire cup of suffering, not just death, and the fact that Jesus included submission to the Father's will in His prayers ("not what I will, but what You will", Mark 14:36). To interpret Hebrews 5:7 as a reference to Jesus' survival of the crucifixion, despite His having to suffer through the crucifixion and the other mistreatments associated with it, is ludicrous. It's more likely that the passage is referring to salvation from death in some other sense, such as the resurrection. Verse 8 goes on to combine the theme that Jesus had a close relationship with the Father and the theme that He had to suffer anyway. Most likely, verse 7 is also referring to such a

combination of themes. He was saved from death in a sense, through the resurrection, but He also had to suffer through death. Or verse 7 may only be referring to God's ability to prevent Jesus from dying and God's generally positive response to His requests in prayer, even though avoidance of death wasn't part of what the Father granted. Either reading would make more sense than Price's, which makes Hebrews 5:7 contradict the rest of the letter and contradict so many other early Christian and non-Christian sources.

Then there's Price's citation of Luke 24:36-43 as an account in which Luke claims that Jesus "did not die" (225). But verse 46 has Jesus referring to His death in what's portrayed as an ongoing discussion with the same group of people.

Price gives us page after page of such absurdities. He often cites Islamic sources without interacting with Christian responses to the Islamic claims.

He offers no explanation for the earliest interpretations of the gospels by both Christian and non-Christian sources, even though the early interpreters widely contradict Price's reading of the documents. The patristic and early non-Christian evidence is almost entirely ignored. He occasionally cites somebody like Josephus (224) or Celsus (229) for some sort of minor alleged support for his claims, but the large majority of the relevant evidence from the early extra-Biblical sources isn't addressed.

He doesn't explain why the early Jewish opponents of Christianity would be arguing with Christians over how Jesus' tomb became empty if the body was moved to a second tomb and was still there. If he's going to speculate that the Jewish opponents didn't know about the second tomb and accepted what the Christians told them, then that sort of appeal to apathy or forgetfulness isn't consistent with his claim that his theories create "no problem at all". The notion that the Jewish opponents overlooked or forgot a burial scenario favorable to their cause, then accepted a different account favorable to Christianity while not even mentioning the former scenario, is dubious.

He proposes circumstances in which somebody other than Jesus might have been mistaken for Jesus risen from the dead (228-230). But he doesn't address the unlikelihood that such a scenario would happen so many times. And he doesn't address the details of the gospel accounts that make such a mistaken identity unlikely (how close the witnesses were to Jesus, the nature of the conversations they had with Him, etc.).

He claims that the gospels create "suspicion" when they tell us that the risen Jesus sometimes wasn't recognized (229). But two of the four passages he cites not only aren't suspicious, but even work against Price's theory. Why is it suspicious for a person to not immediately recognize somebody who had been standing behind her, a person she had assumed was dead (John 20:14-16)? She recognizes Him shortly afterward, and the details of the account make mistaken identity highly unlikely. Similarly, why is it suspicious that Jesus initially wasn't recognized at a distance in

John 21:4? Is a failure to recognize somebody at a distance suspicious? As with the John 20 passage, the details of Jesus' interaction with the disciples in John 21 make mistaken identity highly unlikely. Price also cites Matthew 28:17, but presents no argument that the doubt in that passage is related to mistaken identity. Luke 24:13-35 has the most potential for supporting Price's theory, but he offers no argument for rejecting the explanation the passage itself gives us (Luke 24:16). And, once again, he doesn't address the details of the account that make it unlikely that somebody was mistaken for Jesus. Even if we thought some of the resurrection accounts could reasonably be explained as instances of mistaken identity, how would those cases explain the accounts for which mistaken identity *isn't* a reasonable explanation?

Price casts doubt on the textual reliability of the New Testament by appealing to the possibility of corruption prior to the earliest manuscripts we have. He tells us that "We have no alternative to trying to look for internal clues of redaction" (n. 12 on 399). He's ignoring other lines of evidence we have for the text, such as patristic citations and descriptions and what early non-Christian sources tell us.¹³⁴ We would also consider the circumstances in which the textual corruptions Price is proposing would have occurred. How likely would it be that such corruptions would repeatedly be so widely successful while the original text would repeatedly be lost and would keep going unmentioned in the external sources? Price not only never answers such questions, but never even asks them. He also assumes the textual reliability of the extra-Biblical sources he cites (Josephus, Origen, etc.), even when the evidence we have for those texts is much less than what we have for the New Testament.

Let's look more closely at one of the theories Price defends, the notion that Jesus survived the crucifixion. Remember, he claims that such theories have "not the least improbability" (222) and cause "no problem at all" (232). He says there's "no need to posit special circumstances or to multiply hypotheses" (232).

I'll begin with some Pauline evidence that Price ignores. In a creed that scholars commonly date less than a decade after Jesus' death, which Paul refers to as something he received and passed on to others, the death of Jesus is mentioned (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). Paul includes that death as one of the core beliefs of the early church, something widely agreed upon (1 Corinthians 15:11). Those who agreed with his gospel message included Jesus' disciples and members of His immediate family (1 Corinthians 1:12-13, 9:5, 15:5, 15:7, Galatians 2:7-9). Paul defines Jesus' death as one that occurred by crucifixion (Philippians 2:8). The death of the Christian's old life is likened to crucifixion (Romans 6:6-8, Galatians 2:20, 5:24, 6:14), implying that crucifixion brought about death in Jesus' case as well. Jesus' crucifixion is contrasted to His living (2 Corinthians 13:4), suggesting again that He died on the cross. Paul even refers to the cross as so central to the gospel he was proclaiming that it could

¹³⁴ See Triablogue's collection of articles on textual issues at <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/03/reliability-of-new-testament-text.html>. The articles linked there include a three-part series I wrote about evidence for the text prior to our earliest manuscripts.

summarize the whole message (1 Corinthians 2:2, Galatians 6:14). He sometimes refers to the crucifixion as a core element of the gospel (1 Corinthians 2:2) and sometimes refers to Jesus' death as a core element (1 Corinthians 15:3), suggesting that the death was perceived as having occurred on the cross. And he explains that the early Christians recognized that the gospel message he was proclaiming was the same faith that Christians held prior to his conversion (Galatians 1:23). Thus, the concept of Jesus' death on the cross seems to have been a widely held Christian belief, one considered fundamentally important, even prior to the time when Saul of Tarsus converted.

Yet, Price speculates that the gospels initially taught that Jesus survived crucifixion, only to be redacted later (223). If Paul converted roughly around 35 A.D., then does Price want to argue that the original gospels were written prior to that time? If they were, and they taught Jesus' survival of crucifixion, then why is that teaching not only absent from Paul and other early Christian sources, but even explicitly and widely contradicted by them, with no indication that individuals like Paul needed to interact with such a view?

If Price is going to argue that the Pauline letters were written after the original gospels, that the historical claims they make are as radically false as his Swoon Theory explanation of the gospels would require, etc., then those arguments would need to be supported. And he'd need to explain the significance of combining a high view of the gospels with a low view of the Pauline letters. As I've explained above, the view of the gospels that he's granting for the sake of argument isn't particularly high to begin with. If he's adding a radically liberal view of the Pauline letters, then his argument becomes even more insignificant. The opening of his chapter, in which he suggests that he's granting something close to an Evangelical view of the evidence surrounding the resurrection, becomes even more misleading.

What about Acts? Is Price granting a high view of its historicity? If so, then he needs to address its claims relevant to the resurrection. That includes what Acts says about Paul. If he's not granting a high view of Acts, then he should explain why. Why grant a high view of Luke's gospel, but not a sequel written by the same author? And what significance is there in granting a supposedly high view of the gospels while treating documents like Acts and Paul's letters much differently? Evangelicals don't limit their argument for the resurrection to the gospels. And Price allows himself to dismiss even some of the gospel evidence. He's presenting alternatives to the resurrection based on a portion of one category of evidence cited by Evangelicals (the gospels). That can't prove much. And his handling of that one portion of the evidence is unconvincing as far as it goes.

If the belief that Jesus survived the crucifixion was so popular that it was taught in the original gospels, then where's the evidence of its existence shortly after that time? Why do later New Testament authors and early patristic sources, like Clement of Rome and Polycarp, show no awareness of such a view that needs to be countered? Why would early Jewish and Gentile non-Christian sources, like Josephus, Ta-

citous, and Justin Martyr's Jewish opponents, go along with the Christian belief in Jesus' death on the cross? Where's the manuscript evidence, or even descriptions of such manuscripts in ancient sources, supporting Price's theory? Keep in mind that he's suggesting that multiple documents, and ones as influential as the gospels, initially taught Jesus' survival of the crucifixion. Why would such a late, widespread, and influential teaching of the concept leave so few traces in the historical record? Why would Price only be able to find it by means of such a speculative reading of a handful of passages? If the early Christians initially proclaimed Jesus' survival of the crucifixion, then the issue isn't just whether later sources (later New Testament authors, non-Christian historians, church fathers, etc.) had access to records of the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion. Rather, it's also a matter of whether they knew what Christians were proclaiming around the world in the years that followed the crucifixion of Jesus. How did so much early Christian teaching leave so little trace in the historical record, only to be so quickly and widely replaced by a contradictory claim? Just how dishonest, and how effective at lying, would the early Christians have to be under Price's scenario, and how incompetent would Christianity's enemies have to be?

Then there's the general unlikelihood that a person would survive crucifixion. Price speculates that Jesus was drugged in some way that helped Him survive (223), but he ignores some of the most significant obstacles to such a scenario. He doesn't tell us what sort of drug available in Jesus' day, capable of being administered in the way Price suggests (he cites Mark 15:36-37 on page 223), would produce the effect in question. He doesn't explain how such a drugging of Jesus would have convinced the Roman soldiers and onlooking Jewish enemies that Jesus was dead, given that there were multiple signs of death they could have expected and looked for. If there were drugs in Jesus' day that could have produced the effect needed, then wouldn't the Romans likely know about it and make more of an effort, accordingly, to be sure that those they wanted to execute were dead? If Price is going to speculate that one or more associates of Jesus knew of such a drug, but the Romans and the Jewish opponents of Jesus who had so much social status and who had such an interest in countering the effects of such a drug were ignorant of it, then he's proposing yet another unlikely scenario. And what about the spear thrust (John 19:34), which is fatal to Price's theory? He dismisses the account as unreliable (225). Yet, he had told us that he was going to assume such a high view of the historicity of the gospels.

To explain how Jesus got out of the tomb, he writes:

Maybe they [the guards at the tomb who found Jesus alive after He survived the crucifixion] would have fled as Mark's women did, victim to superstitious fear. Or maybe they would have helped the "broken man" to safety. (226)

If Jesus was in such a weakened state, and it was known that a drug was available to allow somebody to survive crucifixion, why would multiple Roman guards run away from one such weakened individual whose corpse they were required to guard? And did the women in Mark 16 simply flee out of superstition? No, they stayed long

enough to listen to the young man they met there. They fled only after he told them to go and deliver a message to the disciples. We aren't told what caused them to be afraid. We don't know that merely meeting the young man in the tomb was causing them to flee in fear. Why should we think that multiple armed Roman guards wouldn't stay long enough to subdue Jesus in some way, even by closing Him up in the tomb while one or more of them went away to get counsel from the authorities about how to proceed?

The idea that the Roman guards "helped the 'broken man' to safety" is likewise absurd. They knew the history of the man in question. He was a criminal who was supposed to be dead, on order of the Roman authorities. The guards were required to prevent the loss of the corpse. In that situation, they probably aren't going to let Him go away, out of their presence, "to safety".

Then Price wants us to think that the weakened Jesus "waited a while, till he was better and stronger, to make grandiose pronouncements" (222). But the gospels, Acts, and 1 Corinthians 15 have Jesus traveling and visiting with His disciples, making "grandiose pronouncements", and leaving earth shortly after the crucifixion. Where's Price's argument that Jesus had sufficient time to heal? Note, for example, the high claims Jesus makes about His identity as the Messiah and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in Luke 24 (including "entering into His glory" in verse 26) so shortly after the crucifixion. What about the high claims Jesus makes in John 20:17, another passage about what happened shortly after the crucifixion? Price can say that he isn't assuming the historicity of such passages. But on pages 222-223, he claims to be explaining the "grandiose pronouncements" Jesus made after the crucifixion, and he attempts to explain Matthew 28:18. Why would he try to explain that passage in Matthew, but not the others in Luke and John? If he's saying that he's granting such statements by Jesus or the essence of the statements, but not their timing, then where's his explanation of and argument for that distinction (granting the statements or their essence, but not the timing)?

There's a lot that's ambiguous in Price's argument. And it seems likely that he wanted it that way, allowing himself a lot of potential for revision. But his argument is highly problematic even where he isn't ambiguous. And although ambiguity isn't always inappropriate, Price's ambiguity doesn't sit well with the confidence he exudes in other places. Remember, he claims that the theories he's defending don't have "the least improbability", cause "no problem at all", etc.

Is it any wonder that the vast majority of even liberal scholars reject theories like Price's? The problem isn't just that his speculative reconstructions are so unlikely. He doesn't even address some of the most significant evidence, and what he does address is treated so incompetently. Yet, we're told that his theories have "not the least improbability" and cause "no problem at all". He says there's "no need to posit special circumstances or to multiply hypotheses". Meanwhile, editor John Loftus and "peer reviewer" (9) Richard Carrier invite him to write such a chapter in the first place and decide to keep it in the book as is. At his blog, Carrier claims that Price

demonstrates "perfectly reasonable natural possibilities that can't be ruled out...I was actually quite impressed with how easily and deftly he defends here the swoon and mistaken identity theories, even using the Gospels as proof texts....He merely shows that even if you *do* think that [a high view of the gospels' historicity is correct], a miraculous resurrection isn't even the most plausible account of what the Gospels themselves report."¹³⁵ Likewise, Matt McCormick recommends Price's chapter to his readers (214). Price's piece doesn't just reflect poorly on him. It also reflects poorly on people like Loftus, Carrier, and McCormick. It tells you something about their standards.

Remember, some of these men have a doctorate in a relevant field. Some have taught at the university level for years. They've had many years to research Christianity and refine their arguments against it. They had a long time to prepare TEC for publication. And what they produced is material like Price's wreck of a chapter. It's fitting that his chapter features a vulgar cartoon (221), since his chapter is so vulgar and cartoonish.

¹³⁵ <http://richardcarrier.blogspot.com/2011/07/end-of-christianity.html>

Chapter 10

Steve Hays

The whole case comes down to an emotional case rather than a rational one. So intolerable, so disagreeable...that we are doomed to death...playing on the heartstrings, playing on the emotions. It's not nice to think that we're all going to die. Not nice to think everything is meaningless.¹³⁶

—Richard Dawkins

I) In chapter 10, Keith Parsons levels the niceness objection against hell. According to Parsons, hell doesn't exist because hell isn't nice. God doesn't exist because God isn't nice.

Hector Avalos and Jaco Gericke also deploy the niceness objection against God's existence.

But even if, for the sake of argument, we were to accept Parsons' characterization, how does that disprove God or hell? What if God isn't nice? Does Parsons think only nice people exist? Only nice things exist?

II) Another fundamental problem with his attack on hell is methodological. He needs to distinguish which theological tradition he's attacking. For different theological traditions have different sources of doctrine.

If, for instance, he's attacking the Protestant doctrine of hell, then he needs to identify what passages of Scripture teach hell, and he needs to exegete his prooftexts.

But that's not what he does. What he does, instead, is to:

1) Quote some passages of Scripture, which he doesn't bother to exegete. He simply takes his interpretation for granted, then builds on that presumptive interpretation.

2) Quote some Christian writers at random, from different times in church history, then attack hell by attacking their conception of hell.

III) Parsons says

Did Augustine, Aquinas, Edwards, and all the other eminently rational teachers and thinkers quoted earlier really not mean it when they spoke of the tortures of hell? (246).

¹³⁶ <http://richarddawkins.net/videos/550270-debate-does-the-universe-have-a-purpose>

But from a Protestant perspective, that's a red herring. It doesn't matter what they thought. They have no independent knowledge of hell. Rather, they are dependent on revelation. Describing their personal beliefs has no bearing on the truth or falsity of hell. What matters is the basis of their belief. Their source of information. Is their belief grounded in Biblical revelation?

IV) Parsons says

The point is that we must be quite clear on what the traditional doctrine of hell really is, so that when we criticize it harshly, it will be clear that we are not attacking a straw man (234).

But attacking the "traditional" doctrine of hell is only germane if tradition is the yardstick, or tradition lines up with revelation. If he's attacking the Protestant doctrine of hell, then tradition is secondary. He can target tradition all day long, but miss the real target.

V) Parsons quotes four passages of Scripture (Mk 9:47-48; Lk 16:22-24; Rev 20:10,15).

The only common denominator of these four passages is the fiery imagery. Apparently, the fiery imagery is the entire basis for his claim that hell is "torture." That's the premise on which he predicates his case against hell. Hellfire is torture, therefore hell is wrong. But if his interpretation is wrong, then the bottom falls out of his entire case.

VI) Parsons says

In Revelation, chapter 20, when it says the damned will be cast into a lake of fire, it really seems to mean a literal lake of fire, not, say, that they will suffer the metaphorical burning of an eternally guilty conscience or something like that (246).

And that's it! He doesn't bother to argue for his interpretation. Rather, he stipulates that his interpretation is self-evidently correct. Yet commentators typically think Revelation is loaded with pictographic or ideographic symbols. The Apocalypse eclectically recycles and remixes stock imagery from the OT.

One of Parsons problems is that he seems to operate with a Sunday School grasp of Scripture and theology. Inside the body of a middle-aged philosopher is a scared little boy squirming in the pew of a Southern Presbyterian church.

VII) Let's go back to his Lukan proof-text (Lk 16:22-24).

1) The story uses parabolic imagery

2) Note the natural link between fire, heat, and thirst. These are metaphors that naturally go together. And they recur throughout the Bible.

That's because the Bible is situated in a hot, dry climate. A "thirsty land," in the Bible's memorable personification. A land liable to drought and dehydration.

Literal thirst gives rise to figurative thirst. Your physical environment generates corresponding metaphors.

It's not coincidental that figures of eschatological judgment depict God drying up rivers and streams. Especially in the Mideast, these were sources of freshwater and drinking water.

Or take the lake of fire in Revelation. A lake is normally a freshwater body. Consider the "Sea" of Galilee, the Nile, and the Jordan River.

Fish, game, livestock, and farmland, as well as edible wild vegetation, were dependent on lakes, rivers and streams. Conversely, figures of eschatological salvation depict God turning the desert into an oasis.

*I will open rivers on the bare heights,
and fountains in the midst of the valleys.
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,
and the dry land springs of water.
(Isa 41:18)*

*For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
(Isa 44:3a)*

The relationship between fire and water is paradoxical. We normally think of water dousing fire. But fire is a drying agent. Eschatological fire can evaporate bodies of water. Fire represents searing heat (among other things).

So the metaphor of fire is likely associated with the related metaphor of thirst, viz.

*As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
(Ps 42:1-2)*

*O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;*

*my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
(Ps 63:1)*

*My soul thirsts for you like a parched land.
(Ps 143:6b)*

*Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.
(Jn 4:14)*

Unquenchable fire signifies unquenchable thirst. And these, in turn, are figures of yearning. The damned forever long for what they shall never have. Dying of thirst, but cursed with immortality.

In Revelation, the counterpart to the lake of fire is the river of life. These are mutually defining metaphors:

*They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."
(Rev 7:16-17)*

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city

*And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.
(Rev 22:1-2,17; cf. Isa 55:1-3; Ezk 47:1-12)*

But unrequited longing is very different from "torture." Yet Parsons' whole case against hell is directed at everlasting "torture."

VIII) Parsons (quoting Carrier) says

The severity of a crime is measured by the amount of harm it does, and surely being infinite and omnipotent God can't be harmed, even in principle (403n12).

1) That fails to distinguish between harming someone and wronging someone. It's possible to wrong someone without harming them.

i) Suppose I had good parents. Suppose I libel them after they're dead. My libel can't harm them, yet I'm wronging them all the same. In a sense, it's worse because I wait until they can't defend their reputation.

ii) Once again, suppose I have good parents. I owe them love and gratitude. I can wrong them by failing in my filial duties even if my failure doesn't harm them in any appreciable way. They deserve better from me, even if they don't need my love and gratitude.

IX) Parsons says

The Catholic Encyclopedia's author seems to hold the oddly medieval view that the wickedness of an action is proportional to the degree of authority of the person offended (241).

1) And how is that germane to the Protestant doctrine of hell?

2) At the same time, there is a grain of truth to this depiction, even if it's misstated. Our degree of guilt is proportional to our degree of obligation, and we have higher obligations for some people than others. In general, we have higher obligations to parents or close friends than a perfect stranger. We are indebted to them in complex ways.

X) Parsons says

How exactly are we to understand that the world created by an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being would be one in which billions of sentient creatures are doomed to eternal torment...Were there no alternatives to such a scheme that would involve no or less torture? Was every alternative somehow (and it is hard to see how) even worse? (238).

Waiving his tendentious characterization of "torture," the question is simplistic. Better for whom? Worse for whom?

There are alternatives, but the alternatives have tradeoffs. For instance, a sinless world would be more pleasant to inhabit. However, the inhabitants of a sinless world are not the same set of inhabitants as the inhabitants of a sinful world. Sons can't preexist fathers. Grandsons can't preexist grandfathers. You can't just shuffle folks around the timeline like interchangeable parts.

The sinful inhabitants of a sinful world don't exist in a sinless world. So is that better or worse? Is it better for them not to exist at all, than exist as sinners in a sinful world?

Parsons is a sinner, yet he seems to think his existence is worthwhile. After all, he hasn't committed suicide.

Suppose for every person who goes to hell, another goes to heaven. How does the fate of the damned automatically outweigh the bliss of the saints?

Which is better: that good never be exemplified if evil is ever exemplified, or that evil be offset by good? Why does the tradeoff only work one way? Should the good be disallowed for fear of allowing any incidental evil?

Why deny the saints the goodness of a beatific existence just because the damned are justly doomed to hell? Why should the damned spoil it for everyone else?

Although the damned would be better off had they never been born, the saints would be worse off had they never been born.

XI) Parsons says (quoting Darwin)

I can hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother, and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished (233).

Several issues:

1) That's a classic example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. As one writer explains:

A self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true.¹³⁷

He knew that despite the comparative liquidity of the bank's assets, a rumor of insolvency, once believed by enough depositors, would result in the insolvency of the bank...The stable financial structure of the bank had depended upon one set of definitions of the situation...Once depositors had defined the situation otherwise...the consequences of this unreal definition became real enough.¹³⁸

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

¹³⁷ R. Merton: *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Simon & Schuster 1968), 477.

¹³⁸ Ibid. 476. Another example is the suggestive power of a horoscope for those who take astrology seriously.

And I think that philosophical distinction dovetails with certain theological distinctions as well. In Calvinism, regeneration is causally prior to faith.¹³⁹ It causes a predisposition to exercise saving faith. Conversely, sin, in the elect or regenerate, can also result in false beliefs or impede the formation of true beliefs.

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

I don't assume that a Christian's loved one is damned if she happened to die before exercising explicit or occurrent faith in Christ. Regeneration is the seed of faith. Regeneration is the seed while faith is the flower. In principle, there can be a gestation period. Regeneration creates a predisposition to exercise faith in Christ, but other conditions must also be met. These are ordinarily coordinated, but there can be exceptions. In principle the regenerate might die before hearing the gospel. Or the regenerate might die before arriving at the age of discretion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

XII) Parsons says

God, in creating the world, would know that billions upon billions of human beings will wind up in hell, yet this is the world he chose to create. Indeed, do

¹³⁹ For an exegetical defense, cf. M. Barrett, "Does Regeneration Precede Faith in 1 John?"; <http://blogmatics.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/does-regeneration-precede-faith-in-1-john-by-matthew-barrett-ets-paper-nov-2010.pdf>

we not have to say that many billions of people were created so that they might be damned? (238).

- 1) It's true that God foresaw the outcome. By the same token, whatever God does, God intends to do.
- 2) The Bible doesn't say what percentage of humanity is damned.
- 3) To say they were created so that they might be damned is simplistic. They were made with that outcome in mind. But that doesn't mean they were created for that purpose—or solely for that purpose.

For instance, if I tank up my car, I do so knowing I'll run low on gas after driving a certain number of miles—after which I'll need to repeat the process. That doesn't mean I fill the tank so that I will run low on gas, even though that's the eventual outcome. Rather, I tank up for what I wish to do in-between trips to the gas station.

- 4) Apropos (3), the damnation of the lost may serve a morally laudable purpose in its own right—which, however, doesn't mean that's the only reason God made them.

XIII) Parsons says

How can even the wickedest of human beings, a Hitler, Stalin or Cheney, say, deserve eternal punishment? We no longer subject even the worst criminals to old-fashioned tortures, so shouldn't we expect God to have made at least as much moral progress as we have? (238).

- 1) This piggybacks on the dubious premise that hell is torturous.
- 2) People can be miserable without undergoing torture. That's another commonplace of human experience, even in the here-and-now.
- 3) There's no reason to assume the damned receive the same punishment. Scripture uses a fortiori arguments regarding degrees of crime and punishment (e.g. Heb 10:29).
- 4) Have we made moral progress in modern jurisprudence? Or do we coddle criminals, in a gross miscarriage of justice?¹⁴⁰

XIV) Parsons says

In what sense, though, could anyone be said to choose to go to hell (238)?

¹⁴⁰ Cf. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/norway/8661444/Norway-killer-could-be-held-in-luxury-prison.html>;
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1986002,00.html>

Although I don't subscribe to the libertarian action theory of Kreeft and Tacelli, Parsons fails to draw an elementary distinction. People often choose self-destructive lifestyles. They dislike the consequences, but they defiantly disregard the long-term consequences for immediate gratification.

XV) Parsons says

How can temporal sin, whether it is stealing pears or genocide, deserve eternal punishment? Isn't there an obvious imbalance between finite wickedness, however malign, and infinite retribution?...Why is everlasting torture a just punishment for sin of limited duration (239)?

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

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

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

4) Why assume guilt is limited to actual wrongdoing rather than counterfactual wrongdoing? Consider all the things we would have done wrong if we thought we could get away with it. That's culpable, too.

5) Although damnation is never-ending, the damned only experience their punishment in finite increments. They remain timebound creatures who experience their punishment a day at a time. So we need to distinguish between the ontology of time and the psychology of time. They don't experience "infinite" punishment. As a practical matter, they only experience finite punishment. The "specious present."

XVI) Parsons says

According to traditional Christian doctrine, hell is full of good people (347).

Assuming (*arguendo*) that this is true, why does Parsons think hell is such a terrible place to spend eternity? Given the company, wouldn't that be a nice place to live? I'm disappointed that Parsons has so little faith in his hellbound compatriots.

XVII) On p247, Parsons rattles off a list of famous atheists. He considers it unjust that they'd be consigned to hell.

- 1) His list reflects the cult of celebrity. Do you get a special discount just because you're hip and cool and famous to boot?
- 2) From what I know about their private lives, some of the luminaries on his list were hardly paragons of virtue.
- 3) Sinners like to sin. In hell, sinners can sin to their heart's content. How does God wrong the damned by abandoning the damned to their favorite pursuit?

XVIII) Parsons says:

Indeed, when you consider that different churches and denominations have very different lists of beliefs required for salvation, it surprises me that any Christian who takes hell seriously can sleep well at night (249).

Which contradicts something Parsons said elsewhere:

I was raised a Presbyterian, not that that made much difference. As one was observed, in the Deep South there was only one Protestant religion, Methodistism. The message was pretty much the same whether you went to your church or a friend's. My best friend was a Baptist, and I went to his church a few times. The only difference I could tell was that his preacher was quite a bit louder and the services did not end as promptly as Presbyterians liked. The hymns were pretty much the same, as was the message and the worshippers looked and acted very similar.¹⁴¹

XIX) Parsons says

I have so far not stated what I consider to be the most unreasonable thing about the Christian doctrine of hell, what I call the "doxastic requirements" for salvation...to be spared hell you must believe certain things (249).

Why is that unreasonable? Beliefs can be culpable. Indeed, various contributors to TEC seem to think it's morally wrong to believe the Bible. They think the Bible fosters many immoral beliefs.

But if we have a moral obligation to believe what's true and disbelieve what's false, then why shouldn't our misbeliefs be punishable?

XX) Parsons says

What must you believe to avoid hell? Well, quite a bit, according to the traditional creeds. For instance, the Athanasian Creed begins as follows... (249).

¹⁴¹ <http://secularoutpost.infidels.org/2011/06/religious-reminiscences.html>

The Athanasian creed has no uniform dogmatic status in Christendom. That varies according to the denomination.

XXI) Parsons says

Creeds create a difficult problem: The vast majority of would-be believers cannot even comprehend the recondite metaphysical formulae of many creeds (250).

- 1) There's nothing very recondite about the wording of the Apostles' creed—to take one example.
- 2) Confessional denominations often have a doctrine of implicit faith.
- 3) From a Protestant perspective, what ultimately matters is saving faith as Scripture defines saving faith.
- 4) The “doxastic requirement” is, to some degree, person-variable. That's why Christian teachers are held to a higher standard (Heb 13:17; cf. Lk 12:48).
- 5) There's a moral difference between incomprehension and willful disbelief.

XXII) Parsons says

There are billions of people who have heard the Christian message yet choose to remain Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, pagans... (251).

Yet as a militant atheist, Parsons also regards their alternative religious views as intellectually contemptible. So why is he citing that as a standard of comparison to measure Christian beliefs?

XXIII) Parsons says

When informed that I do not find obvious what he does, Paul would probably take this as evidence of how far I had sunk into reprobation...I'll just say “Nonsense!”

Actually, to judge by all the ignorant, illogical, and emotional objections that Parsons has raised to the Christian faith in different venues, he behaves exactly the way we'd expect someone deep in denial to act. He's a stereotypical apostate, like a grown man who never outgrew his adolescent rebellion against authority figures.

Why is he so riled up over something he doesn't think exists? Does he write indignant essays assailing man-eating trolls?

XXIV) Parsons says

A doctrine that can only frighten people into belief...Without hell to intimidate people into belief (254).

1) The threat of hell isn't designed to scare people into belief. For the threat of hell presupposes belief. The threat of hell would be ineffectual apart from belief.

The threat of hell motivates (some) people to bring their behavior in line with their belief.

2) Needless to say, Christians can also be motivated by hope and gratitude.

XXV) Parsons says

Surely torturers and inquisitors through the centuries justified their own atrocities with reference to hell (254).

Yet secular totalitarian regimes frequently resort to torture. They require no theological motive. To the contrary, they torture believers. So by Parsons' logic, we should eradicate atheism.

Jason Engwer

Keith Parsons thinks that the Hell of Revelation 20 involves "a literal lake of fire" (246). Elsewhere, he presents a list of Biblical passages on Hell that all use fiery imagery (237).

But other depictions of Hell don't involve fire (e.g., Daniel 12:2, Jude 13). Sometimes fiery language is set next to a description of some other type. In Luke 12, Jesus refers to fire in the context of judgment (verse 49), but does so just after using the illustration of flogging (verses 47-48). Later in the gospel of Luke, Jesus provides us with a description of Hell that uses some of the strongest physical language in scripture (16:19-31). Parsons quotes the passage (237). But Jesus provided that description in a context in which the afterlife involved non-physical souls, without any physical bodies. The general resurrection is still in the future. Similarly, Luke 13:28 associates weeping and gnashing of teeth with more spiritual concepts, like shame and loss of relationships, rather than something like physical burning. Parsons doesn't address such indicators that something other than a literal lake of fire is in mind. Nor does he address the diversity of images used by Jesus, including the much milder description of Hell as "few lashes" for some people (Luke 12:48).

He also doesn't address the concept that Hell is self-perpetuating. Wandering stars remain wandering stars forever (Jude 13). People in Hell remain corrupt and continue to sin. Even if the punishment for each sin were temporal, the punishment

would keep going as a result of ongoing sin. The person remains corrupt, as does his behavior.

Regarding the unevangelized and those who have difficulty understanding some of the doctrines of Christianity, Steve Hays has already said much of what I would say. I want to add that Parsons doesn't address the principles laid out in Acts 17:26-27. God would know what's needed for each individual and what each would do under other circumstances.

I disagree with Parsons' use of Matthew 7:13-14 (248). The passage is addressing the situation in Jesus' day, and how applicable it is to later generations has to be argued on other grounds.¹⁴² Even in Jesus' day, who's being addressed? Most likely those who are held responsible for making the sort of decisions Jesus is referring to, not everybody. Most likely, some large groups, like young children, wouldn't be included.

That's why Matthew's gospel goes on to refer to how positively Jesus responded to children (19:13-15), a stark contrast to His interactions with, say, the Pharisees. That sort of portrayal of God's view of children was widespread in the earliest generations of Christianity.¹⁴³ There seems to have been a belief that young children were sinners in one sense, but innocent in another sense and the recipients of God's generosity in salvation if they died in infancy.

The percentage of people who go to Hell depends on factors like what we believe about when life begins and infant salvation. I hold that life begins at conception, and I believe in universal infant salvation, so views like those significantly affect my perspective on what percentage of the population seems likely to go to Hell. The same can be said of other factors involved. Citing a passage like Matthew 7:13-14 doesn't do much to answer the question.

Something that struck me as I read Parsons' chapter, and I noticed it with so much of the book, is how often he assumes the textual reliability of the documents he cites from earlier centuries. While Parsons keeps telling us what Tertullian believed (234-235), what Augustine wrote (237), etc., other contributors to TEC are more pessimistic about New Testament documents for which we have better textual evidence. Contrast Parsons' use of ancient documents to the textual skepticism that Hector Avalos and Robert Price apply to the New Testament.

¹⁴² See the discussion of Matthew 7 and related issues at <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/10/are-there-few-that-be-saved.html>.

¹⁴³ The Epistle Of Barnabas (6), Aristides (Apology, 15), Hermas (The Shepherd, Similitude 9:29-31), possibly Justin Martyr (First Apology, 18), Athenagoras (On the Resurrection Of The Dead, 14), Irenaeus (Against Heresies, 4:28:3), Tertullian (A Treatise On The Soul, 56)

I. Eller says

Science is led to naturalism/materialism by its commitment to detectability, since the natural/material realm is so far the only realm that is reliably detectable, especially as evidence for anything in particular. Finally, based on the commitment to detectability, there is no evidence that there is any realm other than the natural/material realm; any supernatural or immaterial reality is so far, in principle and in practice, undetectable, and therefore we have no scientific reason to claim that it even exists (265).

- 1) That's not an argument. All he's doing is to assert the viewpoint of atheism.
- 2) He completely disregards the counterevidence. For instance, Roger Penrose, one of the top minds in modern physics, has argued for the existence of abstract objects.¹⁴⁴ You also have a posteriori theistic proofs.¹⁴⁵
- 3) He offers no supporting argument to justify his contention that the supernatural is undetectable in principle. In fact, this claim contradicts his later statement about miracles (275) and agents (277).

Supernatural beings are personal agents. They exercise rational discretion. As such, supernatural agency is detectable in principle, for the same reason that personal agency is detectable in principle. Take the sentences that comprise Eller's chapter. For the letters to occur in that particular sequence, to form a series of meaningful, consecutive sentences, is a mark of personal agency. We rightly infer a mind behind the order of the letters.

II. Eller also has a habit of personifying "Christianity." On p273, for instance, he attributes geocentrism to "Christianity."

But it would be more accurate to attribute this position to Medieval churchmen, or certain church fathers.

One might as well say "science" taught geocentrism, preformationism, spontaneous generation, or Phlogiston theory.

III. Eller says

¹⁴⁴ R. Penrose, *The Road to Reality* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), chap. 1.

¹⁴⁵ E.g. *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell 2009).

Contrary to science, which values reproducibility and the openness of knowledge, religion often stakes its claims on the unreproducible and unverifiable experiences of “adepts” who have access to knowledge others do not. Even rank-and-file members advance their personal and interior experiences or “feelings” as evidence of and/or source of their beliefs (275).

1) That’s one line of evidence. But Christianity appeals to public lines of evidence as well, such as the argument from prophecy or miracles.

2) But even on its own terms, so what? What’s wrong with the argument from religious experience? Sure, that’s unconvincing to an outsider, but that’s true of personal, first-person experience generally. You’re an outsider to my experience while I’m an outsider to your experience. Yet first-person experience is our only port of entry to the external world. So you can hardly discount all such claims without retreating into solipsism.

And the fact that it’s unconvincing to an outsider doesn’t mean you can’t have a veridical experience. It just means your first-person experience is inherently intransitive.

The argument from religious experience is just a special case of the argument from experience in general. Unless Eller’s prepared to say personal experience is inherently suspect, that personal experience can’t be relied upon to access reality—a denial that reduces scientists to windowless monads. A decidedly counterproductive way to defend science.

My experience needn’t count as evidence for what you ought to believe. But it can still count as evidence for what I ought to believe. It may not be a good reason for you, if you aren’t party to the experience, but it may be a perfectly good reason for the subject of the experience.

IV) Eller says

While the term miracle has a specifically Judeo-Christian pedigree, all religions share the notion that the world is not entirely regular but that the putative spiritual beings may intervene in it at any time and change things (275).

i) Of course, a scientist is not merely a passive observer of the natural order. Scientists often intervene in nature. They perform experiments. Likewise, technology frequently impedes or redirects the course of nature.

So scientists are analogous to spiritual or supernatural beings. Scientists are goal-oriented. They may intervene at any time to change the outcome. To change what would otherwise occur if natural forces or natural cycles were allowed to run their

course. Likewise, spiritual or supernatural agents may intervene at any time to alter what would otherwise occur if nature were left to her own devices.

If that's unscientific, then science is unscientific. Eller might as well say a scientist is unscientific when he inserts himself into the causal continuum, thereby deregulating the regularity of the natural process. Eller's "scientific" strictures render science impossible.

ii) In addition, Eller's interventionist model is questionable, especially in reference to God. Strictly speaking, God doesn't change anything. Whatever happens will happen according to God's plan—miracles and all.

Likewise, God doesn't literally intervene. God interacts with the world, not by acting in the world, but by enacting the world. Everything that happens, including miracles, theophanies, and even the Incarnation, happens because that was included in God's master plan for the world. He instantiated his complete concept.

V) Eller says

First, nonhuman/superhuman agents and their minds or wills or intentions are always arranged in practice so as to be impossible to detect in principal [sic], and so they violate the first and most basic premise of science. Even religious believers admit that their alleged beings are inscrutable, "work in mysterious ways," and are "unknowable" (277).

1) That's a wild overstatement. One of Eller's problems is that, as a cultural anthropologist, he's attempting to make cross-cultural statements about religion in general. But every religion is not the same.

2) Apropos (2), although apophaticism is an element in Christian theology, it's a reckless overstatement to treat Christian theology, per se, as apophatic. At best that only applies to certain traditions.

From an evangelical standpoint, God is not systematically inscrutable or unknowable. His actions are not "always arranged in practice so as to be impossible to detect in principle."

Take the sign of the sundial (2 Kgs 20:8-11; Isa 38:7-8). That was specifically arranged in practice to be detectable in principle.

Of course, Eller doesn't believe things like that happen, but for now I'm illustrating how he misrepresents the position he presumes to critique.

VI) Eller says

And every “evidence” of their existence or action can be explained—and can be explained better—in nonsupernatural ways (277).

Eller seems to forget his burden of proof. In contributing to a book that aims to disprove Christianity, Eller assumes a burden of proof. All he’s done here is to beg the question.

Perhaps he’s too used to addressing a sympathetic audience. But he needs to actually argue for his conclusions.

VII) Eller says

Second, the entire project of science depends on the regularity and predictability of nature, and supernatural agency makes nature irregular and unpredictable...This precludes the possibility of ever knowing with any degree of confidence what will happen next or what connects to what (277).

1) To begin with, detectability and predictability are two very different things. Even if (arguendo) agents are unpredictable, that hardly renders them undetectable. Their past actions can be detectable even if (arguendo) their future actions are unpredictable.

2) As far as predictability is concerned, superhuman agency isn’t essentially different than human agency. Human agents intervene in nature every moment of every day all around the world. We also program machines that automatically intervene in nature while we sleep. Even when we’re too preoccupied to interfere with nature, our machines do it for us.

Does constant human meddling render the natural world so unpredictable that we can’t do science?

3) Moreover, even if supernatural agency limits the predictability of nature, so what? Science must come to terms with reality on reality’s terms. If that places some limitations on scientific knowledge, so be it. Scientists didn’t design the natural world. It is what it is.

4) Eller fails to appreciate the theistic underpinnings of natural laws. These are founded on divine providence, without which scientific induction is groundless.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Cf. A. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (Oxford 2011), 271-83.

VIII) Eller says

Religion functions on the personal premises that some or all facts and events are the results of the motives of (supernatural) agents. Science functions on the impersonal premises that facts and events are the effects of antecedent and nonagentive—and therefore knowable—causes (278).

Of course, this is just code language for methodological naturalism. But that's subject to several basic objections:

1) Science is supposed to be a descriptive discipline. A scientist doesn't know, before he conducts his investigations, what the world is like. He doesn't know ahead of time what's possible. That's something he must discover.

By contrast, methodological naturalism is a prescriptive principle. Applied to science, it prejudges what the scientist is allowed to regard as possible or actual. It superimposes a filter on the scientific evidence, screening out any evidence which is at variance with methodological naturalism.

Methodological naturalism dictates a foregone conclusion. Before the scientist peers into the telescope or microscope, methodological naturalism tells the scientist what he's permitted to see. Methodological naturalism prescribes in advance of the evidence what can or cannot count as evidence.

2) Suppose a supernaturalistic explanation happens to be the correct explanation? In that event, a precommitment to methodological naturalism automatically disallows the correct explanation. What's the value of a "scientific" method that forbids you from even considering the true explanation? A "scientific" method that invariably favors one type of explanation over another type even if the favored type of explanation is dead wrong?

3) Methodological naturalism should only be the default position in science if the naturalistic methodology is ratified by metaphysical naturalism. Absent metaphysical naturalism, there is no antecedent presumption in favor of methodological naturalism.

But if you know metaphysical naturalism is true, then methodological naturalism is superfluous. And if you don't know metaphysical naturalism is true, then there's no presumption favoring methodological naturalism. So it loses on both counts.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ For more on methodological naturalism, cf. A. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (Oxford 2011), 168-74.

I'll just add a little to what Steve Hays has said.

Like other contributors to TEC, David Eller dismisses supernatural phenomena in general without much of an argument (265, 277). I would refer readers back to my introduction to TEI for a response, and I'll have more to say on the subject in my review of Victor Stenger's chapter.

Eller says something similar to a ridiculous claim John Loftus had made earlier. According to Loftus, "any god will do" as a creator of the universe (96-97). Similarly, Eller tells us that "any god/spirit/supernatural force" could be cited to explain something like a tsunami (278). What about a supernatural force not powerful enough to cause a tsunami? Or one that wouldn't do anything that brings about such suffering?

Why is it that some of the contributors to TEC want to place all supernatural entities or religions, for example, into the same category in contexts in which it's so obvious that they *don't* belong in the same category? I've just cited examples of Loftus and Eller doing it. They're not alone. Hector Avalos makes the remarkable claim that "nothing" in the Bible is more relevant than "anything" we find in any other ancient text (109).

A more reasonable approach would be to acknowledge that some supernatural entities, religions, etc. are better than others in such contexts. If Christianity is better than another religion in some way, admit it. If one supernatural entity would be better at explaining something than another would be, acknowledge that fact.

I don't know where Eller gets the idea that the designer in intelligent design is "roughly the Christian God" (269). Would intelligent design get you to Trinitarianism? I don't see how. If the rough similarity is vaguer than that, then how does intelligent design get you to roughly the Christian God, as distinguished from others? Some non-Christians are part of the intelligent design movement.

Eller does include an endnote just after his comment. Here's what the endnote says:

The Discovery Institute can be found at <http://www.discovery.org>. (n. 22 on 405)

That does nothing to support his claim. And when we go to that web site, we find examples of non-Christians involved in the intelligent design movement.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ <http://www.discovery.org/a/4306>; <http://www.discovery.org/csc/topQuestions.php>

Eller repeats a common skeptical misrepresentation of Tertullian as anti-intellectual (276). Ken Pulliam misused Tertullian in a similar way earlier in the book (194). I've responded to the abuse of Tertullian in this context elsewhere.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/02/what-does-athens-have-to-do-with.html>

I) Before commenting on some of the specifics, I'll make a few general observations:

1) Carrier likes to pose as a Bayesian probability theorist. However, he was recently outed as an utter hack when it comes to Bayesian probability theory.¹⁵⁰

2) Carrier uses Dembski's *No Free Lunch* as his foil for attacking intelligent design theory. However, that's a dated presentation (10-years-old), which is pitched at a popular level. He completely ignores the more recent, technical papers which Dembski coauthored with Robert Marks and others.¹⁵¹

He also ignores Michael Behe's blog, where Behe responds to critics.¹⁵²

3) He attacks Robin Collins' fine-tuning argument. But there's no indication that he corresponded with Collins. So we don't know if Collins thinks his position was accurately summarized by Carrier, much less how Collins might respond to Carrier's critique.

4) Finally, Carrier has no professional qualifications to evaluate the origin of life or the origin of the universe. He has several degrees in ancient history. Victor Stenger would be the more obvious choice to attempt a critique of the fine-tuning argument.

II) Carrier says

Probability measures frequency...So we're really asking how frequently are things we point to (in all our background knowledge) the product of NID [nonterrestrial intelligent design] (282).

Is probability just a measure of frequency? A royal flush is infrequent, but if the deck is stacked, is the probability of a royal flush still a measure of frequency?

III) Carrier says

Bacteria exhibit intelligent behavior but are not themselves intelligent; and counting up everything like that, we're adding trillions upon trillions of examples, and things made by blind physical processes, like crystallization or the forming of stars...Not a single case of NID. And countless billions and trillions of cases of not NID....Thus, based on our background knowledge alone,

¹⁵⁰ <http://lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com/2011/01/odds-form-of-bayess-theorem.html>;
<http://lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com/2011/01/odds-form-of-bayess-theorem.html>

¹⁵¹ <http://evoinfo.org/publications/>

¹⁵² <http://behe.uncommondescent.com/>

in other words, before we consider any as-yet-only-alleged cases of NID, the frequency of NID is practically infinitesimal (282).

But that begs the question. A robot exhibits intelligent behavior but is not itself intelligent. Would we therefore classify robots as cases of non-intelligent design, which lower the prior probability of intelligently designed things?

Actually, a hallmark of intelligent design is to design unintelligent things that exhibit intelligent behavior—like robots! It takes high intelligence to design something which doesn't know what it's doing, but can still perform a complicated task.

At most, Carrier can only classify most cases as neutral. Consistently with either intelligent design or the lack thereof. They don't create a presumption one way or the other.

IV) Carrier says

Think of getting an amazing hand at poker; whether the hand was rigged or if you just got lucky, the evidence is identical. So the mere fact that an amazing hand at poker is extremely improbable is not evidence of cheating. Thus "it's improbable" is simply not a valid argument for design (293).

And what if you get three or four or five amazing hands in a row? Or what if you always get amazing hands just when you happen to need amazing hands to win?

Perhaps Carrier should test his theory at a casino. I suspect he'd find himself in the trunk of a company car—on the way to a remote location.

V) Carrier has a section on philosophy of mind. He rattles off conventional objections to dualism, as if dualists don't have answers to those objections or their own objections to physicalism.¹⁵³

Now, I'll be the first to admit that Richard Carrier's mind doesn't operate as if it was intelligently designed. And if the world were exclusively populated by human beings who reason at the level of Loftus, Avalos, Parsons, Price, Carrier et al., it would be a tall order to attribute intelligent design to their cogitations. But, thankfully, the noetic effects of sin can account for that phenomenon.

VI) Carrier says

...including logic and mathematics, which are just languages, with words and rules like any other language (301).

¹⁵³ E.g. M. Beauregard & D. O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain* (HarperOne 2007); R. Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion* (Coronet 2012), chaps. 7-8.

Does he mean modus ponens is just a matter of social convention? Are mathematical relations just a matter of social convention too? Isn't that self-defeating?

VII) Carrier says

Thus neither was the universe designed to be easily understood nor were we well designed to understand it...Given these facts...NID is actually improbable (301-02).

So if my cat can't tell time by a digital clock, then it's improbable that the clock was intelligently designed. After all, cats weren't well-designed to understand clocks, while clocks weren't designed to be easily understood by cats.

Carrier lives in such a topsy-turvy mental world. Take the science-fiction theme of a flying saucer that crash-lands. Human scientists study it, but because the technology is so advanced, they can't figure it out.

If the universe is hard for humans to figure out, isn't that just what we'd expect if it was engineered by superhuman intelligence? The work of a vastly superior mind?

There's also a difference between understanding how to operate something, and understanding what makes it work. Another hallmark of intelligent design is to engineer something which someone can operate even if he doesn't know what makes it work. If anything, it takes more intelligence to design something useable for someone less intelligent. It's relatively easy to design something that other smart folks can use: harder to design something that even simpletons can use.

VIII. Carrier says

God could easily have made the world far more intelligible by making the world itself simpler...or [giving us] brains capable of far more rapid and complex learning and computation, etc... (302)

Of course, that entails tradeoffs. Would a simpler universe be habitable?

Likewise, what's involved in giving us brains that are "far more rapid and complex"? Has Carrier considered what other adjustments would be necessary to accommodate that scenario? Why doesn't Carrier show us the technical schematics for his new improved brain?

IX. Carrier says

This entails it is effectively 100 percent certain an infinite multiverse exists...This further entails we have no need to explain why there is something rather than nothing.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ 409n20.

Several problems:

i) Carrier's assertion that the existence of the multiverse is 100% certain is absurdly hyperbolic. This is, in fact, a deeply controversial theory.¹⁵⁵

ii) Even if we grant the multiverse, Carrier is erecting a false dichotomy between the existence of God and the existence of the multiverse.¹⁵⁶

iii) The multiverse suggests a quasi-idealistic ontology in which observers generate the reality they observe. *Esse is percipi*.¹⁵⁷ That's in tension with the existence of an external, extramental world that's independent of the observer. It's hard to harmonize idealism with scientific realism.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. G. Ellis, "Does the Multiverse Really Exist?"

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=does-the-multiverse-really-exist&print=true>

¹⁵⁶ Cf. J. Zweerink, *Who's Afraid of the Multiverse?* (Reasons To Believe 2008); D. Page, "Does God So Love the Multiverse?" <http://arxiv.org/pdf/0801.0246v5>; "Our Place in a Vast Universe," <http://arxiv.org/pdf/0801.0245v2>

¹⁵⁷ Cf. R. Penrose, *The Road to Reality* (Alfred A. Knopf 2005), 784, 1031.

Chapter 13

Steve Hays

I) In this chapter, Victor Stenger tries to disprove the afterlife by reviewing a book by Dinesh D'Souza. But this effort has no chance of success. D'Souza is just a popularizer. To my knowledge, he's a policy wonk by education and experience. He brings no particular expertise to the subject. And Stenger, as a retired physics prof., brings no particular expertise to the subject.

This doesn't mean we should automatically discount what they say on the subject. We can evaluate their arguments and counterarguments on the merits. But it's ridiculous to think the case for the afterlife rises and falls on a book by a policy wonk. Even if Stenger succeeded in poking holes in D'Souza's book, so what?

II) Stenger says

None of the claimed prophetic revelations of the Bible have been confirmed, and many have been disconfirmed. Independent historical and archeological sources have already established that the most important stories of the Bible are myths (306).

To justify this sweeping claim, Stenger footnotes Paul Tobin and Hector Avalos. It's ironic that Stenger touts rigorous evidentiary standards, then defaults to secondary sources instead of doing his own research on the subject. Not only that, but he only consults one side of the argument.

Because Stenger nurses the self-image of a skeptic, his flattering self-image blinds him to his own credulity and parochialism.

III) Stenger says

Not a single report of communication with the dead has ever been verified (307).

To justify this claim, he footnotes an eight-page discussion in his 1995 book on psychics. There's no evidence that he's kept abreast of the field. In fact, he relies on the work of fellow atheist Paul Kurtz. So this is very ingrown, self-reinforcing "scholarship."

IV) Stenger says

It is a fact that the overwhelming majority of people practice the religion of their family and culture into which they were born. Yet most are sure theirs is the true religion (309).

- 1) He says that's a fact, yet he offers no evidence to back up his claim. The skeptical mystique fosters intellectual sloth.
- 2) To my knowledge, many religions are syncretistic and pluralistic. In addition, orthopraxy often takes precedence over orthodoxy. Christian exclusivism is rather unusual among religions.
- 3) We can also draw geographic and demographic correlations with atheism.

V) Stenger says

While the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish Bible, contains no mention of an afterlife, immortality was adopted into Judaism sometime before the first century BCE...the Persians introduced the notion that the whole person, body and soul, survives death, which view the Jews adopted (310).

He tries to justify this claim by noting Alan Segal's monograph, as well as Carrier's self-published *Not the Impossible Faith*.

Several problems:

- 1) This ignores OT prohibitions against necromancy, which was a common phenomenon in the ANE. It also ignores ANE beliefs regarding the afterlife,¹⁵⁸ as well as OT beliefs regarding the afterlife.¹⁵⁹
- 2) He doesn't even address the late date of Zoroastrian texts.¹⁶⁰
- 3) He equivocates over fundamental differences in how Jews and Zoroastrians viewed survival.
- 4) He ignores critical reviews of Segal's monograph.¹⁶¹
- 5) Unlike Edwin Yamauchi, Richard Carrier can't read the primary source material on Zoroastrianism in the original languages.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. E. Yamauchi, "Life, Death, and the Afterlife in the Ancient Near East," R. Longenecker, ed. *Life in the Face of Death* (Eerdmans 1998), 12-50.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. D. Block, "Beyond the Grave: Ezekiel's Vision of Death and Afterlife," *BBR* 2 (1992), 113-41; http://www.ibr-bbr.org/IBRBulletin/BBR_1992/BBR-1992_08_Block_AfterlifeEzekiel.pdf

¹⁶⁰ Cf. E. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Baker 1990), chap. 12; "Did Persian Zoroastrianism Influence Judaism?," D. Block, ed. *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?* (B&H 2008), 282-97.

¹⁶¹ http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4277_4248.pdf

VI) Stenger says

A huge literature exists claiming scientific evidence for life after death. This literature suffers from all the same problems we find with paranormal studies in general. Much of it is anecdotal and virtually useless scientifically since we have no way of checking the veracity of such testimony. Only carefully controlled experiments that provide risky tests of the hypothesis of life after death will convince the scientific skeptics, and until the skeptics are convinced, the hypothesis will remain unproven (312).

1) Whether or not “skeptics” are convinced is irrelevant to the truth or falsity of a scientific hypothesis. That’s just a question of suitable evidence.

2) It’s not surprising that Stenger is a physicist. As such, he acts as if evidence for the paranormal, or postmortem survival, should operate with the general uniformity and repeatability of natural, impersonal processes.

However, that imposes the criteria from one field of study onto a very different field of study. If there are paranormal phenomena generally, or indications of postmortem survival, that would involve personal agency. That’s not going to operate like the laws of physics, or chemical reactions.

3) Apropos (2), to privilege experimental evidence at the expense of anecdotal evidence would invalidate the study of animal behavior in their natural habitat. To study animals in the wild, rather than the laboratory, would be “unscientific.” Ethnological fieldwork would be “virtually useless.”

4) Reality doesn’t exist for the benefit of the scientist. Science must adapt to the nature of the subject matter.

VII) He has a section on “The Material Brain,” which raises stock objections to dualism, as if proponents of dualism never responded to these objections, or leveled objections to physicalism.¹⁶²

VIII) He cites Susan Blackmore’s case against NDEs while ignoring her critics.¹⁶³ He cites Keith Augustine while ignoring the critical feedback.¹⁶⁴ He cites both Jeffrey Long and Gerald Woerlee in support of his position on NDEs even though they are actually at odds with each other.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Cf. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/>; <http://consc.net/online/1/all>

¹⁶³ Cf. <http://www.skeptiko.com/near-death-experience-skeptic-dr-susan-blackmore-responds-to-critics/>; <http://www.near-death.com/experiences/articles001.html>

¹⁶⁴ http://michaelprescott.typepad.com/michael_prescotts_blog/2006/08/ndes_and_their_.html

¹⁶⁵ <http://www.skeptiko.com/near-death-experience-skeptic-gm-woerlee/>; http://www.skeptiko.com/jeffrey_long_takes_on_critics_of_evidence_of_the_afterlife/

I myself have discussed NDEs elsewhere.¹⁶⁶

IX) He has a section on evolutionary ethics. But the problems with evolutionary ethics are manifold:

1) E. O. Wilson recently disowned his theory of evolutionary altruism.¹⁶⁷

2) Evolutionary ethics commits the naturalistic fallacy.¹⁶⁸

3) Darwinian philosopher Michael Ruse candidly admits that naturalistic evolution entails moral nihilism.¹⁶⁹ So does Richard Dawkins.¹⁷⁰

X) Stenger raises some moralistic objections to Christian ethics (327-28). But he hasn't explained his secular basis for morality. So it's unclear, even in his own terms, how he's in any position to judge Christian morality.

1) Does he believe in objective moral norms? If so, how does his atheism ground intrinsic right or wrong?

2) Even assuming (arguendo), that he can justify objective moral norms, is there a right and wrong way to treat human beings, given his secular physicalism? If a human being is just a perishable organization of matter, thrown together by a mindless, amoral process, then in what sense is it possible to wrong a human being? If you kill a human being, all you've done is to reorganize matter.

XI) Stenger says

You must hate your family to be saved (Lk 14:27).

That's just illiterate:

1) To begin with, "hate" is simply a rhetorical antonym to "love" in Hebraic parallelism.

2) In context, it's talking about situations in which your family threatens to disown you if you become (or remain) a Christian. It's your family that's forcing the issue.

XII) Stenger says

You must not get divorced (Mk 10:1-12).

¹⁶⁶ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/04/evaluating-ndes.html>

¹⁶⁷ <http://discovermagazine.com/2011/jan-feb/03>

¹⁶⁸ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/evol-eth/>

¹⁶⁹ http://www.believmag.com/issues/200307/?read=interview_ruse

¹⁷⁰ <http://www.bethinking.org/science-christianity/beginner/the-john-lennox-richard-dawkins-debate.htm>

1) That's equally illiterate. The Bible often speaks in generalities. That doesn't preclude exceptions.

Scripture specifically permits divorce in case of infidelity or desertion (Mt 5:32; 1 Cor 7:15).

In addition, Biblical ethics doesn't specifically address every conceivable situation. It deals with typical situations. There are many exceptional situations in which mitigating factors may apply.

2) At the same time, a lax divorce policy wreaks social havoc.

XIII) Stenger says

Knowing you are not going to live forever restores a sense of your true place in the scheme of things.

You mean, like this?

For the first half of geological time our ancestors were bacteria. Most creatures still are bacteria, and each one of our trillions of cells is a colony of bacteria.¹⁷¹

Or this:

What are all of us but self-reproducing robots? We have been put together by our genes and what we do is roam the world looking for a way to sustain ourselves and ultimately produce another robot child.¹⁷²

Or this:

We're just a bit of pollution. If you got rid of us, and all the stars and all the galaxies and all the planets and all the aliens and everybody, then the universe would be largely the same. We're completely irrelevant.¹⁷³

XIV) Stenger says

Rather than an afterlife giving your life meaning, you will find more meaning and purpose in this world when you realize it is the only world you have.

Let's consider some atheists who live by that philosophy:

¹⁷¹ <http://richarddawkins.net/quotes/31>

¹⁷² <http://richarddawkins.net/quotes/42>

¹⁷³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/11/magazine/11dark.t.html?pagewanted=print>

That conception, far from offering us a sense of who we are, dissolves any sense of purpose or true nature that we may have begun with. The meaning of organic life vanishes in the meaninglessness of physics, of which it is one peculiar consequence. It is widely thought that, without knowing the details, we now have every reason to believe that life arose from a lifeless universe, in virtue of the basic laws of particle physics or string theory or something of the kind, which did not have life or us 'in mind.'

A genealogy of this kind gives us nothing to live by. As Daniel Dennett says, it is 'universal acid: it eats through just about every traditional concept.' To live, we must fall back on our contingently formed desires, reserving the scientific world picture for intellectual and instrumental purposes. If naturalism means that everything reduces to physics, then there is no naturalistic answer to the cosmic question [i.e. How can one bring into one's individual life a full recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole?].¹⁷⁴

I do not believe my theory differs very much from that of many or most people. There is a sense that my life, actions and consequences of actions amount to nothing when I am considering the value of an infinite universe. Our emotional responses to acts or states of affairs we believe have positive or negative value occur when we are narrowly focused on "the here and now", on the people we interact with or know about, ourselves, and the animals, plants and material things that surround us in our daily lives. In our daily lives, we believe actions are good or bad and that individuals have rights. These beliefs are false, but we know this only on the occasions when we engage in second order beliefs about our everyday beliefs and view our everyday beliefs from the perspective of infinity. Most of the time, we live in an illusion of meaningfulness and only some times, when we are philosophically reflective, are we aware of reality and the meaninglessness of our lives. It seems obvious that this has a genetic basis, due to Darwinian laws of evolution. In order to survive and reproduce, it must seem to us most of the time that our actions are not futile, that people have rights. The rare occasions in which we know the truth about life are genetically prevented from overriding living our daily lives with the illusion that they are meaningful. As I progress through this paper, I have the illusion that my efforts are not utterly futile, but right now, as I stop and reflect, I realize that any further effort put into this paper is a futile expenditure of my energy.¹⁷⁵

At 72, a superstitious Woody Allen is still working hard, but is terrified of the void, the 'meaningless flicker' of life.

¹⁷⁴ T. Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* (Oxford 2010), 16.

¹⁷⁵

http://www.qsmithwmu.com/moral_realism_and_infinte_spacetime_imply_moral_nihilism_by_quent_in_smith.htm

Despite the odd superstition (he also avoids haircuts while shooting a movie), Allen has devoted his career to making films that consistently assert the randomness of life. That they do so in a variety of genres— comedy, drama, suspense, satire, even, once, a musical—only partially obscures the fact that, in Allen's eyes, they're all tragedies, since, as he says, "to live is to suffer." If there were a persistence-of-vision award for life philosophy, Allen would be a shoo-in.

On the surface, his latest film, "Vicky Cristina Barcelona," a breezy romance strewn with picnics in the country and Gaudí architecture and flamenco guitar, would suggest a softening of his world view...But go to meet the director in hopes of a "Tuesdays With Woody"-style affirmation of late-life contentment, and you will be quickly disabused of that illusion. At 72, he says he still lies awake at night, terrified of the void. He cannot reconcile his strident atheism with his superstition about the banana, but he knows why he makes movies: not because he has any grand statement to offer, but simply to take his mind off the existential horror of being alive. Movies are a great diversion, he says, "because it's much more pleasant to be obsessed over how the hero gets out of his predicament than it is over how I get out of mine."

Allen says the indifference of the universe has obsessed him since he was a child. "My mother always said I was a very cheerful kid until I was 5 years old, and then I turned gloomy." He can only attribute that shift to an awareness of death, which he claims to remember from the crib. "Now, maybe I stayed in the crib longer than other kids," he adds, with the well-timed cough of a former stand-up comedian. And there it is, that little spark of wryness, suggesting that the nihilism is just shtik. But it soon becomes apparent that when he says he agrees with Sophocles' suggestion that to never have been born may be the greatest boon, he means it. He is, however, cautious not to infect his loved ones with his pessimism. "I don't prattle on about this at all to my daughters," he says. "I bend over backwards to be very positive and not in any way express this to them."

So why go on? "I can't really come up with a good argument to choose life over death," he says. "Except that I'm too scared." Making films offers no reward beyond distracting him from his plight...When it is suggested that others may get a great deal out of his films—that there are fans for whom an afternoon watching "Love and Death" or "Manhattan" provides solace in the way a Marx Brothers film soothes a depressed character in "Hannah and Her Sisters"—he resists the compliment. "This can happen, and this is a nice thing, but when you leave the theater, you're still going back out into a very cruel world."

As a filmmaker, he knows that audiences need a respite from the darkness of his vision—he wanted to end "Hannah and Her Sisters" with his character alone, having been dumped by Hannah's sister, but thought viewers wouldn't go for such a bleak conclusion. In real life, however, he believes there are no happy endings. "It's like the beginning of 'Stardust Memories.' The trains all go to the same place," he says. (And no, that place is not "jazz heaven," as a character in that film hopes.) "They all go to the dump."

Death may be especially on Allen's mind at the moment—his idol, Ingmar Bergman, died while he was shooting "Vicky Cristina Barcelona," as did director Michelangelo Antonioni. His longtime producer, Charles Joffe, passed away recently as well. "Your perception of time changes as you get older, because you see how brief everything is," he says. "You see how meaningless ... I don't want to depress you, but it's a meaningless little flicker."

It's not that Allen is unable to enjoy himself (though he did want to title "Annie Hall" "Anhedonia," which means the inability to experience pleasure); it's that he's convinced the moments don't add up to redemption. "You have a meal, or you listen to a piece of music, and it's a pleasurable thing," he says. "But it doesn't accrue to anything."¹⁷⁶

Jason Engwer

Victor Stenger begins his chapter with a description of Dinesh D'Souza's background:

Dinesh D'Souza is a well-known right-wing policy analyst and author who recently has taken on the role of Christian apologist. He has a degree in English from Dartmouth. From 1985 to 1987, he was editor of *Policy Review*, a conservative journal published by the Heritage Foundation, now part of the Hoover Institution. He served as a policy adviser to the Reagan administration until 1988 and followed this with stints as a fellow for the American Enterprise Institute and the Hoover Institution. (305)

If Stenger intended to highlight the irrelevance of D'Souza's qualifications to the subject at hand, his effort backfired. Yes, we wouldn't expect D'Souza to know much about the evidence for an afterlife based solely on the qualifications Stenger mentions. But, then, why devote an entire chapter of *TEC* to a response to D'Souza's book? Why not respond to, say, Stephen Braude's book on the subject?¹⁷⁷ Braude's

¹⁷⁶ <http://www.newsweek.com/id/151533/output/print>

¹⁷⁷ *Immortal Remains* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003)

qualifications, as a philosopher and as a paranormal researcher, are far weightier, and his arguments can't be dismissed as easily. Braude isn't a Christian, but D'Souza's case for an afterlife doesn't limit itself to Christian arguments, and Stenger claims to be addressing "arguments for life after death" in general (305). And there are Christian sources available with far better qualifications than D'Souza's, like Gary Habermas. Why focus so much on D'Souza, then?

The Biblical evidence for an afterlife is dismissed (306-307) with references to Paul Tobin's chapter on the Bible and modern scholarship in TCD and Hector Avalos' material in chapter 4 of TEC. I'll dismiss Stenger's citation of Tobin and Avalos by citing our responses to them in TID, TEI, and the Triablogue archives.

And it should be noted that since the issue on the table is evidence for an afterlife, arguments against the Bible in general are inadequate. Many people reject Biblical inerrancy, but think there's good historical evidence for some Biblical miracles relevant to an afterlife, like Jesus' resurrection. Even some non-Christians think Jesus appeared to the resurrection witnesses in some physical or non-physical state after He died. I reject Stenger's general assessment of the Bible, and that general assessment doesn't address all of the relevant evidence.

Stenger claims that:

Not a single report of communication with the dead has ever been verified. Once again, just have the psychic tell us something he and we did not know that was later verified. (307)

If he had responded to somebody like Braude or Michael Sudduth instead of D'Souza, then we could have seen how he'd interact with their material on mediums like Leonora Piper. Stenger cites pages 150-159 in his *Physics And Psychics* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1995) in support of his comments quoted above.¹⁷⁸ When we read those pages, we find brief references to mediums like Daniel Home and Leonora Piper, but not enough to lead us to Stenger's conclusion. He seems to think that it's sufficient to selectively refer to the alleged credulity of some of the original investigators and cite examples of fraud and unconvincing phenomena among the mediums of that era. But that isn't enough.

One medium isn't responsible for the faults of another, and fraud on one occasion doesn't give us reason to conclude that fraud was involved on another occasion. We have to examine the merits of each case, and Stenger doesn't even address the most relevant phenomena. I suggest that readers contrast Stenger's material to Braude's.¹⁷⁹ What Stenger has done would be like denying the skills of a baseball

¹⁷⁸ I have a 1990 edition of his book. I looked for a 1995 edition online, but didn't find one. The 1995 date mentioned in TEC might be incorrect.

¹⁷⁹ *Immortal Remains* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003); *The Gold Leaf Lady* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2007)

player on the basis of several bad innings or one phase of his career in which he used a performance-enhancing drug. How does that sort of approach explain the times when he exhibited skills under conditions in which the use of performance-enhancing drugs would have been unlikely? To take Leonora Piper as an example again, Stenger's selective analysis of the Phinuit phenomena doesn't even explain those phenomena adequately, much less does it explain the other phenomena Piper produced.¹⁸⁰ Stenger has failed to explain the best mediumistic evidence.

He sets an absurd standard for his opponents:

Much of it [literature arguing for the paranormal] is anecdotal and virtually useless scientifically since we have no way of checking the veracity of such testimony. Only carefully controlled experiments that provide risky tests of the hypothesis of life after death will convince the scientific skeptics, and until the skeptics are convinced, the hypothesis will remain unproven. (312)

Science is built upon historical testimony. How does Stenger know what happened in a scientific experiment? Usually by trusting the historical testimony of sources who reported it to him. If paranormal phenomena seem likely to have occurred, then it makes sense to believe in them, regardless of whether "scientific skeptics" give their assent and regardless of whether the evidence measures up to whatever Stenger defines as "proven".

Concerning scientific experiments and the paranormal, see the resources I cited in the introduction to TEI.

Beginning on page 314, Stenger addresses near-death experiences (NDEs). He tells us that "Many features of the NDE can be simulated with drugs, electrical impulses, or acceleration – such as during rides in a centrifuge used for training fighter pilots" (315). But "many" isn't all. The similarities that do exist are vague and accompanied by significant differences. And people who experience NDEs aren't simultaneously using the drugs in question, receiving the same sort of electrical impulses, and experiencing the same type of acceleration, nor are they experiencing some equivalent of a combination of those phenomena. The theories Stenger is citing have already been refuted in the near-death literature, including in one of the books Stenger himself cites.¹⁸¹

On pages 315-316, he goes on to discuss the failure to attain evidence for NDEs in some experiments involving "controlled conditions" (315). But the same chapter of the same book Stenger cites also describes many lines of evidence for NDEs outside

¹⁸⁰ Stephen Braude, *Immortal Remains* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), especially 56-71

¹⁸¹ Janice Miner Holden, et al., ed., *The Handbook Of Near-Death Experiences* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 185-234; Chris Carter, *Science And The Near-Death Experience* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2010), 160-215

of such experiments.¹⁸² He ignores that evidence while highlighting the absence of the former type of evidence.

What he's referring to are experiments in which the researchers:

Place some kind of target such as a card with some random numbers on it facing the ceiling of the operating room so that it is unreadable not only to the patient on the table but to the hospital staff in the room. Then if a patient has an NDE that involves the commonly reported sensation of moving outside her body and floating above the operating table, she should be able to read that number. (315-316)

There are some problems with such experiments. Near-death experiencers could easily miss such a target or make little or no effort to remember its details. They don't know about the target ahead of time. When they're experiencing the NDE, they have more significant things to think about. And there are many directions in which a soul can leave a body, so to speak. How often will the person even have the right perspective to see the target in question?

Penny Sartori, a near-death researcher, recently commented:

Having undertaken a five year prospective research project into NDEs I know how difficult it is to verify the OBE [out-of-body experience] component....

In my research eight patients reported an out of body type experience but none of them reported the hidden symbol. The reasons for this were the varying qualities of the OBEs reported.

Some patients floated to locations opposite to where the symbols were situated. Some did not rise high enough out of their body and some were simply more concerned with what was going on with their body.

There were two patients who reported an OBE where they were high enough and in the correct location to view the symbols but they were not looking on the top of the monitor. One of those patients remarked that if he knew before his OBE that there was a hidden symbol there he would have looked at it and told me what it was....

So the most important point I realised having conducted this research was that OBEs are of varying qualities and quite rare. It was incredibly hard work to undertake the research project. In the five years of my research there were only two OBEs that were of sufficient quality to actually view the symbol.

¹⁸² Janice Miner Holden, et al., ed., *The Handbook Of Near-Death Experiences* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 185-211

During those five years approximately 7000 patients were admitted to ITU. Hence to accumulate convincing results will take a very long time, many thousands of patients and a lot of patience from the researchers.

So when the results are considered at surface value it may be wrongly assumed that the OBE veridicality research is producing negative results when in fact it is not – it is simply far too early to yield good quality OBEs in sufficient quantities. I predict it could take at least 20 years of continuous research to get any satisfying results....

I know Dr Sam Parnia is hoping to publish some results from the AWARE study soon. I am not aware that any patients have viewed the hidden targets as yet but I would suggest that to get more conclusive results that the study continues for the next 10 to 20 years....

Even if patients report an OBE but not the hidden target, it will still be valuable information to report.¹⁸³

Beyond those problems, Stenger has once again ignored a point made in the same book he's citing. While Janice Miner Holden does refer to the failure of test subjects in NDE studies to see targets during NDEs, the authors of the next chapter cite examples of *successful* cases involving a target in out-of-body studies.¹⁸⁴ Out-of-body experiences aren't the same as near-death experiences, but what's the significant difference in this context? Stenger himself highlights the out-of-body aspect of NDEs when discussing these target studies (316). Why does Stenger keep ignoring such significant evidence, even when it's discussed in his own sources?

Like other contributors to TEC, he repeats the notion that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, but doesn't offer much support for the concept:

I do not insist that all anecdotes are useless. They can point the way to more serious research. But when they are the *only* source of evidence they cannot be used to reach extraordinary conclusions. (318)

We addressed the idea that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence in TID.¹⁸⁵

On pages 319-320, Stenger summarizes some points about NDEs that he found "particularly compelling". He begins with the point that around eighty percent of those who come close to death don't recall having had an NDE. Thus, the experience isn't

¹⁸³ <http://drpennysartori.wordpress.com/2011/08/13/obe-veridicality-research/>

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 223

¹⁸⁵ e.g., 149-153, 166-167, 222-223; see, also, <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/01/onus-of-miracles.html> and <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/02/extraordinary-disclaimers-demand.html>

"common". But NDEs don't have to be common in order to have evidential significance against Stenger's position.

He then claims that the research so far "presents no challenge to the current scientific understanding of NDEs as hallucinations" (319). That's a ridiculous assertion that's already been sufficiently addressed by my earlier comments. Critics like Stenger have to appeal to multiple types of hallucination in multiple contexts significantly different than the context of NDEs in order to come up with a parallel that's only *vaguely* similar to *some* aspects of NDEs. Then they have to propose a series of dubious assumptions (malfunctioning medical equipment, failed anesthesia, etc.) in order to explain other aspects of the most evidential cases. They're stringing together a series of highly unlikely scenarios that would only *vaguely* parallel *some* aspects of the NDEs in question. Supposedly, the prior probability of veridical NDEs is so low as to be outweighed even by the sort of highly unlikely series of scenarios I've just described. Their argument hinges on the notion that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, which I've addressed above, the assumption that NDE claims are extraordinary in the relevant sense, and the assumption that the evidence for NDEs isn't extraordinary. Stenger doesn't prove those assumptions.

He goes on to appeal to temporal lobe activity as an explanation of NDEs. That theory, along with other failed theories Stenger appeals to, is addressed in the books cited above by Carter and Holden, et al.

He objects that the paranormal phenomena that near-death experiencers often claim to experience after NDEs haven't been verified by "a controlled experiment" (320). But most experiencers don't claim such paranormal phenomena, their validity isn't equivalent to the validity of *NDEs*, and controlled experiments, while good, aren't needed. The vast majority of Stenger's beliefs haven't been verified by controlled experiments. And when there is such an experiment, we accept its alleged characteristics on the basis of what other people have reported to us. That's the sort of reliance on historical witnesses, without the mediation of a scientific experiment, that Stenger downplays. He keeps advocating evidential standards that he doesn't consistently abide by in his own life, standards that are unlivable.

The remainder of his points on pages 319-320 are about the subjective nature of NDEs. I view NDEs as akin to dreaming while partly awake in a paranormal state, meaning that there's a combination of objective and subjective elements.¹⁸⁶ It's not as though our only options are to view NDEs as entirely subjective or entirely objective. The central issue in this context is whether Stenger can adequately explain the objective elements of NDEs that are most problematic for his position. He can't. The fact that some subjective aspects accompany the objective ones doesn't have much significance in this context.

¹⁸⁶ For more about my view of NDEs, see <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/12/evangelical-view-of-near-death.html>.

Like his treatment of the Biblical and mediumistic evidence, Stenger's explanation of NDEs is a failure. It's also worth noting that he doesn't even address what Raymond Moody has called shared death experiences, in which two or more people share a near-death experience.¹⁸⁷

Stenger tells us that "few researchers in the field" of near-death studies (316) have gone as far as Dinesh D'Souza in seeing NDEs as evidence for an afterlife. He also tells us that he thinks "the great majority of NDE researchers are honest and do not hide data that fail to confirm their beliefs", though he adds that they're "hardly disinterested in the question of survival of death" (320). But, as Chris Carter notes:

With regard to hallucinations as an explanation of the NDE – whether caused by anoxia, temporal lobe seizures, or drugs – psychiatrist Bruce Greyson, editor of *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, notes, "Without exception, every report of a large study of NDEs published in a mainstream medical journal has concluded that these phenomena cannot be explained as hallucinations. Such unanimity among scientific researchers is unusual and should tell us something. Why is it that scientists who have done the most near-death research believe the mind is not exclusively housed in the brain, whereas those who regard NDEs as hallucinations by and large have not conducted any studies of the phenomena at all?"

In response to one critic's assertion these scientists are biased and that near-death research has been influenced by the researchers' beliefs, Greyson retorted that "he has it backwards: the researchers' beliefs have been influenced by their consistent research findings. Most near-death researchers did not go into their investigations with a belief in mind-body separation, but came to that hypothesis based on what their research found."¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Raymond Moody, *Glimpses Of Eternity* (New York, New York: Guideposts, 2010); For further discussion of the subject, see appendix 11.

¹⁸⁸ *Science And The Near-Death Experience* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2010), 200

Chapter 14

Steve Hays

I) Carrier says

We get an “ought” from an “is” all the time...For example, “If you want your car to run well, then you ought to change its oil with sufficient regularity” (334).

Of course, that’s blatantly equivocal. That’s not what is meant by the naturalistic fallacy. Carrier is burning a straw man.

The naturalistic fallacy is using “ought” in the ethical sense of moral obligation, not the teleological sense of goal-directed behavior.

To say you “ought” to use glue to make the parts of your plastic model car stick to each other doesn’t mean you have a duty to use glue. It just merely expresses a necessary or expedient means of achieving the desired result.

II) Carrier says

The most popular Christian theory of morality is that we had better be good or else we’ll burn in hell for all eternity, but if we are good, we’ll get to live forever in paradise (335).

1) Even if that were the most popular version, which Carrier doesn’t bother to document, he can’t disprove Christian ethics by citing popular beliefs. If you want to disprove a position, you need to attack the most sophisticated version of the position, by its most astute representatives.

2) Carrier is also confusing motives with standards. What motivates us to abide by a moral standard is not a substitute for the standard itself. Objective moral norms are not reducible to subjective incentives or disincentives.

Suppose I have a duty to rescue a small child who wanders into a busy intersection. I may be motivated by a parental instinct, even if it’s not my own child (a transferred parental instinct). But the objective duty is separate from the psychological dynamics.

Likewise, it’s possible to do the right thing for the wrong reason.

III) Carrier says

There is no empirical evidence as to how God actually feels about any particular behavior (336).

Which assumes, without benefit of argument, that divine revelation is not a source of information about God's attitudes. Throughout his essay, Carrier will continue to assert that unargued assumption.

IV) Carrier says

Thus every Christian moral system conceived either derives its "ought" from some "is," or has no relevant claim to being true (337).

That's another equivocation. If a wise and benevolent God designed human nature to function in certain ways, then it's not a naturalistic fallacy to derive certain obligations from nature since nature has a built-in moral purpose.

But that's quite different than deriving moral obligations from nature if nature is a brute fact, if human nature is the byproduct of a mindless, amoral process.

V) Carrier says

The malignancy of the Nazi movement is the most famous example...But the Christian support of the American slave system for over two hundred years is America's most nightmarish example...The Holocaust, the Inquisition, antebellum slavery, and the genocide of American Indians are the most notorious examples (339).

1) Carrier is not entitled to cite examples of moral atrocities unless and until he can establish secular ethics. He can't use these examples to prove his position, for he must prove his position before he can cite historical examples to illustrate his position.

2) Slavery was a fairly universal custom. There's nothing distinctively American or "Christian" about it.

3) Of course, we can cite examples of secular atrocities as well, viz. Stalinist and Maoist purges, the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge.

4) His own examples are simplistic and one-sided.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Cf. M. Medved, *The Ten Big Lies About America*; <http://tinyurl.com/5ruye8k>; "Six inconvenient truths about the U.S. and slavery"; http://townhall.com/columnists/michaelmedved/2007/09/26/six_inconvenient_truths_about_the_us_and_slavery/page/full/; "Reject the lie of White 'Genocide' Against Native Americans;

VI) Carrier says

But war (of any sort) is the most common example... (339).

What does that even mean? Is he a pacifist? Is he alleging that Christian just-war doctrine is “wicked”? If so, where’s the argument?¹⁹⁰

VII) Carrier says

...As well as (presently) the use of Christianity to turn the American people against helping the poor and instead toward promoting the libertine policies of the rich (a more blatant perversion of the teachings of Christ can hardly be imagined, yet behold its success) (339).

This is just another lopsided smear which makes no honest effort to engage the opposing argument.¹⁹¹

VIII) Carrier says

Psychologists have established that mature adults are moral not because of bare threats and bribes...but because they care about the effects their behavior has on themselves and others, and who find their reward (and their punishment) in exactly that realization (339).

Military dictators and mafia dons care about the effect their behavior has on themselves and others, which they find rewarding. I guess that’s a mark of their moral maturity.

IX) Carrier says

A fully rational and informed slave master must agree it’s factually true that his slaves ought to kill him. It’s unlikely that a rational person will want to live in a world in which he admits it’s right and proper that he ought to be killed (346).

Suppose that I’m a godless slave master. I don’t believe in morality. I believe in getting the most out of life. Exploiting slave labor enhances my standard of living.

http://townhall.com/columnists/michaelmedved/2007/09/19/reject_the_lie_of_white_genocide_against_native_americans

¹⁹⁰ Cf. J. D. Charles, *Between Pacifism and Jihad: Just War and Christian Tradition*;

<http://tinyurl.com/3wx6wwx>

¹⁹¹ Cf. J. Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis*; <http://tinyurl.com/3peyzmm>; R. Nash, *Poverty and Wealth: The Christian Debate Over Capitalism* (Crossway Books 1986).

It's understandable if my slaves want to kill me. If I were in their situation, that's what I'd be tempted to do.

But life's a gamble. Yes, there's a risk that they will turn on me, but that's a calculated risk. The benefits outweigh the risk.

So I create disincentives that discourage them from killing me. It's risky for me, but it's riskier for them.

Being amoral, I also operate with a blatant double standard. I pretend that my slaves have a duty to serve me. I indoctrinate them in their duty to serve me. It's a useful lie.

You may say I'm a hypocrite, but since I'm admittedly amoral, so what? The only consistency I value is self-serving consistency. I promote religion for the masses, since that keeps them servile, while I myself am proudly godless. Self-interest is my creed. Me first, last, and always.

Of course, I won't tell you that out loud. I keep my machinations to myself.

X) Carrier says

In the final analysis, moral knowledge is not analytical but empirical. Even debates over how to define a person, for example, simply reduce to the question of why we should care about "persons" in whatever sense defined, which can only be answered empirically; we need to know all the consequences of "not caring about that" (and all the consequences of caring about it) before we can honestly say which consequences are better for us in the long run (346).

i) Future consequences are not empirical. I can't observe the future. I can't experience the future until it happens. It's often hard to even predict the future. So many unknown, imponderable variables.

ii) "Persons" are not empirical. Empiricism involves a public, third-person description of reality. But personhood involves a private, first-person perspective. An outside observer can't perceive my private, indexical viewpoint. Likewise, I myself can't directly perceive my indexical viewpoint. That's not a sensory object. Rather, my indexical viewpoint is the lens by which I perceive everything else.

Human "persons" have empirical aspects (i.e. a body), but persons are not reducible to their empirical aspects.

iii) Empirical knowledge is often relevant to moral knowledge, but there's more to moral knowledge than empirical knowledge. The sniper in the bell tower and the police sharpshooter are, for all intents and purposes, empirically equivalent. Both

are gunman. Both are killing other people. The sharpshooter killing the sniper is empirically equivalent to the sniper killing pedestrians.

But while these are empirically equivalent actions, they are not morally equivalent actions.

XI) Carrier says

Even the supposed exceptions are not really such. For example, upon someone becoming fully informed of the consequences and yet continuing to smoke, we see no change in what they want most. Their decision then entails that smoking is wanted more than avoidance of the consequences; but that desire can only follow from irrational thinking...Because the benefit of avoiding the consequences in actual fact vastly outweighs the trivial benefits of smoking—the more so as those same benefits can be obtained by other means—and it is irrational to prefer what is far costlier when all else is equal (349).

For all his talk of moral maturity, Carrier is such a babe-in-the-woods.

i) Suppose I'm an atheist who enjoys a good cigar. To begin with, that's a unique experience. Nothing else confers the same benefit. Nothing tastes like a good cigar except a...good cigar.

ii) The medical consequences are hypothetical. Not everyone suffers the worst-case scenario. The medical consequences are person-variable. Maybe I have good genes. My body can take a licking and keep on ticking.

iii) Yes, I assume a risk, but that's a calculated risk. Life isn't risk-free. We gamble all the time. We may lose the bet, but we may win. A cost/benefit analysis.

iv) I'm going to die sooner or later. If push comes to shove, I'll trade a shorter, more enjoyable life for a longer, less enjoyable life.

Why would I want to live way past my prime, anyway? What are the consequences of taking good care of myself so that I spend my final years wasting away in a lonely stinking nursing home? As one philosopher states the issue:

Let's talk about cigarettes. Suppose you smoke one pack per day. Is that irrational? I hope all will agree that no one who is concerned to be optimally healthy as long as possible should smoke 20 cigarettes a day, let alone 80 like Rod Serling who died at age 50 on the operating table. But long-term health is only one value among many. Would Serling have been as productive without the weed? Maybe not.

Suppose one genuinely enjoys smoking and is willing to run the risk of disease and perhaps shorten one's life by say five or ten years in order to secure certain benefits in the present. There is nothing irrational about such a course of action. One acts rationally -- in one sense of 'rational' -- if one chooses means conducive to the ends one has in view. If your end in view is to live as long as possible, then don't smoke. If that is not your end, if you are willing to trade some highly uncertain future years of life for some certain pleasures here and now, and if you enjoy smoking, then smoke.¹⁹²

v) As an atheist, I don't have to face the ultimate consequences of smoking. Suicide is always an option. I can pull the trigger before I get to that point. I don't have to die of lung cancer or emphysema. I don't have to lug around an oxygen tank. I can burn my firecracker at both ends, then go out with a bang. Indeed, that's what infidels like Hemingway and George Sanders did.

XII) Carrier says

Only genuine science could discover what actually constitutes disease in the first place (such as finding that demonic possession doesn't exist or that homosexuality is not an illness but a healthy and natural human condition)... (357).

1) Of course, these examples beg the issue. Carrier is simply pandering to the natural constituency for TEC.

2) Homosexuality is "healthy"? Healthy as in...higher rates of suicide, clinical depression, bipolar disorder, domestic violence, smoking, alcoholism, drug addiction (e.g. methamphetamines, amyl nitrates), viral hepatitis, AIDS, gonorrhea, chlamydia, genital herpes, syphilis, HPV, "gay bowel syndrome," &c.¹⁹³

XIII) Carrier says

There is no relevant difference here between propositional knowledge ("I know how to swim") and nonpropositional knowledge (actually knowing how to swim) (428n45).

So I can learn how to surf by watching surfers. If I sit on the beach, watching how the pros surf, then the moment I step on the board I will surf like a pro. Somehow I don't think that's very realistic.

¹⁹² http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2011/12/cigarettes-rationality-and-hitchens.html

¹⁹³ <http://www.cdc.gov/msmhealth/STD.htm>; <http://www.cdc.gov/msmhealth/suicide-violence-prevention.htm>; <http://www.cdc.gov/msmhealth/HIV.htm>; <http://www.cdc.gov/msmhealth/viral-hepatitis.htm>; <http://www.cdc.gov/msmhealth/substance-abuse.htm>

XIV) Carrier says

I'm reminded of a soldier who fully expects to be abandoned for the good of the unit and indeed, would deem it profoundly wrong for his unit to do otherwise (350).

Out of curiosity, I quoted his statement to three Marines.

One said, "Check recent living Medal of Honor recipient who refused to leave others behind. This is a 'fundamental' and it is anathema to consider leaving a comrade behind."

Another said: "Yeah, Marines and Seals (and I suspect most Army soldiers) don't leave a comrade behind unless they have absolutely no choice. Carrier must not know too many veterans."

Another said: "good Marines would rather die than leave other unit member behind...a good Marine would never expect to be voluntarily abandoned by his or her peers."

Carrier is often wrong, but never unsure.

XV) Carrier says

She ought most to have let her daughter die...We should then instead praise a mother's refusal of self-sacrifice (350).

That graphically illustrates the back-stabbing ramifications of Carrier's secular morality. He reminds me of the Carter Burke character in Aliens.

Atheists often complain that many Americans don't think atheists are trustworthy. Well, here's a textbook example. Carrier served in the Coast Guard, but would you really want a Guardsman on a search-and-rescue mission who's not prepared to stick his neck out?

In this chapter, Price alleges that evangelicalism is demographically doomed. According to him, there's a liberalizing trend in Evangelical ethics and Evangelical theology. However, his prognosis suffers from a number of basic problems:

- I) Price doesn't cite any scientific surveys to document his claims.
- II) Price is not a professional pollster. Even if he did cite opinion polls to document his claims, he lacks the expertise to evaluate the polling data.
- III) It's a truism in polling that the way a question is worded will influence the answer. It's easy to manipulate the results since you can often get the answers you were looking for by how you phrase the questions.
- IV) What the "younger generation" believes is equivocal. That can mean either of two things:
 - 1) It can sample younger respondents.
 - 2) It can be a synonym for the next generation, or up-and-coming generation.

What's the difference? Every generation was the younger generation at one time. The older generation used to be the younger generation. And the younger generation will one day become the older generation.

I think it's fair to say "young people" tend to be more liberal than their parents. A single, childless 20-year-old tends to revel in his newfound freedom. Not only does he enjoy his youthful independence, but he's not deeply invested in the "system" or the "establishment."

However, that doesn't mean the same individual will retain the same views when he's a middle-aged husband, father, and breadwinner. You can't project what a 20-year-old will believe when he's a 40- or 50- or 60-year-old.

Even if the younger generation is more liberal than the older generation, that doesn't mean the younger generation will still be more liberal as it ages, assuming greater responsibilities or liabilities. You can't extrapolate a trend from what young people believe right now.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ Cf. R. Stark & B. Johnson, "Religion and the Bad News Bearers," <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903480904576510692691734916.html#printM>
[ode](#)

3) Conversely, the younger generation can be reactionary. For instance, children from broken homes and blended families may be more socially conservative than their parents because they've had to experience the harsh, real-world consequences of their parents' libertine ideology.

4) Apropos (3), many people don't relate to purely abstract ideas. Abstract ideas aren't real to them. It's not until they experience the concrete consequences of certain ideas that their thinking comes into focus.

For instance, someone might oppose the death penalty in theory until a friend or family member is murdered. Rude experience can move people to the right or the left on the political or theological spectrum.

5) Christian theology has a doctrine of the remnant. The truth of the gospel isn't a popularity contest. It isn't measured by successful marketing strategies.

At the same time, Christians can't afford to be complacent. It only takes one lost generation to lose enormous ground.

6) Price's analysis is strikingly ethnocentric. He acts as though evangelicalism is essentially a white, North American phenomenon. He disregards the expansion of the evangelical movement into the global south. Price views the world through white-tinted glasses.

Appendix 1: The Price Myth

by Steve Hays

I. Introduction

TEC contains a chapter attributed to Robert Price. Secular fundamentalists regard “Robert Price” (hereafter the mytho-Price) as a real person who actually spoke the words attributed to him.

However, *kultgeschichtliche* criticism uncovers a range of mythopoetic motifs in the Price *Sage*. On closer inspection, the mytho-Price is revealed to be a fictitious construct.

II. The Price Sage

The Price *Sage* contains the following biographical factoids about the mytho-Price:

Name: Robert Price
Birthplace: Jackson, Mississippi
Birthdate: July 17, 1954
Moved to New Jersey in 1965
Moved back to North Carolina
Graduated from Montclair State U (alma mater)
Taught at Mount Olive College
Used to be a Baptist minister
Committed apostasy
Is heavily bearded
A student of comparative mythology
A fan of H. P. Lovecraft
Has daughter named Veronica

III. Mythic Hero Archetype

The naïve secular fundamentalist takes these biographical factoids literally. Yet to the trained eye of the *kultgeschichtliche* critics, these are stereotypical features of the Mythic Hero Archetype.

1) Name: Robert Price

This looks like an ordinary name until we realize that “Robert Price” is an anagram for “Rib Receptor.” So that’s a cryptographic synonym for Eve.

And that, in turn, carries both prelapsarian and postlapsarian connotations.

2) Apostasy

Apostasy is a standard type scene in the quest genre. The hero grows up in a fundamentalist church (i.e. Edenic state of innocence). The hero then goes on a journey to college (i.e. the forbidden fruit), where he undergoes a personal crisis, thereby achieving enlightenment (“and their eyes were opened”).

3) Birthplace

The mytho-Price was born in Jackson, Mississippi.

A childhood setting in the Bible belt is a standard cliché in the deconversion genre.

4) Birthdate

The mytho-Price was born July 17, 1954. That might seem like an insignificant detail until we compare it to other events on that same date.

For instance, on that same date Charles Schulz published a comic strip about Pig-Pen taking a bath. Pig-Pen signifies the state of innocence, while taking a bath signifies enlightenment.

Likewise, the cover of the July 17, 1954 issue of the New Yorker magazine depicts fabulous creatures (griffins, gargoyles). This signifies the mytho-Price’s fascination with weird fiction (H. P. Lovecraft) and comparative mythology.

5) Moved to New Jersey in 1965

This seemingly insignificant detail is profoundly emblematic in several key respects:

- i) Moving from Mississippi to New Jersey on the eve of adolescence represents a classic rite of passage.
- ii) New Jersey is the “Garden state.”
 - a) The paradisal garden is a standard mythopoetic motif in world literature, viz. Eden, Dilmun, Garden of Hesperides.
 - b) The primeval garden represents lost paradise.
 - c) The garden also represents carnal knowledge (e.g. the floral imagery in the Song of Solomon).

iii) Moving east represents enlightenment, since the east is the land of the rising sun.

6) Montclair, Mount Olive

This triggers a wealth of mythopoetic associations:

i) Mt. Olive is an allusive metonymy for the garden of Gethsemane, which signifies the trial by ordeal which the hero must undergo.

ii) Montclair is a French compound word for “mountain of light.”

iii) The cosmic mountain (German=*Weltberg*) is a standard mythopoetic motif in world literature, viz. Zion, Horeb, Olympus, Zaphon, Sumerian ziggurat, Egyptian/Mesoamerican pyramids—where it represents the axis mundi and the cosmic temple.

When the mytho-Price travels to Montclair, this signifies the hero ascending the mountain to receive numinous enlightenment.

7) Retiring to North Carolina

Moving back to the South reflects the cyclical plotline of the monomyth.

8) Baptist minister

Water is a complex metaphor in world literature. It can signify life, death, and purification, viz. rivers of Eden, the Ganges, Noah’s flood, Christian baptism, &c.

9) Heavily bearded

The mytho-Price is depicted as a graying, heavily-bearded figure. That’s an iconographic emblem of spiritual wisdom, viz. swamis, yogis, fakirs.

10) H. P. Lovecraft

The hero typically has a supranatural mentor (wizard, dwarf) who aids him in his quest. The occultic figure of H. P. Lovecraft fills that role in the Price *Sage*.

This also dovetails with the Lovecraftian themes of misotheism, hereditary guilt, and forbidden knowledge which we encounter in the Price *Sage*.

11) Veronica

The mytho-Price has a daughter named Veronica. But “Veronica” is a cipher for “true icon.”

So this represents the fruit of the mytho-Price’s quest for enlightenment.

IV. *Entmythologisierung*

It’s clear from our analysis that Robert Price doesn’t exist. Robert Price is a fictional character, cobbled together from a miscellaneous combination of mythopoetic conventions. The Price *Sage* fits into the familiar contours of dying and rising savior-gods like Osiris, Tammuz, Baal, Attis, Adonis, Hercules, and Asclepius who symbolically “die” (representing the loss of childish innocence) and return to life (representing mature enlightenment).

To judge by the pulp fictional quality of the Price *Sage*, with its hackneyed themes and shopworn imagery, the author is a hack writer. He doesn’t even need a college education, since the Mythic Hero archetype has been popularized in science fiction films (e.g. Star Wars) and comic books. For instance, consider the cosmic mountain motif in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. That’s the type of raw material which supplies the *Grundlage* for the Price *Sage*.

That’s part of the pop cultural ethos. Something a boy can unconsciously absorb through social osmosis.

The depiction of Southern piety reflects a North Eastern caricature of the Bible belt. That, along with the local name places suggests the author is a native of New Jersey.

In all probability, the author of the Price *Sage* is a nerdy teenager. Because he’s no good at sports, he hangs out at the local library, reading back issues of escapist literature like comics books, Lovecraft stories, the New Yorker magazine, &c.

Because he’s shy around girls, he compensates by creating an antihero. Indeed, the dramatic arc of the Price *Sage* is clearly a projection of his hormonal fantasies and adolescent rebellion. A sublimated allegory of the quest for carnal knowledge, unhampered by authority figures.

In the age of the Internet, any boy with a laptop can self-publish his juvenilia.

Appendix 2: The Presumption of Miracles

by Steve Hays

i) Richard Lewontin famously said:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door. The eminent Kant scholar Lewis Beck used to say that anyone who could believe in God could believe in anything. To appeal to an omnipotent deity is to allow that at any moment the regularities of nature may be ruptured, that miracles may happen.¹⁹⁵

I agree with Lewontin's analysis. Where we differ is on the significance of the consequences. I'm open to miracles "rupturing" the regularities of nature in unpredictable ways. I don't have any problem with that.

ii) I do think the chain of physical causation can and does break down in unpredictable and often undetectable ways. To take some examples:

a) I believe in creation ex nihilo. In the nature of the case, creation ex nihilo is abrupt, discontinuous, unprecedented, nonlinear. From nothing to something. Even if the result of creation ex nihilo were a closed causal continuum, there's no telling (short of revelation) at what point in the continuum creation ex nihilo takes effect. Creation ex nihilo could initiate the natural cycle at an early phase in the cycle or a later phase in the cycle. And there's no antecedent reason, that I can see, to think one is more likely than another.

b) I believe that angels and demons are agents who effect certain outcomes in time and space. I have no way of quantifying their contribution. It may be quite limited or it may be widespread. But even if the effect is physical, that's not something you can

¹⁹⁵ R. Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons,"
http://www.drjibloom.com/Public%20files/Lewontin_Review.htm

trace back to a physical cause.

c) I believe that answered prayers frequently have physical outcomes. I have no idea what percentage of prayers are answered. But I don't think it's a trivial sum.

And even one answered prayer can have far-reaching effects. Take a Christian couple who prays to God to spare the mother from another miscarriage. If, in answer to prayer, the mother gives birth to a viable child, the life of that child will have multitudinous effects which would not occur had the child died in the womb. So God's answer to that single prayer has a branching effect. And that effect is multiplied by countless answered prayers throughout the course of OT history, NT history, and church history.

From a Christian standpoint, I think it's safe to say that history is honeycombed with the tangible effects of answered prayer. That's a powerful dynamic in the course of world history.

Yet that's not something you can trace back to a physical cause. If I offer a silent (mental) prayer to God, and God answers my prayer, that transaction falls outside the framework of physical causation. Even if I intone my prayer, God's answer to my prayer is not just another link in the physical chain of cause and effect.

Thus, in a vast number of cases, our world has been shaped by the indiscernible factor of petitionary prayer. The present generation is the beneficiary of prayers offered by past generations, while the future generation is the beneficiary of prayers offered from the present generation. Yet, from an empirical standpoint, it usually looks like these things just "naturally" happen. They blend in seamlessly with the physical background. How could you tell, by looking at a teenager, that he is only here because his parents offered that prayer?

d) Likewise, some miracles are miracles of timing. Providentially opportune timing. Sometimes in answer to prayer, but not always. Miracles of timing employ natural mechanisms. So, in that sense, they're perfectly "camouflaged." They go unnoticed by the world at large. Only the beneficiary is in a position to perceive how timely, and unlikely, this was.

So I don't think we can simply start with a physical effect, then actually (or hypothetically) run back by through the physical links until we arrive at a physical cause. For in many instances, the trail of physical causes and effects runs out before it reaches the ultimate, supernatural cause. If something happens as a result of my prayer, then a scientist 100 years later can't trace the outcome all the way back to God's answer. The true explanation is physically untraceable. God left no fingerprints. Disposable latex gloves.

Appendix 3: Petitionary Prayer

by Steve Hays

Loftus says petitionary prayer is “wildly improbable,” but, as usual, he fails to give a supporting argument for his contention. So the onus lies on Loftus to make a case. The Christian is under no obligation to refute a nonexistent argument against petitionary prayer.

However, for the sake of completeness, we might take a stab at it. I suppose Loftus is alluding to the alleged problem of unanswered prayer. The alleged absence of hard evidence for the efficacy of prayer. Sometimes this involves the claim that answers to prayer are statistically insignificant.¹⁹⁶

Coded signs

What would constitute evidence of answered prayer? Suppose the petitioner asks for divine guidance in his life. A petitioner isn’t sure which course of action is the best course of action. Maybe he asks God for a sign.¹⁹⁷

And suppose God gives him a sign. What kind of sign would we expect God to give him? Would it be a public sign? A sign whose significance everyone could recognize? Or would it be a private sign, a customized sign—whose significance would only be recognizable to the petitioner?

On the face of it, what would make a divine sign especially significant to the petitioner is a sign that’s uniquely meaningful to the petitioner. A sign whose significance only the petitioner would appreciate. That would make it very special.

Suppose his late, beloved grandmother used to hum an old hymn tune as a lullaby when he was a child. He hasn’t heard that since she died, so many years ago.

Then, a day later, after he prayed, he’s sitting on the bus when he suddenly hears a passenger in the seat behind him hum that tune. He takes that as divine confirmation.

What makes that an answer to prayer? What makes that a divine sign? The improbable timing, as well as the fact that it’s so specific to his unique experience.

¹⁹⁶ R. Swinburne, “Response to a Statistical Study on the Effect of Petitionary Prayer”; http://users.ox.ac.uk/~orie0087/pdf_files/Responses%20to%20Controversies/Response%20to%20a%20Statistical%20Study.pdf

¹⁹⁷ In general, I think that’s a dubious way to make decisions. Cf. B. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Eerdmans 2002).

There are different kinds of signs in Scripture. Some are public, spectacular, extraordinary—like the plagues of Egypt.

But others are outwardly ordinary. Their significance is essentially private. A coded sign. Something only God and the petitioner would understand.

Take the prayer of Abraham's servant. His servant asks for a sign:

Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia to the city of Nahor. And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water. And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success to-day and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. Let the young woman to whom I shall say, 'Please let down your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels'—let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master" (Gen 24:10-14).

To an outside observer, there's nothing significant about this sign. Nothing out-of-the-ordinary. What makes it a divine sign is the specificity of the sign, the exact correspondence between the nature of the request and the nature of the answer.

Yet this wouldn't be measurable to the outside observer. It's not the sort of thing that would register in a clinical trial designed to gauge the efficacy of prayer.

This is not an ad hoc escape-clause to explain away the statistically undetectable efficacy of prayer—even assuming that's statistically undetectable. For what makes the sign a sign is the coded nature of the sign. It's not a sign for general consumption. It was never meant to be. It's for the exclusive benefit of the petitioner. A sign for insiders, not outsiders. For individuals, not collectives.

Loftus might complain that this renders the efficacy of prayer unverifiable and unfalsifiable, since—to all appearances—nothing counts as evidence for or against answered prayer. Answered prayer and unanswered prayer are empirically equivalent.

But that's not true. For the answer, if God answers the prayer, won't be inevident to the petitioner. It will merely be inevident to someone who's not a party to the prayer. But since the prayer doesn't concern an outside observer, why should the answer be evident to an outside observer? This is a private transaction between God and the petitioner. The shepherd and the sheep.

Sampling error

i) Unbelievers accuse Christians of sampling error. Christians only count apparent answers to prayer while discounting unanswered prayers.

However, answered prayer and unanswered prayer are evidentially asymmetrical. Evidence that something never happened doesn't cancel out evidence that something else did happen. If it rains today, but not tomorrow, the nonoccurrence of rain tomorrow in no way counts against the occurrence of rain today, as if we have to balance one against the other.

Events and nonevents, experience and inexperience, are evidentially asymmetrical. A boy in Alaska is used to seeing snow every year. A boy in Hawaii never sees snow where he lives. Does the snowless experience of the Hawaiian boy weigh against the snowy experience of the Alaskan boy? No.

If skeptics say they have no experience of answered prayer, or miracles, in what sense does their inexperience counter the experience of those who do (or say they do)? Inevidence is hardly equivalent to counterevidence.

Likewise, undetectable answers to prayer don't count against detectable answers to prayer.

ii) While answered prayer has evidential value, that's a fringe benefit of prayer. That's not what prayer is for.

Prayer is not designed to be a theistic proof. While answered prayer has apologetic potential, that's not what prayer is for. Rather, that's a bonus point.

ii) One purpose of prayer is to make us acutely aware of our utter dependence on God. How helpless we are to control the things we most care about.

iii) Moreover, I wouldn't expect a one-to-one correlation between prayers and answers. Prayer is not a vending machine in which you make a mental selection, input the specified amount, input the code number, and out pops the goody.

Prayer is not a mechanical, cause-effect transaction. Rather, prayer is a transaction between two (or more) personal agents, involving personal discretion.

a) To take an obvious comparison, good parents don't give their kids everything they ask for. That's because kids often lack the foresight to ask wisely. For one thing, kids often lack a long-term perspective on the consequences of what they desire. They live for the moment, with a view to the near future.

b) It's not even possible for God to answer every prayer, for one outcome may not be compossible with another outcome. Farmer Joe prays for rain to irrigate his parched crops.

Across the street, old Aunt Betsy prays for dry, sunny weather, so that she can submit her prize-winning mincemeat pie at the country fair, hoping to beat out old Aunt

Maude, who won last year.

(Just between you and me, Betsy doesn't think Maude won the prize fair and square. She darkly suspects it was Maude's new dress, with the pretty floral pattern, which beclouded old Judge Harlan's better judgment.)

Well, it can't rain and shine at the same place at the same time. So both prayers aren't answerable.

In addition, God may think Farmer Joe needs rain more than Aunt Betsy needs sunshine.

iv) And, of course, answered prayer is not the only evidence we have for Christianity. There's a larger context in which we evaluate unanswered prayer (or apparently unanswered prayer).

Appendix 4: The Problem of Evil

by Steve Hays

Loftus trots out the problem of evil. So what's the problem? And what's the answer?

Moral relativism

Several contributors to TEC are moral relativists, viz. John Loftus, David Eller, Hector Avalos. However, it's self-defeating for a moral relativist to deploy the argument from evil. If nothing is intrinsically evil, then God did nothing wrong—even in principle.

And it won't work to say the moral relativist is simply attacking Christianity on its own grounds. For Christianity doesn't impute wrongdoing to God. Moreover, a moral relativist must logically deny epistemic duties. As a moral relativist, he must admit that we have no obligation to believe something just because it's true. And this generates a dilemma for his atheism:

Such a worldview summarily forfeits the right to be taken seriously. For a worldview is not entitled to our consideration if it disenfranchises the very notion of epistemic duties. Such a position thereby disenfranchises itself from further consideration.

If a worldview rejects the possibility that true beliefs are praiseworthy, while false beliefs are blameworthy, then we have no responsibility to believe something just because it is the right thing to believe—including the worldview in question. For there's nothing praiseworthy about believing a worldview which denies the praiseworthy character of true beliefs.

Second-order goods

A theological value-system will take God as the most valuable object, as well as the source and standard of mundane values.

God will be the most valuable object in two respects:

i) At a metaphysical or absolute level: of what he is, in and of himself.

His intrinsic value.

ii) At an epistemic or relative level: of what he is to another or others.

His extrinsic value.

How he's valued by others. Or how he ought to be valued by others.

According to (ii), knowing God is the highest good because, according to (i), God is the highest good.

3) Apropos (2), we need to distinguish between first-order goods and second-order goods. Second-order goods supervene on first-order goods.

As such, first-order goods are a necessary condition of second-order goods.

They are not an absolute necessity. It is not necessary that there be second-order goods. For that matter, it is not necessary that there be first-order goods.

But assuming the existence or value of second-order goods, then their corresponding first-order goods are a necessary precondition of the latter.¹⁹⁸

4) Apropos (3), we also need to distinguish between impossible and/or incommensurable goods. Between a greater good for a lesser number, and a lesser good for a greater number.

5) Apropos (4), if knowing God is the highest good, and if a fuller knowledge of God is unobtainable apart from the internal relation between first-order goods and second-order goods, then second-order goods are justified by a higher end (the value of second-order goods), of which first-order goods are the prerequisite.

6) Apropos (5), a fuller knowledge of God includes a knowledge of his justice and mercy, as well as his wisdom in the way whereby his justice and mercy are revealed.

7) Apropos (6), although an abstract knowledge of divine justice and mercy is obtainable apart from concrete expressions of divine justice and mercy, yet an existential knowledge of his justice and mercy is not obtainable apart from concrete expressions of justice and mercy.

8) But an existential knowledge of the good is superior to an abstract knowledge of the good. Superior because such a personalized knowledge is of more value to the individual recipient or beneficiary.

9) Apropos (1-9), God foreordained the Fall as a means of manifesting his justice and mercy to the elect.

10) Such a solution to the problem of evil is the implicit theodicy of Scripture in such passages as Jn 9-12 and Rom 9-11.

¹⁹⁸ Even unbelievers are beginning to appreciate the instrumental value of evil. Cf. <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=17985>; For a Christian treatment, cf. J. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment* (Crossway 2010).

What's the question?

1. We need to be clear on the level at which a theodicy operates. A theodicy may be able to answer the general question, "Why is there cancer?"

But I think it's quite unrealistic to expect a theodicy to answer the specific question, "Why do I have cancer?" "Why me rather than the next guy?"

2. One consequence of living in a fallen world is the silence of God. That silence is by no means absolute. But to be fallen creatures in a fallen world does entail a fair measure of disruption in our fellowship with God.

Had Adam and Eve never sinned, we might all enjoy daily theophanies with the Maker of heaven and earth. But one consequence of the Fall is a degree of radio silence between God and sinners.

That silence is broken from time to time. Most notably in the Scriptures. I also don't deny that God may occasionally reveal himself on a more individual basis. But that's hardly the norm.

3. This also goes to the Biblical distinction between faith and sight or hope and sight. Fideism takes this to an extreme. Christian faith is not a matter of taking everything on faith. Of walking blind.

But the Bible is intended to cultivate the virtue of faith. Of trusting in God for many things.

Less a matter of knowing "why" than knowing "who." I don't know the answer, but I know Him, and that's answer enough. He knows the answers. And in knowing him, I can leave the answers to him.

Natural "evil"

i) Theodicy does not entail a one-to-one correspondence between a given evil and a compensatory good. Teleology isn't that discrete or atomistic.

It's not that a given evil, taken in isolation, is a direct means to a greater good. Rather, it's a part/whole relation. Each event, including evil events, makes its individual contribution to a common end.

ii) I do regard natural evil as a manifestation of divine judgment. But this ordinarily goes back to the Fall. It isn't directly punitive with respect to any particular victim. But it is a general manifestation of divine judgment.

iii) I'd add that a natural evil can also be a manifestation of divine mercy where the survivors are concerned. But we don't know enough to draw specific conclusions. Why did so-and-so live and so-and-so die? We can't say.

iv) There are some exceptions in Scripture. But that's because we have the benefit of divine revelation where those instances are concerned.

But the fact that we can mentally compartmentalize those changes doesn't mean that, in reality, that is possible.

In a system of second causes, it may not be possible to change certain natural mechanisms without making a number of other far-reaching adjustments.

Means are finite. The medium has built-in limitations. To change a few things it may be necessary to change a lot of things.

And such a world might be so different from the one we know that we can no longer compare the two and size them up.

For this alternative scenario might well have its own dangers or trade-offs. A different set of natural evils.

1. I don't regard natural disasters as natural evils, per se. They are only evil in relation to the victim.

Natural disasters are actually natural goods inasmuch as they are various ways in which the ecosystem restores a natural imbalance. Natural disasters are not disastrous for the ecosystem. Not over the long haul.

Now, if I happen to be a victim of a natural disaster, then it's evil to me. But that's a relative evil rather than an absolute evil. I just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The primary function of natural disaster is not punitive in character. Although death by natural disaster may be an evil, it is generally an incidental consequence of a natural good.

Fire warms and fire burns. Too little or too much water is destructive, but the absence of water is also destructive.

2. Apropos (1), I also don't assume that all natural disasters represent the judgment of God for the sin of any particular victim.

3. However, I do believe that, as a result of the fall, human beings are liable to natural disasters.

Although death by natural disaster does not necessarily, or even ordinarily, represent a one-to-one correspondence between the event and the sin of the victim, yet the fact that most victims are sinners (in the sense of actual sin) does remove an immunity to death by natural disaster to which they would otherwise be exempt in

an unfallen world.

Why does God disallow it?

When the problem of evil is raised, the question typically takes this form: “Why did God allow it?” There are verbal variants, but that’s the basic way in which the question is generally cast.

Yet when you stop to think about it, that’s a very lopsided question. Is there some reason we typically ask, “Why did God allow this evil?” or “Why did God allow so many evils?” rather than asking, “Why didn’t God allow some evil to happen?” “Why didn’t God allow more evils to happen?”

In other words, the problem of evil is typically focused on questioning the evils that did occur, rather than the evils that didn’t occur. But surely, for every evil that happens, there are a multitude of possible evils that never happen.

I suppose that, at one level, it’s easier to consider actual evils, since there’s less to think about. You don’t have to imagine an actual evil. You only need to remember it. All of the specific details are already given in that particular, concrete instance. So it’s easier to think about what did happen than what didn’t happen.

For to think about what didn’t happen opens up vast, receding vistas of unrealized possibilities. Where do you begin?

And yet, when we ask, “Why did God allow it?” there is, implicit in that question, a comparison between what actually happened and a possible, preferable alternative. The question assumes a contrast between an actual evil and the good thing or “better” alternative which didn’t transpire.

“Why did God allow this evil?” carries with it the corollary question, “Why didn’t God bring about a better alternative by preventing the evil event?”

But if we’re going to ask, why didn’t some good take place instead of the evil that actually occurred—then we should also ask, why didn’t some evil take place instead of the good that actually occurred.

For whatever reason, we tend to take the nonoccurrence of evil for granted. And for that reason, a theodist typically concentrates on horrendous evils or gratuitous evils. On the amount of evil, or kind of evil.

Yet evil possibilities are just as possible as good possibilities. By asking, “Why didn’t God prevent some evil or another?” we neglect to ask, “Why did God prevent so many other evils?”

Some of us lead wretched lives from start to finish, but most of us lead middling lives—with a balance of ups and downs. For most of us, things could be so much

worse.

Just consider for a moment all the terrible things which might happen to you in just one day, or just one week—that never actually happened. Around every corner lurk possible evils. Just lying in wait. Crouching in unseen, possible worlds. The Bates Motel at the end of one wrong turn.

Indeed, there are horror films in which that scenario plays out. Everything that can go wrong, does go wrong.

In which, the day before, everything was going all right for the protagonist—then the next day, inexplicably, things begin to take a turn for the worse. A losing streak. A run of back luck where every “chance,” every roll of the dice, comes up snake eyes.

Men are apt to view life as a gamble in which, “as the odds have it,” you win some and you lose some. Yet, “chances are,” it’s possible to lose every time. Evil nonevents (or possible, unexemplified evils) outnumber evil real events by nearly infinite orders of magnitude. Why doesn’t that happen far more often?

Why blame God for all the bad things that do happen when God gets no credit for all the bad things that don’t happen? What’s the catch?

When we count our blessings, not only should we number the good things that befell us, but all the evil things that never befell us. And, from one day to the next, that’s quite a sum. Ever so many things might have gone so very wrong, yet never did. Why not?

ii) It would be possible for God to make temporary, isolated changes—a flurry of opportune miracles.

Such a world is more flexible, but the lack of continuity comes at a cost. A very unpredictable world. Impossible to plan for the future.

So there’s a practical and ethical dialectic between flexibility and inflexibility—miracle and providence.

Wherever you range along the continuum, you are going to face certain advantages and disadvantages.

Life in a fallen world is already quite fragmented. Would we wish it to be even more unstable?

Bringing good out of evil

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today (Gen 50:20).

If God is good, then we'd expect whatever God has made to be good. Whatever he creates is good because it's the handiwork of a good God. That comes as no surprise.

Not that this logical correlation should blind us to the miraculous power of his creative fiat.

But by the same token, there's a sense in which it's even more impressive when God brings good out of evil. We'd expect good to come from good. Creaturely goods from a good Creator.

But for good to come from evil is counterintuitive. How can one thing yield its antonym?

Theodicy is obsessed with the question of how evil can come from good. And that's a worthwhile question to address.

But obsession with that narrow question can blind us to the reverse question—which is equally profound: how can good come from evil?

That question is no less important. And the two questions are interrelated. To bring evil out of good, there must be evil. There must be evil in the first place for God to bring good out of evil.

And that, of itself, is a partial answer to the problem of evil. Why is there evil? So that God can bring good out of evil.

To bring good out of evil is a greater demonstration of divine omnipotence than bringing good out of good. We expect like from like. Good from good and evil from evil. That's logical. Almost predictable.

But this is unlike from like. Turning something evil into its polar opposite.

If creating good is a miracle, then recreating good from evil is an even greater miracle. The creation of Adam and Eve was a testament to God's almighty power. But the new creation of Adam's elect posterity, by redemption, regeneration, sanctification, and glorification, is a greater testament to God's almighty power.

Making the garden of Eden is a testament to God's almighty power. But making the Church is a greater testament to God's almighty power. Greater by far.

A work in progress

i) I think that even a sinless world would contain natural "evils." That's because I think natural evils are generally natural goods. What makes them "evil" is if they're evil to you. If they do you harm. They're only "evil" in the relative sense that if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time, then they pose a threat to your life or wellbeing. But, in general, many natural "evils" are actually beneficial to the ecosystem. In-

deed, essential to the balance of nature as we know it.

I think what the Fall effects is not the existence of natural evil, but a liability to natural evil. It exposes us to dangers which, in a sinless world, we'd be immune to—in one way or another.

There's a difference between a dangerous world and a world which endangers you and me. A world with mountains and streams is a dangerous world inasmuch as you can fall off a cliff or drown in the river. I think the difference between a pristine world and a fallen world is not so much the presence or absence of natural evils, but whether we are put in harm's way. Is the potential for harm actually realized?

ii) I also assume that part of the cultural mandate is to tame the wilderness. We start in a garden, then we extend the garden. Cultivate the wilderness. Domesticate animals. Found towns and cities.

I think God has posed certain natural challenges for us to overcome. We need these raw materials to exercise our God-given creativity.

In a fallen world, that becomes an occupational hazard. But I don't view the underlying principle as essentially different for an unfallen world.

iii) This is not to deny that some natural evils are second-order evils which reflect our fallenness. Scientists develop treatments for STDs. STDs are a natural punishment for sin. The STDs then adapt by developing a resistant-strain to the conventional treatment. So some natural evils do presuppose the Fall.

iv) And, of course, to the extent that some natural evils are penal sanctions for sin, they require no special justification.

In modern times, the argument from evil is the most popular argument against God's existence. Yet there's a paradoxical sense in which evil creates its own theodicy. Indeed, there's a paradoxical sense in which atheism contains its own theodicy.

A fallen world forces us to treasure things which we'd take for granted in an unfallen world. And atheism forces us to question things we'd take for granted in an unfallen world.

Take a simple little thing like a mother who schedules her day so that she can drop the kids off at some event, then pick them up when the event is over.

Her kids expect mom to pick them up. They expect mom to be waiting for them when they're through. That's what mothers are for! That's what mothers do! Right?

Yet, living in a fallen world, you begin to observe that this isn't something we can safely presume. Some mothers are temperamentally unsuited to motherhood. Some

mothers are addicted to drugs or alcohol. Some mothers die of cancer at a young age. Some mothers walk out on their husband and kids. And, of course, sooner or later, everyone's mother dies.

Learning in a fallen world, you learn not to take a mother's love for granted. For you see many instances in which that is not a given.

And from a secular standpoint, what does a mother's love amount to? Human mothers generally care for their offspring, but mother crocodiles are also excellent caregivers. Yet we don't get that sentimental about mother crocodiles. So is there really any difference?

Behind both of them is a mindless process. From a secular standpoint, maternal devotion is the by-product of a mindless process. In Christianity, by contrast, it's an exemplification of God's goodness.

Human beings naturally feel at home in this world. After all, we were made for this world. And this world was made for us.

But, from a secular standpoint, that's just a projection. From that perspective, the world is like a desolate village after a civil war. You're the lone survivor. You return home. But no one is home. No one is left.

There is nobody behind the windows and doors. No one looking out at you. No one is waiting.

It's quiet inside. Empty inside. Lifeless. Just a façade. A handsome façade. But hollow. Deserted.

The atheist forces us to ask ourselves what the world would be like without God. Forces us to ask if there would even be a world without God.

Of course, in an unfallen world, we'd have no occasion to ask such questions. And these are good questions to ask.

Not because we should question God's existence. Indeed, there's a sense in which it's good to take his existence for granted. But not in the sense of failing to appreciate all that his existence entails. Contemplating the absence of God is a good way of learning to appreciate the presence of God.

It's easy to become oblivious to something you always had—however good. Easy to undervalue something which you've never been without. You don't know how much you miss it unless you lose it. Finding something you misplaced can be more rewarding than if you never lost it. Coming back to something after a long separation can be more fulfilling than if you never went away.

Losing and leaving sweeten the reunion. It fills you with gratitude. Makes you more thankful for what you've got.

The atheist urges us—indeed, admonishes us—to consider life without God. Ironically, I think that's good advice. A fine spiritual exercise.

We ought to take him up on the offer. Think long and hard about the deprivations of atheism. About the empty house behind the window of atheism.

Cursing to bless

The argument from evil has to identify examples of gratuitous evil to make its case. Not just any sort of evil will do.

Are there apparent examples of gratuitous evil? Not that I can see.

i) To begin with, I think one can come up with a theodicy that explains evil in general, even if I can't explain why any specific evil occurs. I can explain why that kind of evil occurs.

ii) A lot of evils seem pointless, but we'd expect them to seem pointless. I don't know for a fact why a promising young Christian student dies in a freak accident. But it's not hard to explain how that seemingly pointless event might serve a purpose.

Cause and effect are all about timing. What happens in what order. A sequence of nested events.

It's like traffic flow. If I turn onto the arterial a minute earlier or a minute later, then there will be different cars behind me or ahead of me. And that, for its part, affects when they will stop and go; what other cars will turn onto the next arterial.

Causation is a matrix or network of one event causing another event. Change one variable, and it triggers a chain reaction. Change one variable, and it realigns a set of variables.

We only see the present, isolated variable. We don't see all the things down the line. All the things that will happen—or would happen if the variable had been otherwise.

Or, to vary the metaphor, it's like conception. Conception is all about timing. A minute earlier or later, and a different child is conceived, or no child is conceived. And that, in turn, ramifies out in many different directions.

iii) Moreover, we wouldn't expect God to explain the reason for every evil. God can't have a plan if he tips his hand too often. For, if he let's us in on too much of his plan, then that sets up a countersuggestive dynamic. We can't rebel against what we don't know. But if we know it, then we can do the opposite.

This brings me to a final point. I think some Christians mistakenly believe that every evil which befalls them must be for their personal gain. And this can strain their faith since, in some cases, it may be hard for them to see the benefit.

But I think they're starting from a false premise. For I think that sometimes God afflicts one Christian to bless another.

Take the case of Warfield and his wife. While he was hiking with his newlywed, they were overtaken by an electrical storm. Apparently she was struck by lightning, which left her crippled for life. They never had children, so I suspect they never had conjugal relations after the accident. They probably figured that motherhood would be too arduous in her diminished condition. That's my guess.

As a result, Warfield was "condemned" to a life of research and writing. Tethered to Princeton, NJ, year in and year out. A celibate marriage. A childless marriage. To have that happen on your honeymoon would be a tremendous blow to a normal man or woman.

Yet we can see how their hardship benefited the church. We profit from his writings.

That's not to say there can't be any compensations. All that time he spent reading and speaking to his bed stricken wife may have enriched their marriage in other ways. Still, that's not the life they chose for themselves. Rather, that's the life God chose for them.

If only

There are Christian philosophers who, in response to the evidential problem of evil, question a key premise. They take the position that if God exists, there's no presumption that we would know his reasons for permitting evil. Therefore, they don't think it's incumbent upon a Christian to even give a reason for the occurrence of evil.

Of course, from the standpoint of an atheist, this smacks of special pleading. What are we to say to that reaction?

1. If you begin with the ground level assumption that there's no evidence for God's existence, then it's more natural to view the response of these philosophers as special pleading. It's like Flew's famous parable of the invisible gardener. You have no initial evidence for God's existence. Then, in the face of prima facie evidence against his existence, you add insult to injury by saying you also don't need to give a reason for the occurrence of evil. You don't need to give a reason for God's existence and, what is more, you don't need to give a reason for the existence of evil. So nothing could possibly count against your belief in God. Not the absence of evidence or the evidence to the contrary. One could justify any belief, however arbitrary or outlandish, on this basis.

2. This objection might have some force against a Christian fideist. Of course, as a fideist, he'd also be immune to that objection. But from an outsider's perspective, it would carry some force.

However, except for fideists, most Christian philosophers, theologians, and apologists don't begin with the ground level assumption that there's no evidence for God. To the contrary, they think there are various lines of evidence for God's existence.

Hence, there's an obvious difference between saying:

i) We don't have to give a reason for the existence of God, and—what is more—we don't have to give a reason for the existence of evil!

And saying:

ii) We don't have a reason for the existence of evil, but we have many reasons for the existence of God—some of which we can give you, and some of which we can't (since they involve personal experience, which is intransitive).

(i) invites the charge of special pleading in a way that (ii) does not.

And this, in turn, goes to the incommensurable perspective of the believer and the unbeliever. From the unbeliever's viewpoint, belief in God is like belief in the invisible gardener. The problem of evil is just a special case of that larger deficiency. An aggravating factor. One more thing the theist can't account for.

Since, however, the average Christian philosopher, theologian, or apologist doesn't share that perspective, the two sides don't place the burden of proof in the same position. For they don't share the same starting point.

3. Beyond the question of special pleading, is it possible or plausible that God could have reasons for allowing (or decreeing) evil which are inscrutable to the human observer? Seems to me that that's eminently plausible.

Take those science fiction scenarios in which a time-traveler wants to improve the future. He wants to change the past to avert some future tragedy. But every time he tries, he discovers that by averting one tragedy, he precipitates another tragedy in its stead. Although, when he begins tinkering with the future, he's sure that our world is not the best possible world, that he can create a better world, he finds out that it's exceedingly difficult to create an alternate timeline in which the overall balance of good and evil is superior. On the one hand, a past evil might give rise to a future good. On the other hand, a past good might give rise to a future evil. He can eliminate one particular evil, but in so doing he either eliminates a resultant good or precipitates another evil which is just as bad or even worse.

Clearly no human being knows enough to juggle all of the alternate outcomes and say which aggregate outcome represents a better balance overall. Actual historical causation is fiendishly complex, and when you add hypothetical variables to the mix, the various permutations are hopelessly complicated. Who's to say which combination is better or worse? Certainly no finite mind can perform that operation.

4. On a related note, is it plausible that God has a reason not to tell us his reason? Once again, that strikes me as eminently plausible.

Let's go back to our science fiction scenario regarding the time-traveler. In order for God to tell us why he allows (or decrees) every specific evil occurrence, he'd have to reveal the future in minute detail. Reveal the future to show how past evils give rise to future goods. How the good outweighs the evil.

But, of course, science fiction scenarios involving time travel also explore the logical difficulties of knowing the future. A future you can know is a future you can change. For the future you know is a future which, by foreknowing it, you're in a position to change. And that, in turn, introduces a counter-suggestive dynamic which undermines foreknowledge.

The reason we can't change the future is because we don't know the future. So we don't know what to do in the present (or the past, under time travel scenarios) to change the future.

If, however, you know the future, then you know what to change in the past to change the future. But if, in fact, you act on that knowledge, you undermine the basis of that foreknowledge. That leads us to the intractable paradoxes of time travel.

Hence, there's a plausible reason why God would refrain from revealing his detailed reasons for allowing (or decreeing) any particular evil. That action would require God to give us a blueprint of the future. But that generates two problems:

i) It would tempt us to tinker with the future. You and I as individuals don't care about the overall good. We care about our loved ones. Our emotional priorities lie with the welfare of our loved ones. Left to our own devices, we'd lower the wellbeing of the many to raise the wellbeing of the few. To improve the situation of my loved ones at the expense of your loved ones.

ii) And, of course, you can't change the future unless you know the future. But if you change the future, you can't know the future.

Therefore, God not only has a plausible reason, but a necessary reason, to keep his reasons to himself.

(God can know the future because God has no intention of changing the future. Indeed, he knows the future because he intends the future.)

5. I'd add that (3) & (4) aren't special pleading. Most science fiction writers are unbelievers. Most science fiction writers who write about time travel are unbelievers. Therefore, when I use this scenario to illustrate a Christian theodicy, I'm drawing on assumptions which even unbelievers acknowledge. Therefore, it's not special pleading for a Christian to make assumptions which he shares in common with the unbeliever.

The origin of evil

1. Original Sin

The fall of Lucifer (as well as Adam and Eve) is often thought to present a psychological conundrum. To commit sin, you must find sin appealing. How could a sinless being ever form the initial desire to sin?

Even if you subscribe to libertarian freewill, that's of no avail here. Freewill can't explain how a sinless being could acquire a sinful motive. What would make sin appealing to a sinless being in the first place? To entertain a sinful desire, you must find sin desirable. How would a sinless being get to that point? How would a sinless agent take the first sinful step?

Once the process is under way, you can explain the outcome, but how does it get underway? How does it ever get started in the first place?

However, this dilemma may be a pseudoproblem. I think the source of the problem lies in the failure to distinguish between possible and actual agents.

The Bible uses certain literary metaphors to describe God's creative role. God is the Word, the Logos. The world is like a book or lyric poem. God "spoke" the world into existence, like a bard or oral storyteller. God has written every chapter of the book before the world existed. The book of life. The life of David (Ps 139:16).

So the Bible uses a literary metaphor to describe God's creatorship. Let's play along with that illustration.

When a novelist contemplates a novel, he contemplates various characters who may populate his novel. Not only does he consider different characters, but variations on the same character. There's a wide range of things which each character could do. What a character could possibly do is only limited by the imagination of the novelist, as well the relation of one character to other characters, and to his fictional environment.

A possible character can do whatever a novelist can make him do, in the fictive sense of all the possible actions a novelist can think of. What is possible for the character comes down to what is possible for the novelist to contemplate. All of the possible actions or events which the mind of the novelist can imagine.

Possible worlds are to the real world what fiction is to reality. A possible person is a fictional character in the mind of God. He becomes a real person if God objectifies his concept in real time and space. (At least in real time.)

However, not all possibilities are compossible. One character must interact with other characters. He must interact with his fictional circumstances. So the range of possibilities is narrowed down by the demands of the story. A coherent story in which what one character does must be consistent with everything else that happens in the story.

Out of the larger range of hypothetical possibilities, the novelist chooses one set of possibilities to commit to writing about. He instantiates one set of possibilities to the exclusion of others.

There is, however, no prior constraint on what a possible character could do. A merely possible character has no default setting. There is no particular course of action which he would have done. Rather, he could have done any number of things. He could have done whatever the novelist could conceive of him doing.

By contrast, an actual character will only do one thing. At a concrete level, he can only do one thing. In the actual story, the novelist selects one combination of serial possibilities to the exclusion of others. The novelist instantiates one combination to the exclusion of others.

When we think about it this way, the fall of Lucifer, or Adam and Eve, doesn't strike me as especially mysterious or paradoxical. It's only a problem when we start with the concrete individual. With the actual person. Then it seems out of character for a sinless character to sin.

But we need to go back a step. Considered as a merely possible agent, there is nothing either in character or out of character. There is nothing in particular which a possible agent was or wasn't going to do. His field of action is only limited by the imagination of the author. A possible agent is a concept. A concept in the mind of God. A divine idea.

What distinguishes acting out of character from acting in character is subsequently determined by the creative act of the author when he resolves on one set of actions to the exclusion of other possible actions. Only then does the agent have a settled persona or course of action.

When God creates Lucifer, he instantiates one possibility—out of many. Considered in abstraction, as a merely possible agent, there is nothing that Lucifer was incapable of doing—consistent with his finitude.

The only thing that delimits his practical field of action is which possible action God

chooses to instantiate. There's a sense in which God makes every creature do whatever it does, but not in the sense of making it do something contrary to what it would otherwise do, of its own accord. For there's no one thing which a possible agent was going to do, or refrain from doing.

There are certain abstract possibilities which God will not allow to be realized. God's choices are characterized by his wisdom and justice. But hypothetically speaking, there was no prior constraint on Lucifer's field of action, or Adam's field of action. What we have, instead, is a posterior constraint due to the creative act itself. A character can't act out of character once the novelist has finalized a concrete combination of abstract possibilities. A subset of hypothetical scenarios.

So there is, in this sense, nothing to get started—since it doesn't start with the actual agent. Rather, starts with a possible agent—an agent with an indeterminate field of conceivable actions. God's creative fiat crystallizes one subset of conceivable actions. Renders an indeterminate possibility a determinate reality. God instantiates that particular idea—his own idea—to the exclusion of other ideas.

Creation selects for one of these possibilities. Creation causes that possibility to be realized. But it doesn't cause the agent to do something in the sense of making him act other than how he'd act on his own. It's not as if a possible agent was going to do one thing rather than another until God intervened. Rather, as a merely possible agent, he could do a number of different things. A possible agent doesn't have a bias one way or the other in terms of what he'd do. There is no predisposition to do A rather than B, or B rather than A. At this juncture, his field of action is only delimited by what is logically compossible. By what the infinite mind of God is able to coherently "imagine" or conceive in relation to the same basic character.

And just as there is no one thing, in the infinite mind of God, that Adam or Lucifer would do, there's no one thing that Adam's posterity would do. God can imagine a wide variety of alternate endings, surprise endings or plot twists (as it were). At the level of possible worlds, there's more than one way the story can come out. For a possible person or possible timeline is simply a measure of what God is able to conceive.

There are one or more logically possible worlds in which all of Adam's posterity are sinners, since it is not logically impossible for God to imagine that scenario.

If God chooses to instantiate that possibility, he does us no wrong. For it's not as if there was something else we were going to do until he stepped in to thwart it.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ For a philosophical argument treating abstract possibilities as divine ideas, cf. G. Welty, *An Examination of Theistic Conceptual Realism as an Alternative to Theistic Activism* (Oxford 2000); <http://www.proginosko.com/welty/mphil.pdf>; *Theistic Conceptual Realism: The Case For Interpreting Abstract Objects As Divine Ideas* (Oxford 2006).

Appendix 5: Penal Substitution

by Steve Hays

I'm going to reproduce, with minor editing, my impromptu debate with Ken Pulliam on penal substitution.

When Ken is attacking proponents of penal substitution, he says:

The notion that it is wrong to punish an innocent person is a basic intuition that all men possess and it seems to be present in man from infancy. I believe the notion is present in man due to the way our brains have evolved...²⁰⁰

But when Ken is attacking opponents of penal substitution, he says:

Concerning Achan, I think it is a case of eisegesis to say that his family somehow were complicit in his act and thus rightly deserved to die. The text says that his animals and all of his possessions were also destroyed. It seems to me that one could hold that either his sin had "contaminated" everything that belonged to him (including his wife and children) and thus had to be destroyed or one could hold that the Israelites were simply operating under a "collective culpability" mindset, which we know was prevalent in ancient times. This collective culpability mindset would also explain why the command was given to destroy all the Canaanites, why all within Sodom was destroyed, and so on.²⁰¹

Yet if our brains are hardwired to believe it's wrong to punish the innocent, then how come collective culpability was "prevalent in ancient times"?

According to Ken:

The notion that it is wrong to punish an innocent person is a basic intuition that all men possess and it seems to be present in man from infancy. I believe the notion is present in man due to the way our brains have evolved...²⁰²

But, of course, that's entirely inadequate to validate the intuition. At best, that would only account for the origin of the intuition. But that doesn't begin to show how the intuition is true.

Indeed, if this moral intuition is simply the byproduct of naturalistic evolution, then it's an illusion. Natural selection has tricked us into believing that, but it doesn't cor-

²⁰⁰ <http://formerfundy.blogspot.com/search/label/A.%20A.%20Hodge>

²⁰¹ <http://christiancadre.blogspot.com/2010/08/some-clarifications-on-biblical.html#comment-3311418856305760064>

²⁰² <http://formerfundy.blogspot.com/search/label/A.%20A.%20Hodge>

respond to any objective moral facts.

Ken has also said:

I believe that the idea of Jesus Christ dying for man's sin has its origin in the ancient concept of offering human sacrifices to a deity. We know human sacrifice was common in ancient times.²⁰³

But if so, then this directly contradicts his appeal to a universal moral intuition against the vicarious principle.

Ken: If Christ does not deserve to be punished and yet he is punished, that is itself an unjust act.

Steve: We're not talking about just any old "person," but the divine lawmaker who sentences himself to acquit others.

Ken: That still does not explain the justice of the act. If a judge decides to punish himself instead of the guilty, that may be his prerogative if he is sovereign over the law but it doesn't explain why the punishment is a) necessary...

Steve: It is necessary because:

- i) It is morally obligatory that injustices be rectified;
- ii) If the guilty are to be forgiven consistent with justice, then retribution must still be exacted (though not necessarily on the offender).

Ken: ...or b) just. It would seem that the necessity of the punishment would have to be satisfy the demands of justice and yet it is itself an unjust act.

Steve:

- i) To say vicarious punishment is itself an unjust act is arguing in a circular.
- ii) One of your problems is that you're appealing to moral intuition; however, many people find the idea of an innocent party volunteering to take the rap for a friend to be morally compelling.
- iii) Apropos (ii), this works in reverse. If Jim and John have a mutual friend in Justin, and Jim offends John, then Justin may be able to intercede on behalf of Jim, as favor between friends. Jim is the vicarious beneficiary of Justin's friendship with John. John wouldn't do it for Jim (with whom he's currently estranged), but he will do it for Justin. John is treating Jim as if Jim were Justin. As if he were entitled to the same

²⁰³ <http://formerfundy.blogspot.com/2009/10/human-sacrifices-and-death-of-jesus.html>

treatment as Justin.

Ken: How does punishing someone who is not guilty of the crime rectify justice? The act of punishing such a person is itself an injustice."

Steve: That doesn't advance the argument, Ken. You keep repeating the same claim. But that's the very contention in dispute.

Ken: The central element of retributive justice is that the person who commits deserves the punishment.

Steve: That's a red herring. Whether the offender deserves to be punished is not the question at issue.

Ken: If as Lewis says...

Steve: That's not a reasoned argument. That's an appeal to authority. The opinion of C. S. Lewis doesn't settle anything. That, itself, is something to evaluate.

Try that on Victor Reppert, not me.

Ken: ...then to punish an innocent person is an injustice.

Steve: That's not unqualifiedly true.

Ken: That is all well and good but that is not the same as Justin suffering the penalty that Jim deserves. How would it satisfy John's sense of justice if he punished Justin in Jim's place?

Steve: Jim is getting better treatment than he deserves because John owes it to Justin. That illustrates the principle of transmissible merit.

Ken: You state that the contention that punishing an innocent person is itself an injustice is the very contention in dispute. Precisely and you have failed to show how it is not an injustice.

Steve:

i) And you have failed to show otherwise. Repetitiously asserting your claim doesn't make it so.

ii) In addition, if all you're appealing to is moral intuition, then you can't prove your position. At best, you can cite illustrations which most readers find persuasive. But intuitive appeals lack the demonstrative value of, say, correspondence between belief that it's raining outside and rain outside.

Hundreds of millions of people find penal substitution intuitively compelling, so your intuition can't pull rank on their intuition.

The only thing that could pull rank is a divinely revealed norm.

Ken: If you read about retributive justice you will find that the key component is that the person who commits the crime deserves punishment.

Steve:

i) Once again, no one denies the fact that the offender deserves punishment. That's not the issue. The issue is whether a second party can be punished in his stead. That's not the same issue.

ii) And at the risk of stating the obvious, ethics is a value-laden discipline, so it's not as if everyone from Aquinas and Kant to James, Singer, and Ruse (among others) is going to agree on the key concepts.

Ken: The evil act is deserving of punishment.

Steve: So you think the act is deserving of punishment rather than the agent.

Ken: To decouple punishment from guilt is contrary to retributive justice. It is blatantly unjust to put the punishment that someone deserves as a result of his evil act upon an innocent person. This is self-evident and is recognized by virtually all men.

Steve:

i) I didn't know that virtually all men excluded virtually all Christians. For historically, millions of Christians have found penal substitution morally satisfying. Same thing with OT Jews.

And, of course, non-Christian sacrificial religion is also commonplace throughout history. Even in modern times (e.g. Voodoo, Santeria). The notion of vicarious atonement has been quite popular in time and place. That doesn't make it true, but it certainly falsifies your appeal to moral consensus.

Ken: Again, go back and read your Reformed heroes, they all say that.

Steve: Imputation is a classic case of penal substitution.

Ken: As to your illustration it may illustrate 'transferrable merit' but it doesn't illustrate 'transferrable demerit.' In order to show that penal substitution is legitimate, you need an illustration in which the demerit of one is transferred to another resulting in the just punishment of the innocent.

Steve: No, I don't. You have to show how the two are fundamentally asymmetrical.

John Owen doesn't recognize any such problem. He begins by defining the "formal nature" of sin as a "as it is a transgression of the law."

On that construction, what constitutes guilt, and liability to punishment, is a matter of what the law assigns.

And he goes on to say, "There is, therefore, no imputation of sin where there is no imputation of its guilt...therefore, which we affirm herein is, that our sins were so transferred on Christ, as that thereby he became 'reus,' — responsible unto God."

So, on his construction, it's possible for a second party to assume responsibility for the guilt of the first party.

You may disagree, but that is hardly a concession on Owen's part.

Of course only the guilt is transferable. In the nature of the case, one party's actions (e.g. sin) aren't transferable to a second party, for the second party didn't do what the first party did. He's not the same agent. So you can't say a second party did it. It's not attributable to him.

But it doesn't follow from this argument that moral properties (merit/demerit) are intransmissible. For the same moral properties can be shared by more than one agent.

No one denies that "there is no guilt without sin." That's not the question.

The question is whether the effect of sin (guilt) is transmissible, and not what causes the effect. You keep confusing distinct issues.

Ken: My point was that Owen, Hodge and virtually everybody recognizes that it is unjust to punish an innocent person.

Steve: You're confusing issues again. Owen, Hodge, et al. don't think it was unjust for God to punish Christ. That's a different issue from whether Christ suffered unjustly at the hands of Pilate or the Sanhedrin. It may be morally licit for a second party to permit another party to do something morally illicit.

Ken: How can guilt be transferred? Guilt is only caused by the demerit or evil action. If the actual demerit is not transferred, then the guilt is not actual (it is a fiction).

Steve:

i) You're confusing actual guilt with an actual guilty action, as if those are interchangeable. But deeds and moral properties of deeds are not conterminous, since more

than one deed can exemplify the same moral properties. I already explained that to you. You're not advancing the argument.

ii) How can Justin expect John to forgive Jim as a favor to Justin, when Jim did nothing to obligate John? How can John's obligations to Justin transfer to Jim? Yet, intuitively speaking, we regard that type of transaction as a defining feature of friendship. A will do a favor for C as a favor for B.

Ken: Crisp was talking about the justice of God and he argued that hell has to be real in order for God's justice to be demonstrated. He says it was not demonstrated in the death of Jesus because Jesus died 'undeservedly.' If Jesus died undeservedly, then his death was a miscarriage of justice.

Steve: You oversimplify the issue. As I already explained to you, to say it was unjust for the Sanhedrin to convict Jesus doesn't mean it was unjust for God to allow (or decree) that event. You're not advancing the argument.

Ken: Owen and Hodge think that it would have been unjust to punish Jesus (an innocent person) unless somehow the guilt of sin was transferred to him. Once the guilt is transferred, then it becomes just.

Steve: And transferring the guilt is, itself, just.

Ken: My point is that their position undermines the argument that Crisp is making in his paper.

Steve: Crisp doesn't argue that it was wrong of God to punish Jesus. God is not the referent of the injustice.

Try not to chronically oversimplify the issue.

Ken: What is the difference between 'actual guilt' and 'actual guilty action'?

Steve: A moral property is not an action. Even if a moral property is the effect of an action, a moral property is not, itself, an action.

Ken: It seems that what you need to be able to show is how the moral property of a deed can be disconnected from the deed itself.

Steve: I already did that with my illustration of the three friends. Your only response was to postulate a possible asymmetry between transferable merit and transferable demerit. But you didn't begin to demonstrate that postulate.

Ken: It is also not clear how even doing this helps you with the imputation of sins to Jesus. What precisely was imputed to him in your opinion?

Steve: The guilt of the elect.

Ken: I take it not the deeds (sins) but the moral property (evil) that is attached to the deeds? If that is the case, how does Jesus escape the charge of possessing evil?

Steve: Imputation doesn't implicate his moral character, as if he's personally evil.

Ken: Crisp nowhere mentions the Sanhedrin or any human actions for that matter in his paper. He is talking specifically about divine justice and how that needs to be demonstrated. He maintains that particularism is necessary because God needs to be able to demonstrate his justice and that justice was not demonstrated in the death of Jesus.

Steve: Crisp is a fairly orthodox Christian, so it's not as if he's impugning God's character or rejecting penal substitution. He clearly doesn't believe that God committed a grave injustice regarding the vicarious atonement of Christ. And in his article, he wasn't attempting to justify penal substitution. That's a presupposition of his article. Not something he tries to argue for in that particular article.

Ken: How so? How would it ever be just to transfer the guilt of a crime committed by one person to another person?

Steve: Take my analogy with the three friends.

Ken: And how could one do so without transferring the actual demerit associated with the crime?

Steve: There's a difference between actual blame, and an actually blameworthy agent.

Ken: But it is descriptive of the qualitative nature of an action. There is still no way to separate the quality of an action from the action itself. If the action disappears or is not present, then the quality of the action also disappears."

Steve: Well, that's a rather bizarre claim. Does the continuing existence of an effect depend on the continuing existence of a cause? Do we die the moment our parents die?

Ken: So it's a legal fiction? He is treated as if he were guilty but in reality he is not?

Steve:

i) You have an inability to grasp rudimentary distinctions. Guilt is hardly equivalent to an evil personal character. Guilt involves a violation of the law, or a violation of a duty to a superior.

If a soldier defies a direct order from his commanding officer, and that's a lawful order, then the soldier is guilty of insubordination—yet the soldier may be morally justified in defying the order.

ii) Also, the whole notion of a legal fiction is something of an oxymoron. The son of a king enjoys certain birthrights that a commoner does not, even though he's no better than the commoner—and maybe worse. But he's entitled certain prerogatives due to his ascribed social status. That's not a legal fiction, for his social status is legally defined in the first place. His relation to a second party (his royal father) automatically transfers the same regal standing to the son.

Ken: Again, since guilt has no meaning apart from the action that produced it, how can the two be separated?

Steve: Repeating the same tendentious denial doesn't make it any truer on the tenth repetition. From the time you first commented on this post, all you've done is to paraphrase the same claim. That doesn't rise to the level of a reasoned argument. You're just moving in circles.

Ken: Simply saying as you have above that one is the act and the other is the moral value of the act does not help because as I stated, if there is no act, then there is no moral value.

Steve: There is an underlying act—Adam's. The sins of the elect.

Ken: Moral value cannot be attributed to something that doesn't exist.

Steve: That's absurd on the face of it. Are you claiming that we can't make true, morally ascriptive present-tense statements about past events or individuals?

Ken: While he doesn't say in his article that the punishment of Jesus was an injustice, he does say that it was not an act of justice and therefore for God's justice to be demonstrated, hell must exist. I think it is a blindspot on his part not to recognize that not only was the punishment of Jesus not an act of justice, it was in fact an act of injustice, if he suffered undeservedly as he claims.

Steve: You continue to reiterate the same simplistic claim, contrary to my careful distinctions.

Ken: It seems you have the same problem because you want to say that Jesus was punished for the guilt of man's sin but not for the sin itself.

Steve: That is not what I said. He is punished for the sin of a second party. He assumes the guilt of the sin.

Ken: Blame is an abstract idea...

Steve: No, it's a moral property.

Ken: ...and has no meaning unless attached to a person or thing."

Steve: Of course, "attached" is just a spatial metaphor.

Ken: How do you transfer the blame for an action to one who did not do the action?

Steve: I already told you.

Ken: You can only do so as an act of injustice.

Steve: That's not an argument. That's a tape recorder on playback. Repeating yourself ad nauseum like a loop-tape does nothing to further the argument. You really shot your wad with the first comment. You have no fallback argument. Nothing in reserve.

Ken: Your analogy of the three friends does not illustrate imputation or the penal sub. theory. You have an innocent person mediating for a guilty person and the offended person agreeing to forgive the guilty person and treat him as if nothing happened because of his admiration and respect for the innocent person. Yes, that can happen and it would be closer to Thomas Aquinas' view of the atonement than to the Penal Sub. theory. For in your analogy, the offended party is forgiving the guilty party on the basis of the superlative righteousness of the mediator not because the mediator is suffering the punishment that the guilty party deserves. In your analogy, the offended party is giving up his right to demand punishment.

Steve: You're missing the point. My analogy operates at a higher level of generality. I didn't use that analogy as a specific model for penal substitution. Rather, I used that analogy to illustrate the broader principle of transmissible moral properties. The vicarious principle. In this case, a transmissible obligation. Penal substitution or vicarious atonement would be a special case of that broader principle. Try to follow the argument.

Ken: I am assuming the Christian view of morality in my critique. The Bible says that God is upright and that all of his ways are just. (Deut. 32:4). The Bible also says that it is wrong to punish the righteous along with the sinner (Gen. 18:25; Eze. 18:20).

Steve:

i) Your appeal to Gen 18:25 is equivocal. God is not the speaker. That's a quote from Abraham.

ii) Your appeal to Ezk 18:20 is typical Arminian spoof texting. Have you bothered to

read Daniel Block on that passage?²⁰⁴

Ken: If you try to separate the guilt from the act and apply the guilt to someone who did not commit the act, then you are guilty of a non-sequitur.

Steve: That's a category mistake. A non sequitur is a logical fallacy, involving an invalid inference.

However, the relation between action and guilt isn't like a logical syllogism. Rather, that's a metaphysical relation of some sort. Likewise, cause-and-effect relations don't occupy the same domain as premise/conclusion relations.

Ken: So if I violate the law, who is guilty? I am. Could you make someone else guilty of my violation?

Steve: That doesn't follow. A superior officer can be held accountable for the actions of his subordinates—even if he was ignorant of their actions, much less an active participant.

What makes a party legally culpable is simply a matter of how the law assigns guilt.

Ken: You still have not explained how someone can be held guilty for the crime of another.

Steve: Actually, I have—repeatedly.

Ken: You must not have read Crisp's article because his thesis is that unless there is a hell, then God's justice is never demonstrated. Thus, the death of Jesus is not a just act, that is why he calls it "undeserved." If someone receives punishment that they don't deserve, that is injustice.

Steve: I've explained that to you repeated. There are situations in which it is morally licit for one party to permit another party to do something morally illicit. Do you need some concrete illustrations? Is that your problem?

Ken: You gave an analogy in which someone is treated as if they didn't sin because someone else mediated on their behalf but that in no way illustrates how someone can bear the guilt for something they did not do. You say that the analogy illustrates "the broader principle of transmissible moral properties." but it doesn't. There is no transfer of moral properties in your illustration. The guilty person is released from punishment because of the intercession of the innocent person. The guilt of the guilty person is not transferred to the innocent nor is the innocence of the innocent party transferred to the guilty. You need to come up with an analogy that actually

²⁰⁴ D. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel 1-20* (Erdmans 1997), 554-90; cf. I. Duguid, *Ezekiel* (Zondervan 1999), 234-41.

illustrates what you are trying to prove.

Steve: You evince a completely superficial grasp of the issues. It is not simply a question of Justin interceding on behalf of Jim. Rather, it's also a question of what qualifies him to play the role of intercessor. Because Justin is John's friend, John has certain obligations to Justin.

And on that basis, John will do something for the undeserving Jim for the sake of the deserving Justin. John doesn't owe it to Jim, but because he owes it to Justin, John is obliged to treat Jim, the guilty party, as if Jim were Justin, the innocent party. So, yes, that illustrates the transitivity of moral properties.

Ken: You object to my use of Gen. 18:25 because it comes from Abraham's mouth not God's. Are you saying that the truth expressed in Gen. 18:25 is not valid; it doesn't accurately reflect the nature of your God?

Steve:

i) You used that as leverage with Christians, as if anything the Bible says is true merely because you can find it said in Scripture. But while Scripture is a true record of what people say, not everything people are recorded to have said is true.

Therefore, the truth of Abraham's statement wouldn't follow from the bare fact that the narrator of Genesis recorded that statement. For that you need an independent argument.

ii) For that matter, Abraham's experience illustrates the vicarious principle in the sacrificial animal that takes the place of Isaac.

Ken: You also apparently object to Eze. 18:20 as representing divine truth although you don't explain why.

Steve: Did I say Ezk 18:20 was false? No. I said your interpretation of Ezk 18:20 was false.

Ken: And you do not comment on Deut. 32:4 at all. Do you believe that your God is just and upright in all that he does? Do you believe that punishing a person for what he did not do is just?

Steve: I don't comment on Deut 32:4 because that was hardly meant to contravene the vicarious principle. After all, much of the Mosaic cultus is based on the vicarious principle. Your isolated proof-texting is acontextual.

Ken: You think that guilt can be transferred without the demerit which caused the guilt and I don't.

Steve: Demerit doesn't cause guilt. Sin causes guilt. Or law-breaking. Guilt and demerit are synonymous.

Ken: As far as the intuition that it is wrong to punish an innocent person being invalidated by the practice of human sacrifice, here is the answer. Many people will violate their moral intuitions if they are told by a superior, especially what they believe to be a deity, to do so.

Steve:

i) That's a classic example of someone who adjusts the evidence to accommodate his theory, rather than adjusting his theory to accommodate the evidence.

You postulate a universal moral intuition. Then, in the face of counterevidence, you postulate a motive to make the counterevidence fit your original postulate.

But unless you held a séance to interview the individuals in question, you're in no position to say they were only acting under orders, in violation of their conscience.

Where's your evidence that all of them were both acting under orders and violating their conscience? Do you have cuneiform polling data from the ANE?

ii) Moreover, your ad hoc explanation only pushes the question back a step: if subordinates only did it because their superiors made them, then why did their superiors issue the orders in the first place? Were their superiors violating their own conscience? Since you don't believe a real deity told them to do it, what's your explanation? Why did they believe that was a divine injunction?

iv) Finally, your entire objection is gutted by your evolutionary ethics. Even if natural selection conditioned us to entertain these moral intuitions, natural selection is amoral. Therefore, natural selection can't provide the moral warrant for these moral intuitions. The product of an amoral process is an amoral product. So you utterly failed to ground the moral intuition which you rely on to attack penal substitution.

Ken: A certain blogger, in an attempt to defend the Penal Substitutionary Theory (PST) of the atonement, has sought to justify God's punishment of the innocent with the following two arguments.

Steve: Of course, that's a prejudicial way of framing the issue. "Innocent" in what sense?

Ken: What is wrong with this argument? There is a logical distinction between suffering as a consequence (or 'collateral damage') and being singled out specifically for 'punishment.'

Steve:

i) The “logical” distinction is morally irrelevant to the issue at hand, for the core objection to penal substitution is that the condemned party did nothing to deserve this treatment. Whether you call that treatment “punishment” or “collateral damage” does nothing to differentiate the underlying principle, for in both cases the party is not receiving his just deserts. Unmerited suffering raises the same moral or theodicean issue as unmerited punishment.

ii) Moreover, it’s artificial to distinguish between “punishment” and “consequences,” for a punishment is simply a special type of consequence.

Ken: The reason for the distinction is that “punishment” is a legal term.

Steve: Of course, if punishment is merely a legal term, then guilt can be assigned by law. By definition, a party is guilty if the law assigns guilt in that situation. By definition, the punishment is legally just.

Ken: Punishment is the application of retributive justice.

Steve: That hardly follows even on its own terms. You can have utilitarian (e.g. deterrence, remediation) as well as retributive theories of punishment.

Ken: According to one source, retribution ‘is a theory of justice that considers that punishment, if proportionate, is a morally acceptable response to crime, with an eye to the satisfaction and psychological benefits it can bestow to the aggrieved party, its intimates and society.’

Steve: The fringe benefits of punishment are secondary to retributive punishment.

Ken: There are two necessary requirements for just punishment according to retributive justice: 1) the person be guilty of the crime; 2) the punishment be proportionate to the crime committed. Without these two components, there is no retributive justice.

Steve:

i) It isn’t clear if Pulliam is attempting to mount an internal critique or external critique of penal substitution.

ii) Clearly the Bible itself doesn’t regard penal substitution as incompatible with Biblical canons of justice.

iii) Perhaps Pulliam would say that Scripture codifies conflicting traditions regarding just punishment. But it would be difficult to argue that point without begging the question.

iv) Or does he contend that penal substitution is incompatible with extrabiblical definitions of retributive justice? But even if that were the case, what's the force of that objection?

a) Is he simply treating the definition of retributive justice as a social convention or analytical truth, like "bachelors are unmarried men?" But that wouldn't begin to show that penal substitution is objectively wrong.

b) Or is he grounding retributive justice in objective moral norms? Yet Pulliam appeals to evolutionary psychology to explain our moral sensibilities regarding retributive justice. But even if we went along with that etiology, this would only account for the origin our moral beliefs. It wouldn't begin to demonstrate that our moral sensibilities map onto objective moral facts. Indeed, if our moral sensibilities are the byproduct of an amoral process like naturalistic evolution, then that would undercut their normative force.

Ken: Obviously the most important element is the establishment of guilt and that is why we have judges and courtrooms.

Steve: Actually, that's not the priority in modern jurisprudence. The priority is to see to it that the accused receives full due process rights. Even if he's flagrantly guilty, he must be acquitted on legal technicalities.

Ken: Punishment, therefore, as a judicial sentence, is only justified by guilt. If the person is not guilty of the crime but is punished anyway for it, the act of punishment is itself an unjust act.

Steve: Once again, does he mean "unjust" by definition, as a social construct?

Ken: This argument fails to understand the relation of "justice" to the holiness of God. Christians believe that God is perfectly holy. Thus, he cannot do anything that it is unrighteous or unjust...Furthermore, man's moral code, according to Christians, is based on the absolute of God's nature (thus morality according to them is absolute). Laws that reflect the moral nature of God are just laws and those that do not are unjust. God's nature is the standard by which man is supposed to measure his conduct. Thus, if it is wrong for man to punish an innocent, then it must be because somehow the punishment of an innocent contradicts or violates the perfectly just nature of God.

Steve: Unfortunately, Pulliam didn't pay attention to what I actually said. I didn't say anything about "man's moral code." Rather, I distinguished between the divine "administration" of justice and the human "administration" of justice.

The human administration of justice is necessarily imperfect inasmuch as human judges aren't privy to all of the relevant factors—unlike God. And, of course, human judges are biased in varying degrees. Therefore, an inspired law code might include

certain precautionary measures to constrain human judicial authority which are altogether unnecessary in the case of God.

Ken: So the blogger admits that in both cases ‘the party is not receiving his just deserts.’ If someone does not receive their just deserts, that means they are receiving unjust treatment. So he admits my point.

Steve: Ken can’t follow the argument. As I’ve repeatedly indicated, I’m presenting a tu quoque argument from analogy in response to JD Walters.

This doesn’t mean I admit JD’s premise. Rather, I accept his premise for the sake of argument, then construct a parallel case to create a dilemma for JD.

Ken: There is still a difference between an innocent party suffering as a consequence of actions that were not designed specifically to punish him and an innocent party suffering treatment that was specifically designed to punish him. In the former case, it is an unfortunate consequence not an intended consequence. For example, if the US decides to bomb a building that is housing Al-Qaeda terrorists, and innocent civilians that live nearby are killed, the treatment of the terrorists and the treatment of the civilians is distinguished by the intent of the one causing the suffering. Now in human cases this is understandable because we humans are not omniscient and omnipotent. Sometimes we make mistakes and sometimes we cannot design the punishment in such a way that eliminates the possibility of innocents dying. But there is an obvious moral difference between killing innocents as collateral damage and targeting innocents to kill as terrorists often do.”

Steve:

i) The question is not whether there are differences, but morally relevant differences—given the nature of JD’s objection to penal substitution.

ii) In collective divine judgments, the “unfortunate consequences” are divinely intended. That innocent parties like Ezekiel and Daniel suffer as a result of the Babylonian exile is a divinely intended outcome of divine judgment.

Ken: It is correct that punishment is a special type of consequence. It is special in the sense that it designed to recompense the wrong-doer for his wrong act.

Steve: That doesn’t follow from the concept of punishment, per se. For that doesn’t follow from utilitarian concepts of punishment (i.e. deterrence, remediation).

Ken: To attempt to recompense an innocent for a wrong-act is non-sensical because the innocent by definition has not committed the wrong act. So to follow through with ‘punishment’ of an innocent is to commit an unjust and immoral act.

Steve: If he’s going to say that “by definition,” only the guilty party can be “pu-

nished,” then, by definition, there’s no such thing as unjust punishment.

In that case, he can’t say penal substitution is unjust punishment, for the use of the word “punishment” in that connection is “nonsensical.”

Ken: This assumes that all laws and all application of laws reflects justice. In Muslim countries, for example, there are many laws that are patently unjust. Are they legal? Yes. Are they morally just? No.

Steve:

i) Unfortunately, Pulliam is unable to follow his own argument. He’s the one who said judicial concepts like “guilt,” “innocence,” and “punishment” are what they are by definition. It’s simply a question of how the law defines those concepts.

Now he’s adding a caveat which he didn’t include in his original statement. And that caveat will vitiate his argument. For if laws and legal applications must reflect justice, then he can’t say that penal substitution is unjust “by definition.” In that event, the fact that something is defined by law doesn’t make it so.

ii) Since, moreover, Pulliam is a moral relativist, there is no objective standard of justice which just laws must exemplify.

Ken: True but the Bible clearly teaches retributive justice. So when the God of the Bible executes punishment, he is executing it according to retributive justice.

Steve: It’s true that Scripture uses retributive language. However, this doesn’t mean that Pulliam can begin with an extrabiblical definition of retributive justice, then say that Biblical penology is at odds with retributive justice. Rather, we’d have to begin with the Biblical concept of retributive justice.

Otherwise, Pulliam is using an extrabiblical definition of retributive justice to attribute retributive justice to Scripture, then alleging that Biblical penology isn’t properly retributive after all. The entire exercise is circular and incoherent.

Ken: I agree and this is one of its many contradictions. The fact is the Bible was written (and edited) by many different authors and there are actually competing or contradictory views presented on this topic as well as many others.

Steve: And Pulliam needs to demonstrate, without begging the question, that Scripture presents contradictory views of just punishment. All he’s done is to posit that Scripture is self-contradictory in this regard.

He can’t very well show that Scripture is self-contradictory by quoting extrascriptural definitions of retributive justice, then show that Scripture is (allegedly) inconsistent with extrascriptural concepts. For that wouldn’t begin to demonstrate the

internal inconsistency of Scripture.

How does he determined, on its own grounds, that Biblical retribution is at odds with Biblical imputation or substitution? Unless he can do so on its own grounds, he can't show that it's self-contradictory.

Ken: It is as incoherent to talk about punishing an innocent as it is to say that bachelors are married. It is non-sensical. So what one calls 'punishment' when inflicted on an innocent is not really 'punishment' but the infliction of unjust hard treatment upon one who does not deserve it.

Steve:

i) So by his own admission, Pulliam can't say that penal substitution constitutes unjust punishment.

ii) Instead, it's "unjust treatment." Yet when I mounted an argument from analogy in response to Walters, in which I drew that very distinction (i.e. between punitive and non-punitive unmerited suffering), Pulliam objected (see above).

iii) Notice, too, that he's now falling back on legal conventions, where "punishment" is reducible to how punishment is defined by law. But in that event, it would be just to punish an agent who had nothing to do with the commission of the crime as long as his guilt is legally assigned.

Ken: I don't agree. Evolution has provided us with instincts that are necessary to our survival as a species. Are these instincts true? Yes, I would say so. There are a few moral instincts that we also possess. Precisely how we came to have them, I am not certain but the fact that they are universally or nearly universally agreed upon tells me that they are true.

Steve:

i) That's a category mistake. Instincts can't be true or false. You might as well say the color red is true. At best you can formulate true or false propositions about instincts.

ii) Is the biological imperative a moral imperative? Doesn't that commit the naturalistic fallacy? Even if these "instinctual" moral intuitions are necessary for our survival, why should the human race survive?

iii) From a secular standpoint, why does the survival of the many (our "species") trump the survival of the one? In a lifeboat setting, why should I sacrifice my life for the sake of my fellow passengers? Given atheism, what obligates me to value their life more highly than my own?

iv) It's ironic that Pulliam tries to ground true moral intuitions in evolutionary psychology when Michael Ruse, for one, regards that etiology as an argument for moral nihilism:

I think I would still say—part of my position on morality is very much that we regard morality in some sense as being objective, even if it isn't. So the claim that we intuit morality as objective reality—I would still say that. Of course, what I would want to add is that from the fact that we do this, it doesn't follow that morality really is objective.

I'm saying that if in fact you're Christian then you believe you were made in the image of God. And that means—and this is traditional Christian theology—that means that you have intelligence and self-awareness and moral ability... it's a very important part of Christianity that our intelligence is not just a contingent thing, but is in fact that which makes us in the image of God.

What I would argue is that the connection between Darwinism and ethics is not what the traditional social Darwinian argues. He or she argues that evolution is progressive, humans came out on top and therefore are a good thing, hence we should promote evolution to keep humans up there and to prevent decline. I think that is a straight violation of the is/ought dichotomy...I take Hume's Law to be the claim that you cannot go from statements of fact—"Duke University is the school attended by Eddy Nahmias"—to statements of value—"Duke University is an excellent school."

Ed [Edward O. Wilson] does violate Hume's Law, and no matter what I say he cannot see that there is anything wrong in doing this. It comes from his commitment to the progressive nature of evolution. No doubt he would normally say that one should not go from "is" to "ought"—for example from "I like that student" to "It is OK to have sex with her, even though I am married." But in this case of *evolution* he allows it. If you say to him, "But 'ought' statements are not like 'is' statements," he replies that in science, when we have reduction, we do this all the time, going from one kind of statement to another kind of statement. We start talking about little balls buzzing in a container and end talking about temperature and pressure. No less a jump than going from "is" to "ought."

My position is that the ethical sense can be explained by Darwinian evolution—the ethical sense is an adaptation to keep us social. More than this, I argue that sometimes (and this is one of those times), when you give an account of the way something occurs and is as it is, this is also to give an explanation of its status. I think that once you see that ethics is simply an adaptation, you see that it has no justification. It just is. So in metaethics[4] I am a nonrealist. I think ethics is an illusion put into place by our genes to keep us social.

I distinguish normative ethics from metaethics. In normative ethics I think evolution can go a long way to explain our feelings of obligation: be just, be fair, treat others like yourself. We humans are social animals and we need these sentiments to get on. I like John Rawls's[5] thinking on this. On about page 500 of his *Theory of Justice* book, Rawls says he thinks the social contract was put in place by evolution rather than by a group of old men many years ago. Then in metaethics, I think we see that morality is an adaptation merely and hence has no justification. Having said this, I agree with the philosopher J.L Mackie[6] (who influenced me a lot) that we feel the need to "objectify" ethics. If we did not think ethics was objective, it would collapse under cheating.

If we knew that it was all just subjective, and we felt that, then of course we'd start to cheat. If I thought there was no real reason not to sleep with someone else's wife and that it was just a belief system put in place to keep me from doing it, then I think the system would start to break down. And if I didn't share these beliefs, I'd say to hell with it, I'm going to do it. So I think at some level, morality has to have some sort of, what should I say, some sort of force. Put it this way, I shouldn't cheat, not because I can't get away with it, or maybe I *can* get away with it, but because it is fundamentally wrong.

We're like dogs, social animals, and so we have morality and this part of the phenomenology of morality, how it appears to us, that it is not subjective, that we think it *is* objective...So I think ethics is essentially subjective but it appears to us as objective and this appearance, too, is an adaptation.

Within the system, of course, rape is objectively wrong—just like three strikes and you are out in baseball. But I'm a nonrealist, so ultimately there is no objective right and wrong for me. Having said that, I *am* part of the system and cannot escape. The truth does not necessarily make you free.

There is no ultimate truth about morality. It is an invention—an invention of the genes rather than of humans, and we cannot change games at will, as one might baseball if one went to England and played cricket. Within the system, the human moral system, it is objectively true that rape is wrong. That follows from the principles of morality and from human nature. If our females came into heat, it would not necessarily be objectively wrong to rape—in fact, I doubt we would have the concept of rape at all. So, within the system, I can justify. But I deny that human morality at the highest level—love your neighbor as yourself, etc.—is justifiable. That is why I am not deriving "is" from "ought," in the illicit sense of justification. I am deriving it in the sense of explaining *why we have* moral sentiments, but that is a different matter.

I think ultimately there is nothing—moral nihilism, if you wish.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ http://www.believermag.com/issues/200307/?read=interview_ruse

Ken: Some define objective as something that is true whether anyone believes it or not but I would prefer to define it as something that is true because everyone believes it.

Steve: No amount of consensus can ever make a naturalistic fallacy true.

Ken: That does not mean that everything that man has universally believed in history has proven to be correct but when one comes to moral instincts there has been a universal agreement among men that certain things are wrong, for example, rape, killing an innocent, and so on. Someone might argue that some societies have condoned these practices but I would disagree. Sometimes societies have enforced different standards for the treatment of those within their group versus the treatment of those apart from their group. For example, cannibalistic societies would prohibit eating people of their own tribe but people of other tribes could be eaten.

Steve: Of course that's special pleading. The only evidence for unanimity would be unanimity. Once you have to begin carving out deep exceptions, then you're no longer going by the evidence.

Ken: Or one might say that millions of Christians have seen no problem with Jesus dying as the penal substitute for man's sin even though he was innocent. However, the fact is that Christian theologians who believe in the PST have attempted ways to justify the punishment of an innocent in the case of Jesus. They have taken a number of different approaches but if it was not commonly believed that it is wrong to punish an innocent, then why would they attempt to rationalized and justify it in the case of Jesus?

Steve: That doesn't follow. They defend it in response to outside critics like the Socinians.

Ken: But according to the Christian the administration of human justice if it is to be truly just should be a reflection of God's nature which is the perfect standard (according to them) of justice.

Steve: That's deeply confused:

i) The very existence of a judicial system in Scripture presupposes the fall. All parties to the transaction are sinners. The judge. The accused. The accuser. The witnesses. There's no biblical expectation that the human administration of justice will mirror the divine administration of justice. That's one reason we have a final judgment.

ii) OT law establishes some basic boundaries for what the Israelites were required, permitted, or forbidden to do. It doesn't attempt to set an absolute ideal. For one thing, law can only regulate conduct, not attitudes. You can't legislate faith, love,

wisdom, &c.

iii) Moreover, laws are inherently general. They deal with certain types of situations. But it would be up to an OT judge (for better or worse) to exercise judicial discretion in any particular case, by taking into account the unique features of each individual situation.

Appendix 6: Creation

by Steve Hays

Several contributors to TEC cite Gen 1 as a reason to disbelieve the Bible. I'm going to discuss some issues regarding Gen 1 from different angles.

One thing I'd say at the outset is that unbelievers come to the text with a set of questions and expected answers that are often very different from the questions that the text is designed to answer. And that invites a misreading of the text, be it Gen 1-3, 7-9, or whatever.

Measuring Time

The second half of Poincaré's essay 'The measure of time' is the more famous because of its connection with special relativity. But I will concentrate here on the first half, where Poincaré begins with the problem that we do not and cannot have a direct intuition of the equality of successive time intervals (equality of duration of successive processes). This is not a psychological point. Two successive periods of a clock cannot be compared by placing them temporally side by side, that is why direct perception can't verify whether they lasted equally long,²⁰⁶

In the case of two sticks we can check to see whether they are equally long (at a given time) by placing them side by side; that is we can check spatial congruence (at that time) by an operation that effects spatial coincidence (at that time). We can check whether two clocks run in synchrony during a certain interval if we place them in spatial coincidence. These procedures do not suffice for checking whether two sticks distant from each other in time or space are of equal length, nor whether distant clocks are running in tandem, nor whether a clock's rate in one time interval is the same as some clock's rate in a disjoint time interval. But in physics, criteria for spatial and temporal congruence are needed. Poincaré is concentrating on this need.

What measures duration is a clock, and physics needs a type or class of processes that will play the role of standard clocks. What type or class to choose? One answer might be: the ones that really measure time, that is, mark out equal intervals for processes that *really* take equally long. While certain philosophers or scientists might count his demand as intelligible, it must be admitted that there could be no experimental test to check on it. We cannot compare two successive processes with respect to duration except with a clock; but clocks present successive processes that are meant to be

²⁰⁶ Bas Van Fraassen, *Scientific Representation* (Oxford 2008), 130-32; cf. R. Le Poidevin, *Travels in Four Dimensions* (Oxford 2003), chaps 1-2.

equal in duration. This is similar to Mach's point about thermometry: whether the melting of ice always happens at the same temperature, or the volume of a substance expands in proportion to temperature increase, can be checked only with something functioning as a thermometer—and thus cannot be ascertained in order to check whether thermometers are 'mirroring' temperature.

Poincaré wishes to reveal by these examples two problems that arise in developing a measurement procedure for duration. The first is the initial one, illustrated with the pendulum: we cannot place successive processes side by side so as to check whether their endpoints coincide in time. So there is no *independent* means for checking whether successive stages of a single process are of equal duration: the question makes sense only after we have accepted one such process as 'running evenly.'

In Medias Res

One of the stock objections to creationism is that it carries with it the notion that some natural objects have illusory histories. When we see a supernova, we see a nonevent. We see something that never really happened. And that, in turn, imputes deception to God.

But while this objection is superficially plausible, it fails to think very deeply about the basic nature of creativity. Indeed, it fails to take into consideration the nature of human creativity, much less divine creativity.

For example, in James Cameron's *Avatar* there's a Hometree that looks older than a Sequoia. To judge by the sheer size of the tree, it would have taken longer to grow than a Sequoia.

In *Avatar*, the Hometree has an implied history. And this is true of fiction in general. A novelist or playwright usually begins his story at some point within the ongoing history of the world. His characters have implied parents, implied grandparents, implied great-grandparents, and so on, even if those ancestors never actually figure in the timeline of the narrative.

Same thing with their surroundings. Say you place the characters in New York City around 2000 or 1965 or 1940. Whatever decade you place them in, that cityscape still has an implicit history which antedates the timeline of the story.

Yet, within the world of the story itself, the story doesn't begin at the beginning. Rather, the story begins as if New York City came into being a moment before, in 1940—complete with all those period buildings from decades earlier.

And that's because what a creative artist like Cameron does is to objectify his idea of the Hometree. Cameron created the Hometree, not by putting the entire history of the Hometree on film, from the time it was a little seed in the ground, but by putting

his idea of a grown tree on film. And that's because Cameron is only interested in just a part of Pandora's history. Although Pandora has a beginning, he doesn't begin at the beginning. Rather, he begins at that stage in Pandoran history where he wants to tell his story. He skips ahead to his favorite part of the story. But to tell that part of the story, he gives that timeline the temporal effects of an earlier phase in the same continuous storyline. An implicit past. For the present has an implicit past.

This is something we take for granted when we read a novel or see a movie. We understand that an artist instantiates his full-orbed concept of the plot, characters, and so on. It existed in his mind as a complete, finely-detailed idea. But when a creationist proposes that God's creativity is similar in this respect, eyes roll and fingers wag.

Yet that's how Gen 1 depicts creation. Creation is a series of speech-acts. God is an oral storyteller. A cosmic bard. He makes the world by telling a story. By verbalizing the story of the world. The world is the spoken word of God.

Now, you might say that this is nothing but a metaphor. Sure. But it's a creative metaphor. And creativity literally instantiates an idea rather than a process.

Of course, human creativity must employ some preexisting medium to objectify a concept. But divine creativity is making the medium itself.

Mind you, this is not a full-blown argument for creationism. My point is simply that the charge of deception is oddly obtuse.

Nature miracles

And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens." So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day (Gen 1:20-23).

Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children (Mt 14:15-21).

Many professing Christians subscribe to theistic evolution. From what I can tell, that's the default position in modern Catholicism. There are also some "evangelicals" like John J. Davis and Alister McGrath who represent that position.

Some Darwinian theists are more conservative than others. For example, you have Darwinian theists who deny the historicity of the creation account, but affirm the historicity of Jesus' miracles. For example, although they'd deny the historicity of Gen 1, they'd never presume to deny the feeding of the multitude.

But this raises some interesting questions. Take the creation account of fish in Gen 1:20-23. A Darwinian theist will deny that this is how fish actually originated.

Rather, he believes that fish originated through a long evolutionary process. And he believes that because he thinks the scientific evidence points in that direction. However, he also believes that Jesus miraculously multiplied two fish.

Now we don't know exactly what the additional fish were like that Jesus made by instantaneous fiat. But they were probably duplicates of the two fish. Just like you could catch in the Sea of Galilee.

Suppose you were an evolutionary ichthyologist who traveled back in time to this event. Suppose you examined one of the miraculous fish—only you didn't know it was a miraculous fish.

Could you tell the difference between the miraculous fish and a normal fish from the Sea of Galilee? No. All the evidence would point to a fish from the Sea of Galilee.

What is more, the miraculous fish would look just like fish that had gone through all of the preliminary stages in the lifecycle to reach that point. Its parents had mated. It started out as a fish egg. And so on.

But, of course, none of that would actually apply to the miraculous fish.

What is more, not only would the miraculous fish resemble a fish with a personal history, but, of course, that history would be continuous with the history of all its ancestors. The generations of fish which came before it.

But, of course, none of that would actually apply to the miraculous fish.

What is more, our evolutionary ichthyologist would explain to us that this fish was a "living fossil"—insofar as a modern fish bears the telltale traces of its evolutionary past. A living record of the past. Of prior adaptations leading up to a modern fish. Not only does this fish have a personal history, from its conception forward, but it evidences the evolutionary history of its species. To get to this fish, you have to go back millions of years through all of the intervening stages in evolutionary development.

But, of course, none of that would actually apply to the miraculous fish.

What is more, our evolutionary ichthyologist would explain to us that this fish evidences the common ancestry of man and fish, for human blood shares the same basic salt content as fish blood.

But, of course, none of that would actually apply to the miraculous fish.

The presumptive history lying behind the miraculous fish turns out to be nonexistent. All of the “scientific evidence” amounts to evidence of something that never happened.

So the position of a conservative Darwinian theist seems to generate a dilemma. Why treat the multiplication of fish as factual while treating the initial creation of fish as fictitious?

Natural illusions

The standard criticism of mature creation is that it implicates God in a web of deception. Mind you, I don’t think the natural record even appears to show macroevolution, so it’s not as if I’d invoke mature creation to save appearances. But let’s assume for the sake of argument that the Darwinian has appearances on his side.

I’ve already addressed the argument from deception from other angles, but now I want to address the argument from another angle.

As a matter of personal experience, I’m taken in by deceptive appearances every day of my life. And this isn’t some isolated phenomenon, like an optical illusion. No, this is a systematic, undetectable illusion.

For you see, I dream every night. And except for lucid dreams, which are rare, most of the time I have no inkling that I’m only dreaming. No awareness that what I perceive isn’t altogether real. Is, in fact, a massive illusion.

While I’m dreaming, the dreamscape is utterly convincing. The people I meet in my dream seem to be real enough. As long as I’m dreaming, I don’t suspect their existence. Everything in the dream reinforces the illusion, for the dream is a self-contained experience. In that altered state of consciousness, I have nothing to compare it too. The dream itself is the only frame of reference.

As long as I’m asleep, the outside world doesn’t impinge on my misperception of reality. The experience is inescapable from within the experience. Inside the dream there is no “outside.” No clue pointing to an external world. If I never awoke, I could never tell. I’d go right on thinking that this is all there is. That things are just the way they appear to be, in all the surreal weirdness of a dream.

Sacred Time & Sacred Space

This whole approach to creation account and the flood account is simply tone deaf to the literary strategy of the narrator (whom I take to be Moses).

1. There's a fairly explicit element of sacred time to Gen 1. For the timetable is meant to foreshadow the Sabbath.

Of course, that alone doesn't select for a non-YEC interpretation.

2. A number of scholars (e.g. Beale, Walton) have pointed out that Gen 1 also depicts sacred space. It foreshadows the tabernacle. In that respect Gen 1 is a stylized account, using implicit architectural metaphors to depict sacred space. It's naïve to press every detail as if it were intended to be a literal description.

Likewise, the proportions of Noah's ark (300x50x30) reflect simple ratios. And these, in turn, foreshadow the tabernacle. As Wenham says in his commentary, "The surface area of the ark was thus three times as much as that of the tabernacle courtyard, 100x50 cubits (Exod 27:9-13)" (1:173).

In addition, the triple-decker design plays on the cosmic temple motif.

3. Therefore, sacred space and sacred time are axial coordinates in Gen 1. They create a unified word-picture—with time representing the horizontal axis and space the vertical axis.

(There's a sense in which we also have sacred sound in Gen 1: the spoken word of God.)

4. Sacred time is a key concept in OT religion. And sacred time is conventional rather than natural. That is to say, the day, date, duration, or frequency of occurrence aren't something given in nature.

So even though sacred time may often be real time, it doesn't represent a natural division of time. It's not a periodic process like the solar day or lunar cycle.

5. Apropos (4), there's a numerological motif in many OT rites, objects, and events. Let's take a few examples:

"**Seven days** you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven out of your houses, for if anyone eats what is leavened, from the first day until the **seventh day**, that person shall be cut off from Israel" (Exod 12:15).

"You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for **seven days** at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt" (Exod 23:15).

"And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, and in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger **seven times**" (Lev 16:14).

"Six days shall work be done, but on the **seventh day** is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation" (Lev 23:3).

"Now on the tenth day of this **seventh month** is the Day of Atonement" (Lev 23:27).

"Speak to the people of Israel, saying, 'On the fifteenth day of this **seventh month** and for **seven days** is the Feast of Booths to the Lord'" (Lev 23:34).

"You shall count **seven weeks** of years, **seven times seven years**, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the loud trumpet on the tenth day of the **seventh month**. On the Day of Atonement you shall sound the trumpet throughout all your land" (Lev 25:8-9).

"You shall count **seven weeks**. Begin to count the seven weeks from the time the sickle is first put to the standing grain" (Deut 16:9).

"**Seven priests** shall bear **seven trumpets** of rams' horns before the ark. On the **seventh day** you shall march around the city **seven times**, and the priests shall blow the trumpets" (Josh 6:4).

"And on the **seventh day** God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation" (Gen 2:2-3).²⁰⁷

"Take with you **seven pairs** of all clean animals, the male and his mate, and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and his mate, and **seven pairs** of the birds of the heavens also, male and female, to keep their offspring alive on the face of all the earth. For in **seven days** I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground...On the **seventeenth** day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened..." (Gen 7:2-4,11).

"And in the **seventh month**, on the **seventeenth day** of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat...He waited another **seven days**, and again he sent

²⁰⁷ Christians commonly cite the parallel between Gen 2:2-3 and Exod 20:8-11. And that's valid as far as it goes. But there's actually a three-way parallel between Gen 2:2-3, Exod 20:8-11, and Deut 5:12-15. The Jewish Sabbath is analogous to both creation and the Exodus—which also makes the Exodus analogous to creation. But in that case the analogy is operating at a very general level of comparison, for the analogy must be broad enough to cover two quite different events—the creation and the Exodus. It doesn't involve a point-by-point correspondence between two events.

forth the dove out of the ark...Then he waited another **seven days** and sent forth the dove, and she did not return to him anymore...In the second month, on the **twenty-seventh day** of the month, the earth had dried out" (Gen 8:4,10,12,14).

"And in the eleventh year, in the month of Bul, which is the eighth month, the house [of the Lord] was finished in all its parts, and according to all its specifications. He was **seven years** in building it" (1 Kgs 6:38).

"So Solomon held the feast at that time, and all Israel with him, a great assembly, from Lebo-hamath to the Brook of Egypt, before the Lord our God, **seven days**" (1 Kgs 8:65).

"And on the eighth day they held a solemn assembly, for they had kept the dedication of the altar **seven days** and the feast **seven days**" (2 Chron 7:9).

6. So we clearly have a stereotypical numerology in play. What is more, the numerology is characteristically septunarian. The septunarian dates and intervals often represent real time, yet they are conventional rather than natural. Arbitrary figures, chosen for their numerological or intertextual associations.

(BTW, there's also the question of what numeral system the narrator was using. Modern scholars automatically filter these figures through a decimal numeral system, but that may be anachronistic. Depending on what numeral system the narrator employed, we might be overlooking other emblematic ratios in the story.)

7. And in some narratives (e.g. Gen 6-8) they appear to be somewhat artificial figures. It isn't coincidental that these figures ring the changes on the septunarian motif.

This may also be true of Biblical numbers like 12 or 40, which sometimes seem to be idiomatic or numerological figures rather than literal sums.

8. To some extent, the overly precise calendar in Gen 6-8, with its unnaturally symmetrical time-markers, represents a stylized numerology of sacred time.

This doesn't mean such numbers can't approximate real time and space. But it seems to be the case that Bible writers rounded numbers up or down to create a symbolic pattern. Not simply round numbers, but rounded off for numerological purposes.

So just as sacred time and sacred space are axial coordinates in the creation account, they are axial coordinates in the flood account as well.

9. And this is one reason why it's so naive for unbelievers to point out numerical difficulties or discrepancies in the account. Even if, for the sake of argument, these didn't mesh, that misses the point. For if the figures are numerological, then they

were never meant to express exact measurements in time and space.

10. That's not to say that sacred time and space bear no relation or resemblance to real time and space. But there are situations in which the narrator clearly intended to forge an artificially schematic account for hierophanic purposes.

Critics object to mature creation (or "apparent age") on the grounds that this would implicate God in a web of deception. Deceptive appearances.

YECs typically counter by citing paradigm-cases of mature creation—such as Jesus turning the water into wine.

I'd like to consider a different kind of example. Consider the healings of Jesus. These healings tend to restore the sick to a state of health such that you couldn't tell by examining them that they were ever sick.

Take the case of Jesus healing the man born blind (John 9). The blind man had some congenital defect which left him blind all his life.

When Jesus restores his sight, this doesn't merely affect the future. It also, or so it seems to me, erases any physical trace of his past affliction. An ophthalmologist, examining the man after Jesus cured him, would be unable to detect the fact that this man ever had that particular birth defect. So it doesn't merely change the present. It also changes the evidence of the past.

In addition, many Christians believe that God continues to miraculously heal people throughout church history. To the extent that this actually happens, you have many instances of miniature mature creation throughout the last 2000 years of world history.

I don't cite this as a positive argument for YEC. I merely cite this to question a facile objection to YEC.

Light & Shade

I. Introduction

Unbelievers regard Gen 1 as scientifically hopeless. But bracketing the limitations of science for now, another problem with this objection is how a scientific approach to Gen 1 is apt to misinterpret Gen 1. A scientific reading of Gen 1 imposes on Gen 1 the scientific significance of certain key concepts. However, those concepts don't necessarily possess the same connotations in Gen 1.

I grew up on a large, heavily-wooded, waterfront property. The entire neighborhood was well-wooded, with waterfront properties lining the shore of the lake.

Being a night owl, I'd go outside at night at various times after dark. I was familiar

with the phases of the moon and the phases of Venus. The occasional lunar halo or lunar eclipse. I noticed that the position of sunrise and sunset varied over the course of a year. Going outside at different times, I'd notice the "moving" stars shift position from hour to hour.

Of course, my own life was still regulated by the clock and artificial lighting. And just across the lake were the city lights of Seattle. So I didn't witness the night sky with the undiminished magnitude of the Psalmist (Ps 19).

Nevertheless, my experience does cause me to ask if readers whose lives are regulated by clocks and light bulbs aren't missing a key connotation in Gen 1. Electric lighting has erased the natural contrast between light and dark. Take the city slicker in a town like Manhattan or Vegas that "never sleeps."

II. Units of Light

When a modern urbanite comes to Gen 1, he tends to focus on the days as units of time. And, indeed, that's one function of the diurnal cycle.

But we need to remember that Gen 1 was written to an audience that lived by sunlight, starlight, moonlight, and firelight. The days of Gen 1 aren't merely or primarily units of time, but units of light. They differentiate light from darkness. "Day" connotes daylight.

There is also a narrative motion from the general to the specific:

Light/dark>day/night>morning/evening

Let's go through Gen 1, bolding the elements of light and shade:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, **darkness** was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, "Let there be **light**," and there was **light**. God saw that the **light** was good, and he separated the **light** from the **darkness**. God called the **light** "**day**," and the **darkness** he called "**night**." And there was **evening**, and there was **morning**—the first **day**.

And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. God called the vault "sky." And there was **evening**, and there was **morning**—the second **day**.

And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. And there was **evening**, and there was **morning**—the third **day**.

And God said, “Let there be **lights** in the vault of the sky to separate the **day** from the **night**, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be **lights** in the vault of the sky to give **light** on the earth.” And it was so. God made two great **lights**—the greater **light** to govern the **day** and the lesser **light** to govern the **night**. He also made the **stars**. God set them in the vault of the sky to give **light** on the earth, to govern the **day** and the **night**, and to separate **light** from **darkness**. And God saw that it was good. And there was **evening**, and there was **morning**—the fourth **day**.

And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” And there was **evening**, and there was **morning**—the fifth **day**.

And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was **evening**, and there was **morning**—the sixth **day**.

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.

By the seventh **day** God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh **day** he rested from all his work.

III. Pentateuchal Light

Let's now compare the luminal motif in Gen 1 with some other Pentateuchal texts:

1. Lamps

Exod 25:37

You shall make seven lamps for it. And the lamps shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it.

Exod 37:23

And he made its seven lamps and its tongs and its trays of pure gold.

Num 8:2

"Speak to Aaron and say to him, When you set up the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light in front of the lampstand."

It's safe to say the seven tabernacular lamps correspond to the seven inaugural days. Both the seven days and the seven lamps are units of light. The days of Gen 1 portend the lamps of the tabernacle. They have both a luminous and numerological correlation.

2. Theophanic light

This also draws attention to the religious significance of light in the Pentateuch, where light is often associated with manifestations of God:

Gen 15:17

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

Exod 3:2

And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.

Exod 13:21

And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.

Exod 13:22

The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

Exod 14:24

And in the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic,

Num 14:14

and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people. For you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.

IV. Pentateuchal Darkness

The connotations of Pentateuchal light are mutually defined by the connotations of Pentateuchal darkness.

1. The terror of the night

Although this is not explicit in Pentateuchal usage, I assume references to night would evoke fearful connotations for the target audience. Nocturnal predators came out at night. Some venomous snakes and scorpions were more active at night. And what made the night so fearful was the invisibility of natural hazards lurking under cover of darkness. They could see you, but you couldn't see them.

So to some extent I assume the contrast between day and night would trigger uneasy feelings about the absence of light.

2. Dreams and apparitions

However, Pentateuchal darkness also had religious associations. Angelic apparitions. Oneiromancy.

Gen 32:22-25

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

Gen 20:3

But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife."

Gen 20:6

Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her.

Gen 28:12

And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!

Gen 31:10

In the breeding season of the flock I lifted up my eyes and saw in a dream that the goats that mated with the flock were striped, spotted, and mottled.

Gen 31:11

Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' and I said, 'Here I am!'

Gen 31:24

But God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, "Be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad."

Gen 37:5

Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more.

Gen 37:9

Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

Gen 40:5

And one night they both dreamed—the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison—each his own dream, and each dream with its own interpretation.

Gen 41:1

After two whole years, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile,

Gen 41:5

And he fell asleep and dreamed a second time. And behold, seven ears of grain, plump and good, were growing on one stalk.

Num 12:6

And he said, "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream.

Since the Pentateuch is a literary unit in which Gen 1 foreshadows certain recurring themes in the remainder of a continuous storyline, we need to keep this context in mind as we approach the text of Gen 1.

Appendix 7: The Flood

by Steve Hays

Loftus says the Biblical flood is “wildly improbable,” without bothering to explain why.

1) Local or global?

For some reason, critics direct most of their fire at the specter of a global flood. Why is that?

i) Some or many come out of a fundamentalist background. So this is their point of reference.

ii) To their own way of thinking, a global flood presents an easier target.

iii) Perhaps they also feel that young-earth creationism represents a more potent social force or political threat than old-earth creationism or theistic evolution—although, with the rise of the Intelligent Design movement—any level of religiosity is coming under attack.

2) Flood or flood geology?

For some reason, those who criticize the flood account generally bundle their attack on the flood with a larger attack on flood geology. Why is that?

i) They think it's easier to attack the flood by linking it to flood geology.

ii) Since they regard both the flood and flood geology as equally erroneous, they don't bother to distinguish their objections.

But (1)-(2) need to be challenged.

i) As a matter of intellectual honesty, if you claim to be disproving the Bible, or some portion thereof, then the onus is on you come up with your own interpretation of Scripture. What is the best interpretation of the Biblical account?

You cannot merely depend on the interpretation offered by the opposing side, for their position is only as good as their interpretation. Even if you succeeded in disproving their position, that would not, of itself, disprove the Bible. In order to show that the Bible is incorrect, you would first need to show that their interpretation is correct, and then show that the Bible, correctly interpreted (by them), is incorrect.

ii) Likewise, disproving flood geology is not the same thing as disproving the flood. Flood geology is an exegetical and scientific construct. It intersects with Scripture, but it's not restricted to the witness of Scripture. Hence, even if you succeeded in

disproving flood geology (and there's more than one version), that would not, of itself, disprove the Bible. To pull that off, you would have to show that you are disproving those elements of flood geology which are grounded in the correct interpretation of Scripture. Critics of the flood take far too many shortcuts.

3) Implications of a local flood

People who disbelieve the flood tell us that this account is bound to be unscientific because it's reported in bronze-age literature. It was written by authors or redactors who didn't know any better.

And yet, when they mount an attack on the flood account, or flood geology, they typically construe the exegetical data in a highly anachronistic fashion. What are the standard arguments for the global interpretation? There are two basic lines of evidence:

i) The flood account employs universal quantifiers ("every," "all") with certain nouns.

a) At this point, the unconscious instinct of a contemporary reader is to transfer these expressions to his modern image of the world. But there's nothing literal about that interpretation. For the reader isn't really taking these expressions at face-value. Rather, he takes the quantifiers literally, yet when he transfers them to his own mental picture of the world, what he ends up with is not a literal interpretation of the text, but a hybrid, acontextual interpretation in which his own picture of the world supplies the object. He's kept the quantifiers intact, but swapped in a different referent.

If, however, you're going to take a bronze age approach, then you need to ask yourself what the narrative landmarks would conjure up to the original audience. What was their internal map? How big did they think the world was? What were the boundaries?

Indeed, we have some examples of ANE cartography, such as the Mappa Mundi and the Sargon Geography.²⁰⁸

Once you make allowance for the perspectival difference between ancient readers and modern readers then the descriptions could be global from the viewpoint of the original audience, but local from the viewpoint of the modern audience.

b) And this would have other consequences, regarding the number and variety of animals represented on the ark, since they would sample the implied geography of the implied reader, and not the space age generation.

Remember, the unbeliever keeps telling us that Genesis is bronze-age literature. And

²⁰⁸ Cf. W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Geography* (Eisenbrauns 1998).

that, in turn, commits him to ANE cartography, not satellite cartography.

If this is indeed taken to reflect the narrative viewpoint of the flood account, then that alone, at one stroke, undercuts almost all of the stock objections to the feasibility of the account. How did the animals migrate from all over the world? How did they disperse? How were they adapted to the diet and climate aboard the ark? How did they all fit into the ark? How could they be loaded in time? How did eight passengers care for so many animals? How did they multiply and diversify so soon after the flood? What did they eat after the flood? How did marine and freshwater species survive the mixing of seawater and freshwater? How did plants survive? Where did all the water come from? Where did it go? How does a global flood account for various geological phenomena around the world?

I'm not claiming that flood geology can't answer these questions. I'm only addressing the unbeliever on his own grounds. He is trying to saddle the flood account with a string of complications that do not, in fact, derive from his own view of Genesis. To the contrary, he is holding Genesis to an anachronistic outlook which he has superimposed on the text, despite his stated view that this is bronze-age literature.²⁰⁹

And even from a believer's standpoint, the text would be heard by bronze-age ears.

c) I'd add that while the flood account employs universal expressions, it obviously doesn't intend these expressions to be taken without any limitation whatsoever, for the same account specifically exempts the occupants on the ark. So these expressions were never meant to be all-encompassing. Their force is explicitly moderated by paradigmatic exception of the ark itself.

d) Unbelievers also think that Scripture uses hyperbolic language from time to time. So when do they take the language literally here, but hyperbolic elsewhere?

ii) Another argument involves an inference from the size of the ark, as well as the depth and duration of the flood. Unlike (i), this isn't a narrative assertion regarding the extent of the flood, be it local or global, but a possible implication. Yet there are some problems with this inference, especially from an unbeliever's vantage-point.

a) For one thing, the unbeliever also thinks that Scripture assumes a flat-earth perspective. Indeed, the unbeliever will castigate the flood geologist for abandoning his literalism at this juncture.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the flood account is written from a flat-earth perspective. If so, then how high could the floodwaters rise or remain? Even if the world is flat, it's not a fish tank. There are no walls to hold the water in. To the contrary, if the earth were flat, the overflowing water would run off the edge of the

²⁰⁹ For another example of how critics subconsciously raise anachronistic objections to the flood account, cf. <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/04/biologomachy.html>

earth. It is therefore quite inconsistent, on the one hand, to attribute a flat earth perspective to the narrative, and then, on the other hand, to go on and on about the absurdities involved with floodwaters overtopping Mt. Everest.

b) I'd add that whether or not the duration of the flood is consistent with a local or global flood depends, in part, on what flood mechanism we postulate. The Bible gives two sources: one from the top down, and the other from the bottom up. Rain-water is one source, but the other has reference to some vaguely stated geological phenomenon ("the fountains of the deep").

Because this reference is so unspecific, and even poetic, it leaves the flood geologist with a pretty free hand regarding what flood mechanism he should postulate.

Depending on what model you use, it would be possible to have a local flood of indefinite duration by simply damming the water supply. Mountains and hills function as natural dikes.

c) The design of the ark is both functional and figural. The triple-decker design is emblematic of the cosmic temple. There is also septunarian numerology in play (e.g. seven days, seven animals).

That should caution us against an overly-prosaic reading of the text. This is not a purely descriptive account of what occurred. Rather, this is stylized history.

iii) A local flood would also explain why the ark landed in the Ararat range (Gen 8:4). In a worldwide flood, the ark could have landed in any mountain range around the world. So why did it come down in upper Mesopotamia?

The contextual reason is that the garden of Eden was located somewhere in Mesopotamia (Gen 2:10-14). And the human race was still confined to this general region when the flood struck. So that is where the ark was launched. And that was the vicinity of the flooded region.

4) Implications of a global flood

If, however, we assume a global flood, we must still avoid saddling the text with extratextual interpolations, then acting as if the text is self-contradictory. For instance:

a) According to the creation account, the earth was originally submerged, and dry land appeared as a result, apparently, of orogenic activity (Gen 1:9).

In principle, it would take no more water to flood the earth than already existed. All God would need to do is to readjust the sea-level, returning the earth to the status quo ante.

That, of course, demands a miracle, but it's consistent with narrative clues and as-

sumptions.

b) The biblical text makes no assumptions about the relative salinity of the prediluvial oceans, or the saline tolerance of freshwater fish, and vice versa—not to mention that some individuals are hardier than others.

Likewise, it makes no assumptions about the topography of the prediluvial earth in relation to the postdiluvial earth.

I'd add that, for purposes of killing all the land animals, the floodwaters would only need to reach the tree-line. And to inundate all the habitable land, they would only need overflow the mountain passes, not the mountain peaks.

c) The text makes no assumptions about prediluvial land-barriers. It makes no assumptions about the range of biodiversity or biogeographical distribution in the prediluvial world. It makes no assumptions about the degree of dietary specialization or climatic adaptation before the flood.

Indeed, some of these extratextual assumptions don't even apply to modern species. The fact that many species have a standard diet doesn't mean that most of them can't eat anything else in a pinch. The fact that many species occupy a certain ecological zone doesn't mean they can't survive in a warmer or colder climate.

Also, Noah didn't bring them to the drop-site. God sent them there (6:20; 7:8-9).

d) How do ranchers and farmers and zookeepers feed so many animals with so few helpers? They get creative. They invent mass-feeding devices.

And it's not just modern people who do this. Ancient peoples were quite capable of low-tech innovations. Just read Varro's *De re rustica*.²¹⁰

e) As to postdiluvian biogeography, there's no reason to assume all the animals had to get there on their own steam. Men routinely introduce exotic species into native habitat, intentionally or unintentionally. That includes game species as well as livestock—which sometimes escape and revert to the wild, viz. feral dogs, cats, goats, pigs, and horses. That also includes vermin, viz. shipboard rats.²¹¹

5) Dating the flood

Unbelievers sometimes say there's no place to put the flood in ANE chronology.

²¹⁰ <http://www.intratext.com/X/LAT0056.htm>

²¹¹ For proponents of a global flood, cf. J. Currid, *Genesis 1:1-25:18* (EP 2003); A. Snelling, *Earth's Catastrophic Past*, vols. 1-2 (ICR 2009); J. Sarfati, *The Greatest Hoax on Earth?* (Creation Book Publishers (2010); K. Wise, *Faith, Form, and Time* (B&H 2002). For proponents of a local flood, cf. V. Poythress, *Redeeming Science* (Crossway 2006); J. Walton, *Genesis* (Zondervan 2001); R. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis* (WS, 2nd ed., 1999); http://www.frame-poythress.org/Poythress_books/NAII_Poythress_Redeeming_Science_20061017.pdf

However, this takes several things for granted:

- i) The Bible doesn't date the flood. The Bible sometimes cites datable events. The Bible sometimes gives us chronological intervals. Even then we have to make allowance for round numbers, missing links, or numerology. So it's not as if the flood contradicts what we know was happening at that time and place.
- ii) ANE chronology is rickety.²¹²
- iii) Dating the flood is tied to the scope of the flood.
- iv) Dating the flood is tied to young-earth or old-earth anthropology. How far back the flood could go depends, in part, on how far back man could go.
- v) Some scholars find corroboration in the Sumerian King list, Epic of Gilgamesh, Atrahasis Epic, and the Ziusudra Myth.²¹³ Assuming there's a conflict, that's a conflict between different types of archeological evidence. Do we go with provisional ANE dating schemes, or primary source testimonial evidence?

²¹² <http://bedejournal.blogspot.com/2011/04/what-happened-when-ancient-near-east.html>

²¹³ Cf. J. Hoffmeier, *The Archaeology of the Bible* (Lion Hudson 2008), 35-36; K. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans 2006), 425-26.

Appendix 8: Miscellaneous Objections

by Steve Hays

In his chapter, Loftus tries to snow the reader with a blizzard of objections to the Bible. He's hoping to overwhelm the reader with the cumulative impact of his miscellaneous objections, as if the sheer quantity of fallacious objections compensates for their lack of quality. For a number of reasons I am not going to address every single objection:

- i) Some of his objections are just a rehash of the same objections we already dealt with in TID.
- ii) Some of his objections are just a rehash of WIRC, which I dealt with in my review.²¹⁴
- iii) Some of his objections are repeated by other contributors to TEC, and I don't need to deal with the same objection more than once.
- iv) Some of his objections I address in separate appendices.

1. "Denigration" of women

He says the Bible "denigrates" women, citing (Gen 3:16).

- i) However, Gen 3:14-19 contains a threefold curse on the man, the woman, and the serpent. If the curse denigrates the woman, then it denigrates the man and the serpent as well.
- ii) Naturalistic evolution "denigrates" women by reducing women to planned obsolescent breeding-machines.

2. No religious freedom of expression

He complains about how the OT denies religious freedom of expression. Is Loftus a champion of religious expression? Elsewhere, Loftus says:

I also believe there are inherent dangers with religious beliefs. They don't always materialize, but they do have their impact in various ways. There are political reasons, which I don't touch on here much at all. There is a large voting block of evangelical Christians in America that help elect our local and state and national governmental officials. This large block of evangelical Christians also participate in letter campaigns to change public policy in ways I don't approve of. Atheists generally think Christian theism inhibits scientific progress, creates class struggles, sexism, homophobia, racism, mass

²¹⁴ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2006/10/satans-school-for-girlie-men.html>

neurosis, intolerance and environmental disasters. There are some dispensationalist Christians in America who believe the Jews are somehow still in God's plan. So they defend Israel no matter what they do, which fans the flames of war between the militant Muslims and the US.²¹⁵

And in chap. 4 of TEC, Avalos says his agenda is to completely eliminate the influence of the Bible in the modern world (129).

So this objection is blatantly hypocritical.

3. Mt 27:52-53

Loftus doesn't bother to explain why this is "wildly improbable." Perhaps he's seen one too many zombie films. But that's hardly what the text envisions.

4. NT forgeries

i) He alleges that some of the NT books are forgeries. He presents no evidence to substantiate this allegation, and he fails to engage the counterevidence.²¹⁶

ii) But suppose, for the sake of argument, that the NT apocrypha had just as much or more right to be in the NT canon as the books sanctioned by the church. What would that admission accomplish for the sake of atheism?

The NT apocrypha also contain miracles. The NT apocrypha depict Jesus as a divine or supernatural figure.

True, the NT apocrypha are sometimes heretical, but how is that relevant to atheism? What atheism finds fundamentally objectionable about Christianity is not Christian orthodoxy but Christian supernaturalism.

Bart Ehrman touts the slogan that history is written by the winners. But suppose the losers won? Suppose the monophysites won.

Would Loftus and his fellow infidels rest content if monophysite Christianity were the dominant Christology in Christendom? No.

²¹⁵ <http://debunkingchristianity.blogspot.com/2006/05/what-is-my-motivation-in-debunking.html>

²¹⁶ E.g. <https://bitly.com/bundles/ehrmanproject/4>
<http://www.4truth.net/fourtruthcb.aspx?id=8589998523>
<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/04/book-reviews-forged.html>
<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/publications/36-1/book-reviews/forged-writing-in-the-name-of-god-why-the-bibles-authors-are-not-who-we-think-they-are>
<http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2011/07/book-review-of-bart-d-ehrman's-forged-writing-in-the-name-of-god-why-the-bible's-authors-are-not-who-we-think-they-are/>
<http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2011/07/book-review-of-bart-d-ehrman's-forged-part-2/>
<http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2011/08/book-review-of-bart-d-ehrman's-forged-part-3/>

Militant atheism is so consumed by its hatred of Christianity that it's forgotten why it hates Christianity. The sheer hatred has become all-consuming. Hatred is all that now defines militant atheism.

5. The virgin birth

He cites alleged pagan parallels, but doesn't bother to interact with the counterarguments.

C. E. B. Cranfield, "Some Reflections on the Subject of the Virgin Birth," *SJT* (1988), 41: 177-190.

J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*

Edwin Yamauchi, "Challenge 4", L. Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Zondervan 2007), 178-83.

6. The Exodus

He mentions this as unhistorical without bothering to engage the counterarguments.

J. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford 1999).

K. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Eerdmans 2006), chap. 6.

7. Messianic prophecy

He denies Jesus fulfilled OT prophecy, but offers no argument, and fails to address evidence to the contrary.

T. D. Alexander, *The Servant King: The Bible's Portrait of the Messiah* (Regent College Publishing, 2003)

G. K. Beale & D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Baker Academic, 2007)

I. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (P & R Publishing, 1999)

T. Longman, *Immanuel in Our Place: Seeing Christ in Israel's Worship* (P & R Publishing, 2001)

J. A. Motyer, *Look to the Rock: An Old Testament Background to Our Understanding of Christ* (Kregel Academic & Professional; 1st ed., 2004)

V. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (P & R Publishing, 1995)

O. P. Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets* (P & R Publishing, 2008)

M. Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope: Is the Hebrew Bible Really Messianic?* (B& H 2010)

J. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (Intervarsity Press, 2009)

8. Original sin

Loftus says:

If some of us would not have sinned in the Garden of Eden under the same “ideal” conditions, then there are people who are being punished for something they never would have done in the first place (85).

i) But we wouldn’t even be here under that counterfactual. We are the end-result of the Fall. If Adam and Eve hadn’t fallen, you’d have a different family tree. In the chain of historical causation, you can’t remove a link in the chain, then relocate the link at an earlier stage in the chain. Counterfactual identity isn’t that facile or flexible. You can’t just transplant the same individual from the future to the past, or vice versa—for that alters the subsequent timeline. . That generates time-travel paradoxes.

ii) Moreover, if we’re going to invoke possible worlds, then that appeal cuts both ways. There’s a possible world in which, were I in Adam’s place, I wouldn’t sin—but by the same token there is another possible world in which, were I in Adam’s place, I would sin. So I’m hypothetically guilty of original sin.

9. Identity of glorified body

The Biblical doctrine of general resurrection (or the resurrection of the just) doesn’t require numerical identity between our mortal bodies and our immortal bodies. Our immortal bodies don’t have to have the same set of molecules as our mortal bodies. For that matter, our mortal bodies don’t have the same set of molecules throughout our lifespan. Personal identity doesn’t involve an equipollent correspondence between early and later stages of our body’s persistence through time.

A body is just a distinctive organization of matter. God can reconstitute the same physical pattern without reusing the same molecules. The glorified body needn’t be a recycled body.

In addition, we’d expect a degree of discontinuity. For one thing the immortal body will be disease-free.

Glorification presumably involves aging the body up or down to an optimal age, as well as eliminating diseases or major birth defects. It may also involve certain enhancements. That remains to be seen.

10. Gen 2-3

He doesn't bother to explain how that's wildly improbable.

i) One problem some people have with Gen 1-3 is their assumption that these accounts are purely descriptive. That this is what you'd see if you were there.

But a text like Gen 1-3 contains allusive, emblematic imagery. This is meant to trigger subtextual associations with certain iconic cultural motifs or other Pentateuchal texts. The presentation is more ideographic than pictographic.

Ironically, a prosaic reading is less realistic. For there is more in play than meets the eye.

ii) If he simply means that Gen 2-3 is at odds with evolutionary biology, then, of course, that involves us in a larger debate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

11. Fall of Lucifer

Loftus doesn't think Lucifer would rebel against God since that would be an exercise in futility.

Yet many infidels tell us that they would refuse to worship God even if he did exist—because they hate God. They know it would be futile to resist God, that they would lose, that they would have everything to lose, yet they don't care. They say they'd rather be on the losing side and suffer the consequences than serve a God they hate.

12. Darkness on Good Friday

Loftus doesn't explain how that's "wildly improbable." There are different ways that could occur. For instance, a swarm of locusts can darken the sky. And locusts symbolize divine judgment in Scripture.

In Joel 1, the prophet threatens a plague of locusts. In Joel 2, this carries over into a locustian metaphor, in which he likens the invading army to a swarm of locusts that

blackens the skies (2:2). The locustian motif could lie in the background of Mt 27:45 and Mr 15:33.

13. How does a spirit create/interact with matter?

Loftus says,

There is also the problem of what it means to say God is a spirit and how a spiritual being can create the physical universe. How does something that is spirit create something material, or interact with it, unless there is some point of contact between them that they both share? For instance, how can God speak audibly and be heard by sound waves to our ears, unless he can move sound waves? Logically they cannot interact, unless they share some kind of quality (88).

This bundles a number of issues into one:

i) It's ironic that Loftus makes science the measure of all things, yet raises this objection to theism inasmuch as nonlocality and action-at-a-distance are basic to quantum mechanics.²¹⁷

iii) Loftus is assuming that only like causes like. Is that true?

How does my mind cause my hand to move?

It also works in reverse. We sometimes dream about things that happened to us during the day. The sights and sounds, the physical interaction, cause us to simulate sights and sounds and physical interaction in our dreams, even though our dreamscape doesn't occupy real space.

iv) Counterfactual theories of causation don't require spatiotemporal contiguity.²¹⁸

v) Sound waves are not a precondition of audibility. Take dreaming, silent reading, or interior monologue.

vi) You can know something, or be justified in believing something, even if you can't explain it.

14. Joshua's long day

Loftus doesn't bother to explain how that's "wildly improbable."

There are three basic ways to interpret this text:

²¹⁷ Cf. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qm-action-distance/>

²¹⁸ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-counterfactual/>

i) One suggestion is that Joshua was requesting an ominous portent or prodigy which would demoralize the enemy:

A much more plausible explanation for the so-called "missing day" has been offered by John Walton, professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College. Traditionally, Joshua's request for the sun to stand still (Jos 10:12) has been understood as a request to God for additional daylight so that Israel would have more time to annihilate the Amorites. Walton points out, however, that at the time the request was made the sun was over Gibeon and the moon was over Aijalon to the west (Jos 10:12). With the moon in the west, the sun must have been in the east, making it morning. Since it was morning, there would have been no need for extended daylight (1994: 182).

To understand what Joshua was asking for (actually commanding, cf. Jos 10:12), Walton appeals to the celestial omen texts from Mesopotamia. The first day of the full moon, which took place in the middle of the month, was defined as occurring when the sun and moon were both fully visible for a few minutes on opposite horizons in the morning. If the first day of the new moon fell on the 14th day of the month, this was considered a good omen. Conversely, if the first day of the new moon fell on either the 13th or 15th day of the month, that was considered a bad omen.

The terminology of Joshua 10:12-13, of the sun and moon "standing" or "waiting," is the same as used in Mesopotamian celestial omen texts. This, plus the fact that Joshua focuses on both the sun and moon, prompts Walton to interpret the passage in light of the omen texts. Great significance was attached to such omens in the ancient Near East and undoubtedly the Amorites would have wanted to fight the Israelites on the first day of the new moon on the 14th day of the month.

Walton suggests that the Israelites confronted the Amorites on the 15th day of the month. If the sun and moon were both visible on the morning horizons on the 14th day of the month (a good omen) then on the 15th day the sun would be above the horizon when the moon was just on the horizon. Joshua was, in effect, requesting a bad omen for the Amorites--not because Joshua believed in omens, but for the psychological affect it would have on the Amorites. He commanded the sun to "stand" or "wait," so that it would be visible on the horizon at the same time the moon reached the horizon, thus resulting in a bad omen in the eyes of the Amorites.

The statement at the end of verse 13 is what has prompted the interpretation of an extended day: The NIV, for example, translates the passage: "The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day." Walton, however, translates the passage as, "The sun stood in the midst of the sky and did not hurry to go as on a day of full length" (1994:187). He explains that "the midst of the sky" does not necessarily mean that the sun was

high in the sky at midday. The sky was viewed as having various segments, one major segment being below the horizon, others being above the horizon, and so on. The Hebrew wording can mean that the sun was positioned in the eastern half of the sky. When the full moon comes on the 14th, and the month has the proper number of days, then each of the days of the month is a "full-length" day, according to ancient Near Eastern thought. That constitutes a good omen. This was not the case with the events of Joshua 10; the sun and moon did not act as they would on a "full-length" day.²¹⁹

ii) Here's another suggestion:

An important starting point is to take seriously its poetic nature—that its thought world is phenomenological and metaphorical rather than historical or scientific. The best option is to read verses 12-13 [i.e. Josh 10:12-13] figuratively as a poetic depiction of the military conflict on a cosmic scale. It compares to the claim of another poem, the Song of Deborah, that "from the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera" (Judg 5:20)...Habakkuk 3:11 probably offers the closest literary parallel.²²⁰

iii) Finally, there is no antecedent reason to think God could not or would not temporarily suspend the earth's axial rotation in this situation.

If that naturally happened, it would, of course, trigger a cataclysmic cascade effect. However, on the miraculous interpretation, this is not a matter of changing one variable in a closed system of second causes. Rather, God temporarily takes over the functions he normally delegates to second causes. So the overall balance remains intact.

The only objection to that interpretation goes back to the general objection to miracles.

15. The Trinity

Loftus says

It's hard enough to conceive of one person who is an eternally uncaused God, much less a Godhead composed of three eternally uncaused persons who have always shared a divine nature and who therefore never learned anything new, never took a risk, never made a decision, never disagreed within the Godhead, and never had a prior moment to freely choose his own nature (87).

²¹⁹ <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2005/08/Joshuas-Long-Day-and-Mesopotamian-Celestial-Omen-Texts.aspx>; cf. J. Walton, "Joshua 10:12-15 and Mesopotamian Celestial Omen Texts." A. Millard et al. eds. *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (Eisenbrauns 1994). 181-90.

²²⁰ R. Hubbard, *Joshua* (Zondervan 2009), 297.

i) Of course, that's not an argument. Loftus simply tells us that he finds that hard to conceive. But he doesn't give the reader a reason to agree with him.

ii) Many truths are hard to grasp. Some truths which are easy for a man to grasp are hard for a dog to grasp, or simply inconceivable for dogs. Some truths which are easy for a genius to grasp are hard for ordinary folks.

Some truths in mathematics are inconceivable even for brilliant mathematicians. It's just too complex for human minds to grasp.

Continuing:

This Godhead is also conceived of as a timeless being that was somehow able to create the first moment of time. How a timeless being could actually do this is extremely problematic. How does one make a decision when there is no time in which to make a decision? (87).

God didn't have to "make" a decision, for he was never undecided.

Continuing:

...there is still no temporal gap between his decision to create the first moment of time and the actual first moment of time (87).

i) And the problem with that is what, exactly? Loftus apparently objects to the possibility of time having a point of origin. But that's not distinctive to theism. There are secular cosmological models in which that's also the case.

ii) A counterfactual theory of causation doesn't require temporal precedence.²²¹

On p76, Loftus has an orthodox statement of the Trinity, which he cites to illustrate the "wildly improbable" character of Christian theology. But he doesn't bother explaining how this is "wildly improbable."

i) His allegation commits a category mistake. Even if (arguendo) the Trinity is false, it's not improbable, much less "wildly" improbable. For probability only applies to contingent states. But the Trinity, if true, would be a necessary truth.

ii) Perhaps, in his clumsy way, he's alleging that the Trinity is self-contradictory. But even if (arguendo) that's the case, a logical contradiction is not "improbable."

iii) He hasn't shown how the Trinity is self-contradictory (assuming that's what he has in mind).

²²¹ Cf. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-counterfactual/>

From a Protestant perspective, to show that the Trinity is self-contradictory, he would need to show that Scripture defines the unicity of God in a way that logically excludes the Trinity. But it's not at all clear how he'd go about that.

If the Trinity is true, then that's consistent with the unicity of God inasmuch as there's only one Trinity.

Appendix 9: Methodology, Teleology, and the PSR

by Steve Hays

According to David Eller, divine agential explanations are unscientific. But is that the case?

In fact, I submit the opposite to be the case. Methodological naturalism subverts scientific explanation, for scientific explanations, to be truly explanatory, must ultimately be teleological explanations, underwritten by the principle of sufficient reason—which is, at bottom, a theological principle.

Suppose a patient suffers from coronary heart disease. In performing open-heart surgery, the cardiologist acts as if the heart is a machine designed by an engineer. When the heart malfunctions, you repair it—the way an auto mechanic would repair a broken carburetor.

But imagine if you don't think the purpose of the heart is to pump blood. Imagine if you don't think various parts of the heart have a means-ends relation. Imagine if you eschew goal-oriented analysis. Then what are you fixing? What are you restoring?

This is more than hypothetical:

As it is usually understood, evolutionary naturalism is radically antiteleological. This implies that it is not suited to supply any kind of sense to our existence, if it is taken on as the larger perspective from which life is lived. Instead, the evolutionary perspective probably makes human life, like all life, meaningless, since it makes life a more or less accidental consequence of physics.

The profoundly nonteleological character of this modern form of naturalism is concealed by the functional explanations that fill evolutionary accounts of the characteristics of living organisms. But any reference to the function or survival value of an organ or other feature is shorthand for a long story of purposeless mutations followed, because of environmental contingencies, by differential reproductive fitness—survival of offspring or other relatives with the same genetic material. It is in the most straightforward sense false that we have eyes in order to see and a heart to pump the blood.²²²

Human curiosity leads people to ask what things are *for*. Teleological explanations answer “What for?” questions by appealing to forward-looking reasons.

²²² T. Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* (Oxford 2010), 15.

Children learn that certain things—a snapped twig, a pattern of pebbles washed up by the tide—are *not* thought to be explainable in this way. But there is a vast range of phenomena which adults do try to explain teleologically. Children accept these explanations and learn rules for constructing them. Folk acceptability is no guarantee of scientific acceptability, however. Many thinkers have held that the study of purposes is no business of science.

Goal explanations are widely employed in psychology, ethology, and Artificial Intelligence; natural function explanations figure in biology; social function explanations occur in anthropology, sociology, and sociobiology.

Yet there are some whose idealized conception of good science challenges the legitimacy of goal talk, and others who believe that natural function attributions are not wholly objective.

Typically, a functional explanation in biology says that an organ x is present in an animal because x has a function F . What does this mean?

Some philosophers maintain that an activity of an organ counts as a function only if the ancestors of the organ's owner were naturally selected partly because they had similar organs that performed the same activity.

However, this construal is not satisfying intuitively. To say that x is present because it has a function is normally taken to mean, roughly, that x is present because it is supposed to do something useful. This looks like the right sort of answer to a "What for?" question. Unfortunately, this normal interpretation immediately makes the explanation scientifically problematic, because the claim that x is supposed to do something useful appears to be normative and non-objective.

One possible ground for such a claim is that a designer meant x to do F ...If the designer is held to be Nature, the claim involves a metaphorical personification. Dennett (1987) argued that discerning natural functions always involves tacitly conceiving Nature as a designer.²²³

Speaking of Dennett:

According to Daniel Dennett, there are three different strategies that we might use when confronted with objects or systems: the physical stance, the design stance, and the intentional stance.

When we make a prediction from the design stance, we assume that the entity in question has been designed in a certain way, and we predict that the

²²³ T. Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* (Oxford 2010), 15.

entity will thus behave as designed... Design stance predictions are riskier than physical stance predictions. Predictions made from the design stance rest on at least two assumptions: first, that the entity in question is designed as it is assumed to be; and second, the entity will perform as it is designed without malfunctioning.”

The sorts of entities so far discussed in relation to design-stance predictions have been artifacts, but the design stance also works well when it comes to living things and their parts. For example, even without any understanding of the biology and chemistry underlying anatomy we can nonetheless predict that a heart will pump blood throughout the body of a living thing. The adoption of the design stance supports this prediction; that is what hearts are supposed to do (i.e., what nature has ‘designed’ them to do).

As already noted, we often gain predictive power when moving from the physical stance to the design stance. Often, we can improve our predictions yet further by adopting the intentional stance. When making predictions from this stance, we interpret the behavior of the entity in question by treating it as a rational agent whose behavior is governed by intentional states. (Intentional states are mental states such as beliefs and desires which have the property of ‘aboutness,’ that is, they are about, or directed at, objects or states of affairs in the world.²²⁴

Of course, Dennett doesn’t believe that natural objects were designed to do anything in particular. He simply regards the design stance as well as the intentional stance as a useful fiction.

From a Christian standpoint, we can take this literally. Natural objects were designed by God.

And we can attribute an intentional state even to a natural object that has no mental states in the indirect sense that it exemplifies divine intentionality—like a remote control toy airplane that goes wherever it’s directed to fly.

But as we’ve seen, there is a deeply entrenched tradition within modern science of banning teleological explanations from nature. I’m going to quote some observations by a modern philosopher, and then discuss the repercussions were we to carry the denial of natural teleology to its logical denouement.

The tension between religion and intellectual knowledge definitely comes to the fore wherever rational, empirical knowledge has consistently worked through to the disenchantment of the world and its transformation into a causal mechanism. For then science encounters the claims of the ethical postulate that the world is a God-ordained, and hence somehow meaningfully

²²⁴ <http://philosophy.uwaterloo.ca/MindDict/intentionalstance.html>

and ethically oriented cosmos.

My worry is that the truth of science would not be liberating. To empower, science must extend our ability to act; yet by draining the cosmos of meaning or purpose, science threatens to undermine this very capacity. And this should make us wonder if we can live in a disenchanted world. Religious worldviews may not be true, but we may not be able to do without them unless we can find some other way of imbuing the cosmos with meaning.

There are other nonscientific beliefs that stop our using technology without questioning its power. Say there is an ancient oak in my garden, in just the place I would like to build a little crazy golf course for the kids. I decide to cut the oak down with my chainsaw. Many of us would have qualms about this, but not because we have any doubts about the reliability of the chainsaw. Wouldn't it be wrong to cut down such a magnificent tree just to build a crazy golf course? We might think this wrong because other people, my neighbors and future generations, would be deprived of the sight of this grand old tree. But, some say, it is wrong to destroy this tree for a quite different reason, a reason that has nothing to do with the interests of human beings, present or future. In their view, living things like an oak have a certain place in the natural order. They grow leaves, produce acorns, and become gnarled. In so doing, they discharge their natural function. We have no right to interfere with the natural functioning of the oak just because we want another crazy golf course. We have no right to frustrate the aims implicit in the oak's activities and terminate its existence. To cut the oak down and burn it in order to make way for a crazy golf course would be to misuse that bit of nature, to pervert its natural functioning. Here, the application of technology must be curbed.

There is nothing in the scientific picture of the world to support this line of thought. The scientist acknowledges that we human beings have purposes and we impose those purposes on the world: we fix our environment to suit ourselves. But the things we work on, our physical material, has no purpose of its own. I may make some sticks of wood into a chair and thus give them a function. But, apart from me, these sticks have no function. They could be used as a seat, as a doorstop, or as a bludgeon. Anything these sticks can do I could use them to do and that would become their function. It is people who determine what parts of the natural world are for: in themselves they have no purpose....

Oaks, like all other species of living things, are not designed; rather they are a product of random mutation and natural selection...There is nothing here to support the idea that the tree's shedding its acorns is a more natural event than my applying a chainsaw to its trunk.

When I speak of science's disenchantment of the world, I mean science's re-

moval of natural purposes and meaning from the world...Science's powers of disenchantment now affect our understanding of human beings themselves. It is our turn to be disenchanted.

We must drop this talk of 'natural' and 'unnatural' where the human body is concerned. The body is a machine that is there to serve our purposes. Once we know how this machine works, we can treat it just as we would our car or our house.

A few years ago, I saw a television program about a man who fervently wished to be rid of his healthy left leg: this leg was a part of his body he simply did not want to have. His left leg felt like an imposition, an encumbrance, even a deformity. The man's misery was clearly genuine, and we watched him search desperately for a surgeon willing to amputate. Unsurprisingly, all the doctors he approached turned him down.

The doctors refused this man because, they thought, a doctor's job is to make people healthy, not to give them whatever they want. It was not biochemistry, physiology, or anatomy that taught them this. These sciences explain only how human bodies actually work and how they came to exist. Evolutionary biology no more prevents doctors from cutting off a man's leg to make him happy than it forbids me to cut down the ancient oak in my garden because it makes me happy. What we ought and ought not do with the human body is beyond science's scope...Is such thinking mere superstition, a harmful vestige of a prescientific age we should have outgrown long ago?²²⁵

Now for three more comments:

i) Owens says that "we human beings have purposes and we impose those purposes on the world."

But eliminative materialism has extended the program of disenchanting the world to disenchanting the human mind. It denies intentional states to the human mind. We are not goal-oriented creatures.

ii) Suppose we were to consistently apply the denial of teleological explanation to medical science. Owens already touched on that point, but his argument can be taken a step further.

Why do I go to the doctor? Because I feel unwell. It may be due to aches and pains that interfere with my performance. In some cases, the symptoms may be debilitating. In other cases, the symptoms may be life-threatening.

The doctor attempts to diagnose the source of the problem. He can't fix the problem

²²⁵ D. Owens, "Disenchantment," L. Antony, ed. *Philosophers Without Gods* (Oxford 2007), 165-71.

unless he can identify the problem.

But if science denies the teleological structure of natural objects, then there's nothing to fix since nothing went wrong in the first place. Unless the brain was designed to perform a particular function, brain cancer is not a malfunction. There's nothing to cure.

iii) Finally, notice the tension between Dawkins' complaint against Intelligent Design theory and the denial of teleological explanation in the secular scientific method. Dawkins regards Intelligent Design theory as a stopgap theory. According to him it short-circuits the ultimate explanation.

But if a scientific explanation must exclude a teleological explanation, then what is there left to explain? If natural objects have no natural functions, or if they only have whatever function we artificially assign to them, then what does a scientific explanation amount to?

Consider the interlocking relation between scientific explanation and teleological explanation, theology, and the principle of sufficient reason:

Since the world's all-perfect creator was constrained by a set of accessible metaphysical principles (e.g. continuity, sufficient reason, plenitude, perfection, and noncontradiction) it should be possible to recreate, as it were, the conditions of creation. And from that to deduce the world's structure. In this, Leibniz does not differ in method very much from modern theoretical cosmologists, though the latter tend to avoid any overtly theological underpinning (though some of the uses of the so-called anthropic principle might be noted—a notion that Leibniz would have been keenly interested in).

Leibniz also used his principles to verify Snell's law of refraction by what he called the method of final causes: the principle of perfection guarantees that light will take the "simplest" path, where the simplest path is taken to mean one that preserves identity of a ratio no matter what the angle of incidence. This is not so unlike appeals to simplicity or symmetry that are common in modern science.²²⁶

Here we see how the PSR, as a theological rationale, can serve to anchor or justify the least action principle in physics.

Of course, we can debate the individual merits of Leibniz's metaphysical assumptions, or their specific applications, but that doesn't obviate the general underlying principle. For instance:

²²⁶ "Leibniz," W. H. Newton-Smith, *A Companion to the Philosophy of Science* (Blackwell 2001), 226-27.

An airplane crash is investigated thoroughly. No cause for the malfunction is found. The investigative team reports that the plane crashed for no cause. We naturally object: “You mean, it crashed for no apparent cause.” But the team insists that in fact there was no cause.¹ Of course we might question the epistemic bona fides of this finding. After all, there could always be some cause beyond our ken. But can we do more? Can we insist that there must have been a cause?

The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) claims we can. Everything that is the case must have a reason why it is the case. Necessarily, every true or at least every contingent true proposition has an explanation. Every event has a cause.

Observe, finally, how strong our commitment is to the PSR, in connection with IBE in the special case in which only one explanation is available. Recall Sherlock Holmes’s famous precept “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth,” which seems at first sight to be a claim about modal logic. But actually the application of this principle uses a version of the PSR, as we see from the continuation of the quote:

[Holmes:] “We know that he did not come through the door, the window, or the chimney. We also know that he could not have been concealed in the room, as there is no concealment possible. When, then, did he come?”

“He came through the hole in the roof!” I cried.

“Of course he did. He must have done so.” (Doyle, 1927, p. 111)

Holmes thus takes the elimination of all other explanations to be tantamount to an elimination of all other possibilities. There is no possibility of the person’s coming-to-be *ex nihilo* in the room.

In our ordinary reasoning, if we are certain that we have enumerated all the possible explanations – as Holmes admittedly had not – and that all but one did not occur, then we are certain that the remaining explanation is the correct one. We do not allow for any possibility of there being no explanation. To modify somewhat an example by David White (1979), suppose that a number of zoo animals were brutally killed and dismembered. We have absolutely conclusive evidence that no animal had any access to the cages in question, and only one person did. Moreover, we know that no disease or other natural event could have caused the carnage. On the basis of our absolutely conclusive evidence, only that one person could have done it, though there is no direct evidence against him.

The only question is whether the evidence ruling out the other possible explanations is solid. Observe, too, that, as Holmes did, no doubt the prosecutor

in court will slide between talking of having eliminated all other possible explanations and talking of having eliminated all other possibilities, and no one will consider as a possibility the option that the dismembering deaths of the animals are a brute uncaused fact. Thus, in our ordinary practice, we assign zero probability to the chance that this was a brute fact. Now, there is no reason why it should be any less likely that we have an unexplained brute fact occur in a case in which there is only one available explanation than in a case in which there is more than one available explanation. Thus, in the latter cases, if we are to be consistent, we should suppose there to be no chance of there failing to be an explanation.

For the theist says that God brought about the BCCF for some reason *R*, but the theist cannot say very much at all about what *R* is. And something needs to be said about *R* for the explanation to count as spelled out “in relevant detail” (cf. Grünbaum, 2004).

However, note that this attempt to block the application of (133) fails as a theist can give some epistemically possible reasons *R*. She may say, with Rescher’s interpretation of Leibniz, that God wanted to optimize a balance of diversity over simplicity. Or she may say, with John Hick, that God wanted to create a world where creation could participate in self-creation on the level of species through evolution and on the individual level through the moral self-improvement and growth of limited persons. Or she might say that God valued the objective good of creatures’ praising him freely. There are many possibilities. The theist cannot say which of these possible reasons is the one on which God actually acted. But (133) does not require that we be antecedently able to say which one of the epistemically possible explanations is the correct one. As long as we can give some sort of a relevantly detailed sketch of an epistemically possible explanation, that is all we need.

If one complains that all of these sketches are too vague, consider the similar vagueness that can obtain in putative explanation of why a work of art came into existence. I once saw a number of rocks piled one on top of the other, on a rocky beach in Vancouver. The rocks clearly were purposefully arranged and had some sort of artistic vision. But I could not understand their arrangement. The sketch I could give of a putative agent-based explanation would be quite sketchy indeed: someone arranged them for some artistic purpose or other. But that should be enough for purposes of (133) since this seems a fine application of (133). In fact, to this day, my knowledge of the reasons for this arrangement remains more general than any one of the mentioned proposals in the theistic case. And, in fact, I can offer a theistic proposal that would have a very similar level of specificity: a highly intelligent agent brought about the BCCF for some artistic purpose or other.

Now it is true, I suppose, that if I stared at the work of art, I might eventually come up with possible interpretations that are more specific. But it is im-

plausible that I would need to do that to be justified in simply thinking that there is an explanation. Moreover, some (many?) people do claim to find more and more meaning in the universe as they continue to live.²²⁷

²²⁷ A. Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment* (Cambridge University Press 2006), 3, 283-84, 289-90.

Appendix 10: An Illustration of Early Christian Access to Evidence

by Jason Engwer

In chapter 2, I responded to Richard Carrier's claims about early Christian disregard for evidence (TEC, 62-63). What I want to do in this appendix is offer an illustration of the quantity and quality of evidence the early Christians would have had access to. Even where we don't have any record of Christians availing themselves of the opportunity to access the evidence in question, we can still conclude that it's probable that the evidence was utilized. And, as we'll see, we do have some accounts of early Christian utilization of these opportunities.

Before I explain what illustration I'm going to use, I want to expand on a point I've made above. If a five-year-old wants to stay home all day, eat nothing but candy bars and ice cream, and stay up late at night, it's reasonable to conclude that he won't do so. Why? Because more than his desires is involved. The surrounding society, especially his parents, will send him to school, give him other food to eat, and make him go to bed earlier than he'd like. If a husband has little interest in the Bible and church history, he may learn a lot about both over the years as he attends church. He's attending church in order to get along with his wife, but he ends up learning a lot about the Bible and church history in the process. We often experience things despite our desire not to. Life involves a lot of tradeoffs. We put up with one thing we don't like in order to get another that we do like. Or we get more of what we like than we anticipated. We attend college to prepare for a career, but we also learn about other subjects we didn't expect to learn about, and we meet our future wife and make new friends. My point is that we need to look beyond the alleged interests of the ancient Christians. Even if they, or some of them, were like the five-year-old I mentioned above, they'd often get taken to school in spite of their desires.

The illustration I want to use here is Rome. What sort of evidence did the early Christians in Rome have access to? Rome is just one city, and the Christians there would have advantages and disadvantages in comparison to Christians elsewhere. Some apostles and their associates visited Rome, but other cities were visited by other apostles and their associates who didn't visit Rome. Christians in or nearer to Israel would have derived some benefits from being geographically closer to the birthplace of Christianity. And so on. Rome's advantages and disadvantages have to be weighed alongside those of other locations. Rome isn't all we should take into account, but it does serve as a good illustration.

My treatment of this subject will have to be selective. I'll just be giving some representative examples, and I won't discuss those examples in much depth.

The New Testament says a lot about Paul's presence in and contact with Rome. The early and widespread patristic belief that Peter was in Rome as well is likely correct.

It's probable that at least two of the apostles visited the city, as did some of the associates of the apostles.

The number and variety of letters and messengers sent to and from Rome in the early decades of Christianity suggest that the Christians there were in frequent contact with a lot of other individuals from a lot of other locations. Craig Keener writes:

Urban Christians traveled (1 Cor 16:10, 12, 17; Phil 2:30; 4:18), carried letters (Rom 16:1-2; Phil 2:25), relocated to other places (Rom 16:3, 5; perhaps 16:6-15), and sent greetings to other churches (Rom 16:21-23; 1 Cor 16:19; Phil 4:22; Col 4:10-15). In the first century many churches knew what was happening with churches in other cities (Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 11:16; 14:33; 1 Thess 1:7-9), and even shared letters (Col 4:16). Missionaries could speak of some churches to others (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:1-5; 9:2-4; Phil 4:16; 1 Thess 2:14-16; cf. 3 John 5-12) and send personal news by other workers (Eph 6:21-22; Col 4:7-9). Although we need not suppose connections among churches as pervasive as Ignatius' letters suggest perhaps two decades later, neither need we imagine that such connections emerged *ex nihilo* in the altogether brief silence between John's Gospel and the "postapostolic" period. No one familiar with the urban society of the eastern empire will be impressed with the isolation Gospel scholars often attribute to the Gospel "communities."²²⁸

Keener was focused on the circumstances surrounding John's gospel in his comments above, but his observations have a wider application that's relevant here.

Near the end of the first century, the Roman church sent a letter to the Corinthian church. Most likely, the letter was written by an associate of the apostle Paul named Clement.²²⁹ In the letter, Clement tells us that the deaths of Peter and Paul occurred in his generation (First Clement, 5). In section 63 of the letter, he comments that there were old Christians still alive who had been in the Christian communities of that day from the time of their youth. Those individuals would have had an influence on the churches, including the Roman church, and would have served as potential sources of information for decades.

Clement was himself a contemporary of the apostles and probably one of their associates. As Irenaeus noted, "This man, as he had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them, might be said to have the preaching of the apostles still echoing in his ears, and their traditions before his eyes. Nor was he alone in this, for

²²⁸ The Gospel Of John: A Commentary, Vol. 1 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 41-42

²²⁹ See my argument to that effect at <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/11/review-of-michael-liconas-resurrection-14.html>. For a response to some arguments against the authenticity of First Clement raised by Robert Price, see <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/09/review-of-james-whites-debate-with-08.html>.

there were many still remaining who had received instructions from the apostles." (Against Heresies, 3:3:3)

Ignatius was a contemporary of the apostles and a bishop of an apostolic church. Near the beginning of the second century, he wrote to Rome and traveled there to die as a martyr.²³⁰ It should be kept in mind that the Roman Christians would have frequently been in contact with men like Clement and Ignatius, as they had been in contact with Paul and Peter earlier.

Around the middle of the second century, Polycarp, a disciple of the apostles²³¹, visited Rome (discussed in Eusebius, Church History, 5:24). What would he have encountered while there? Justin Martyr gives us part of the picture when he describes a Roman church service around the middle of the second century. Here are some relevant comments he made:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. (First Apology, 67)

The gospels were read and discussed in these church services. Polycarp probably would have heard issues relevant to the evidence for Christianity being discussed, such as the authorship of the gospels. The name of a document's author could be attached to a document in a variety of ways, such as in a document title, on a tag, or on the spine of a codex. When a Christian picked up a copy of one of the gospels to read during a church service, he'd need a way of distinguishing between one gospel and another. Distinguishing the gospels by the name of the author was a widespread practice in early Christianity, and the early manuscripts we possess distinguish the gospels from one another in that manner. Tertullian tells us that it was normal to attach an author's name to a document, at least in the context he was addressing (Against Marcion, 4:2), and the New Testament manuscripts we have support his claim. Naming the gospels' authors probably would have been part of the Roman church service Justin Martyr describes (as it's part of modern church services), the kind of service Polycarp would have attended.

Eusebius, in the passage from his church history cited above, quotes some of Irenaeus' comments about Polycarp's visit to Rome. Irenaeus mentions that Polycarp was involved in "consecration of the eucharist" while there. It would make sense for

²³⁰ For a defense of the authenticity of the Ignatian letters, see <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2009/07/are-letters-of-ignatius-and-polycarp.html>. For a response to Robert Price's arguments against the authenticity of the letters, see <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/09/review-of-james-whites-debate-with-08.html>.

²³¹ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/11/review-of-michael-liconas-resurrection-16.html>

him to be involved in church services, and not just administration of the eucharist, while visiting the city.

He also would have had other occasions to discuss evidential issues, like gospel authorship, when he visited Rome. Irenaeus, in the passage in Eusebius cited above, explains that Polycarp and Anicetus, a bishop of Rome at the time, tried to persuade each other on a matter of disagreement related to the celebration of Easter. (Irenaeus also says that Polycarp and Anicetus disagreed on some other matters that they set aside, which suggests that they had discussions in other contexts as well.) That dispute over celebrating Easter involved the timing of the celebration, and the arguments on both sides involved appeals to the Biblical documents and apostolic tradition.²³² In the process of such a dispute, it's likely that issues relevant to the evidence for Christianity would have come up (Biblical authorship, what the apostles taught, how the apostles related to each other, etc.).

Irenaeus tells us that Polycarp made a practice of telling people about his memories of the apostles and what the apostles told him about subjects like Jesus' miracles (in Eusebius, *Church History*, 5:20). He may have done so while in Rome. He would have been available to discuss such issues. When he discussed matters like the eucharist and celebrating Easter (a commemoration of Jesus' resurrection), he would have had many opportunities to address evidential issues in the process (how to interpret the gospels, whether the resurrection was a historical event, whether the resurrection was physical in nature, etc.). It's unlikely that Polycarp would visit the Roman church and be involved in such contexts without addressing any evidential issues.

Whether with Polycarp present or under other circumstances, the Roman Christians would have heard the gospels being read during church services and would have thought about and discussed those documents and other New Testament literature in other contexts. They would have had their own New Testament manuscripts, with authors' names attached. They would have had access to manuscripts from previous generations.

How much did the Christians of antiquity know about the significance of manuscripts and how to evaluate them? Eusebius gives us an example in section 5:28 of his church history. He's quoting an unknown source of the ante-Nicene era, perhaps

²³² Somebody might raise the objection that the disagreement between Polycarp and Anicetus reflects how unreliable Christian claims were at that point in church history. But a disagreement between two men only requires that one of them is wrong, not both of them. And they were disagreeing over a minor issue, the sort of matter of freedom Paul describes in Romans 14. Irenaeus, in the passage in Eusebius cited above, tells us that the dispute was minor and that Polycarp and Anicetus departed in peace. Each thought his manner of celebrating Easter was better, and each tried to persuade the other to his point of view, but they seem to have viewed it as something like a Romans 14 issue. If the apostles taught a variety of ways of celebrating Easter, and they allowed Christians to differ on the subject, then the traditions of Polycarp and Anicetus could both be apostolic in that sense.

the Roman presbyter Gaius, concerning some controversies over heresy in Rome. Part of the dispute involved the altering of Biblical manuscripts by the heretics in question. The author Eusebius quotes appeals to multiple lines of evidence that the heretics' manuscripts are unreliable: different heretics have different texts, their later copies disagree with earlier ones, the manuscripts are in the heretics' own handwriting, and they can't produce earlier manuscripts that agree with theirs. Notice that there's an awareness of multiple lines of evidence and a willingness and effort to attain that knowledge through research.

The Roman Christians probably had their own library of Biblical manuscripts and other literature. Martin Hengel mentions some information on the origins of the gospels that Irenaeus seems to have derived from the archive of the Roman church:

Claus Thornton has shown that this [a passage in Irenaeus about gospel authorship] is an earlier tradition, which must be taken seriously; as the geographical references and references to persons show, it is written throughout from a Roman perspective....

As Thornton has demonstrated, it corresponds to the short notes about authors in the catalogues of ancient libraries, of the kind that we know, say, from the Museion in Alexandria. Presumably this information comes from the Roman church archive. As 1 Clement, around AD 100, shows, the Roman community had a respectable library...

This is still evident in Justin, who also presupposes quite a large community library [in Rome].²³³

Irenaeus lived in Rome for a while, and he was in contact with the Roman church on other occasions, as his correspondence with the Roman bishop Victor illustrates. He would have had many opportunities to attain information, like his material on the gospels, from the Roman archive.

What sort of documents would the Roman church have kept in its library? Probably many that aren't extant today. Hengel comments, "of the second-century Christian writings known to us by title, around 85% have been lost. The real loss must be substantially higher."²³⁴ The lost documents include some written by associates and contemporaries of the apostles and other individuals who lived near that time, like Papias, Quadratus, Agrippa Castor, and Aristo. Though only one of Polycarp's letters is extant today, Irenaeus tells us that he wrote more (in Eusebius, *Church History*, 5:20). In his extant letter, Polycarp refers to other correspondence among the Christians of his day, some of which has been lost (*Letter To The Philippians*, 13). Men like Justin Martyr and Rhodo composed replies to Marcion that haven't survived.

²³³ *The Four Gospels And The One Gospel Of Jesus Christ* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2000), 35-37

²³⁴ *ibid.*, 55

Theophilus of Antioch and Pantaenus wrote Biblical commentaries that we don't have. There are many significantly relevant lost works written by non-Christian sources, like Thallus and Justus of Tiberias.

Appendix 11: Shared Death Experiences

by Jason Engwer

Raymond Moody recently published a book about phenomena in which a person or group of people shares in somebody else's near-death experience. "It's quite common that the people around a dying loved one seem to leave their bodies and accompany the loved one partway to a heavenly realm".²³⁵ He refers to other researchers who have discussed such experiences, and these phenomena have been known to exist for a long time. After I read Moody's book, I contacted some near-death researchers for more information. One thing that was mentioned by more than one of them was that the topic hasn't been studied much. It's not something new or something reported by only one source, but shared death experiences (SDEs) are much less common than near-death experiences (NDEs), and they've received far less attention.²³⁶

One resource that was recommended by the near-death researchers I contacted was a 2001 article in *The Journal Of Near-Death Studies*.²³⁷ The article discusses more than shared death experiences. It addresses "shared near-death visions", "shared near-death experiences", and "shared experiences of illness".²³⁸ The first category involves something like a vision experienced by a son sitting by the hospital bed of his dying mother. The second category refers to something like two sons in the hospital room thinking that they traveled through a tunnel of light with their mother and met some deceased relatives at the end of the tunnel, after which they returned to the hospital room and were able to corroborate their mutual experience with each other. The third category involves something like a son's experience of pain in his arm for no apparent reason while, unknown to him at the time, his mother in the hospital was experiencing that same pain in the same area of her same arm. They give examples of reported cases of each type of experience. I won't be saying much about shared illness experiences here. My focus is on the other two phenomena.

I also won't be addressing how SDEs relate to a Christian worldview. I've discussed the relationship between NDEs and Christianity elsewhere.²³⁹ Much of what I said about NDEs is applicable to SDEs, though the latter are of a more objective nature and have different implications accordingly.

²³⁵ *Glimpses Of Eternity* (New York, New York: Guideposts, 2010), front flap

²³⁶ Moody mentions in his book (44), however, that there was a conference on the subject at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, in May of 1994. Also worth noting is that some prominent individuals have had SDEs. Moody mentions Carl Jung (57), for example.

²³⁷ Glennys Howarth and Allan Kellehear, "Shared Near-Death and Related Illness Experiences: Steps on an Unscheduled Journey", *Journal Of Near-Death Studies*, 20(2), Winter 2001, 71-85

²³⁸ *ibid.*, 72-73

²³⁹ See <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/12/evangelical-view-of-near-death.html>.

Moody's book on SDEs contains little documentation. I don't know if Moody didn't want more documentation, the publisher didn't want it, or both. Whatever the case, it's a problem.

But there are some mitigating factors. For one thing, Moody is one of the biggest names in near-death research. He has some credibility that the average author wouldn't bring to the subject. Second, he includes some material on his own SDE, which means that the book offers a firsthand account in that context. Third, he does sometimes do things like name his sources, cite book titles, or name an individual who experienced the SDE in question. Fourth, he isn't just going by his memories of what people have told him about SDEs. He mentions that he took notes as he received SDE accounts over the years (41), and at some points he refers to how he's describing an SDE in the experiencer's "own words" (10, 158). It would be preferable to have more details and documentation. The book has some problems, but it has some value in spite of its weaknesses.

One of the reasons why we should be concerned about SDEs, even though not much research has been done on them yet, is the nature of the phenomena in question. The article by Howarth and Kellehear that I cited above explains:

In the shared NDE cases the NDE [experiencer] is a fellow traveler and is able to interact and confirm the joint experiences. Joint NDErs and NDErs are always able to communicate with one another and affirm one another's experiences. That shared communication reinforces a conviction of a shared reality, which privileges a survival rather than a simple psychiatric or imaginary explanation. Feedback is immediate in shared NDEs and the explanation is often more confidently embraced, particularly since rechecking and comparison of notes is possible for some time afterwards....

People who share near-death visions, NDEs, and illness experience use evidence, for example from the timing of events, witness accounts, and corroboration, to negotiate their way towards an explanation. The nature of this process will depend on a careful and deliberate telling of the nature of the experience, the extent and timing of feedback, the available evidence, and the testimonies of witnesses. (77, 82)

In his book mentioned above, Moody explains:

On the surface, it seems possible that near-death experiences are caused by electrochemical disarray in the brain. But shared death experiences are a different situation entirely. In these cases, someone who is present at another's death reports elements that overlap clearly and significantly with the near-death experience. Yet these people were not dying or even sick, an obvious fact that throws a major monkey wrench into the standard way of debating this highly important issue. (72-73)

Howarth and Kellehear note that experiencers of SDEs often struggle with explaining what they went through (83). Moody refers to an atheist who experienced an SDE and was "stunned" by it (142-143). According to Moody, "the experience is the same whether one believes in God or not" (125). He quotes two sisters who experienced an SDE: "For months it was beyond belief until we finally accepted it." (15) Another experiencer didn't believe in an afterlife and was skeptical of NDEs before he had his SDE (23). Moody reports:

That said, however, I find that most Christians don't skew the facts of their experience at all. Some see Jesus or other religious figures while some don't. Period. They don't try to skew the facts to make it appear as though they were in the presence of a religious figure. (143)

Non-religious experiencers are sometimes "very confused by what they see" and make comments along the lines of "I saw something *like* an angel come to greet my mother" or "Some people *might call* the person I saw Jesus." (143) One individual's SDE was positive, even though the dying person he was with had "a look of abject horror in his eyes" and had commented that he was afraid of death (159). The details of SDEs are sometimes different than the experiencers would have expected (26). SDEs sometimes occur with individuals who didn't have a close relationship with the dying person (28-29, 34-36). And they sometimes bring about a significant change in the experiencer's view of the afterlife (32, 40). It seems that these experiences occur among a wide range of people and sometimes run contrary to the expectations of the experiencer.

SDEs differ significantly from one another in content (75-76). However, some elements, including some that don't seem to be so often associated with death in other contexts, occur a lot. Some sort of mist is often seen around the body of the deceased person, for example (101-104).

One element of SDEs that seems to be common is one "not found in near-death experiences" (80). Often, experiencers will perceive that the room in which an SDE occurs has changed shape.

Though I don't recall any mention of this subject by Moody, another difference between SDEs and NDEs that I noticed is that none of his SDE cases are negative or hellish. I emailed some NDE researchers and asked whether they were aware of any negative SDEs, and they didn't seem to know of any. In contrast, more than fifteen percent of reported NDEs are negative.²⁴⁰ That contrast may be an indication of some sort of difference between the nature of NDEs and the nature of SDEs. It may also be a result, at least in part, of a reluctance to report a negative SDE that would reflect poorly on the person who died.

²⁴⁰ <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/05/hellish-near-death-experiences.html>

SDEs are usually onetime events for people (145-147). Experiencers don't acquire any ongoing paranormal abilities or have another SDE later.

Like NDEs, SDEs have some elements that suggest that they're largely subjective. The people who experienced the same SDE together will report mostly the same phenomena, as if the experience was something objective that they all shared, but they sometimes differ on the details. One experiencer said, "my sister heard beautiful music, although none of the rest of us did" (14). A paramedic sees a dying man's spirit next to his body, but the other paramedics don't seem to notice the spirit (27). In another SDE, only four out of six people present felt they were being lifted off the ground (49). In another case, one individual in the room saw some sort of presence shaped like a person floating near the dying patient, but another individual in the room didn't see any such presence (83). One person sees an individual in the room who isn't seen by another person (126-127). Somebody who enters the room where some people have been experiencing an SDE doesn't experience it himself (156). A daughter sees things that her parents in the same room don't see (175).

Some of these cases may be comparable to differing reports of a car accident. One witness notices a detail not noticed by another witness. One sees two passengers sitting in the back seat of one of the cars, whereas another witness didn't look at that part of the car. The two witnesses aren't contradicting each other. They just had their attention focused in different places. Or when two witnesses do contradict one another, it may be because of faulty memory or some other such factor, even though an actual car accident that they actually witnessed underlies both of their reports. But not all of the differences in these SDE accounts can be explained that way. Take the example of a case in which two people are looking at a dying individual in a bed, but only one of them sees some sort of being standing next to the bed. It's unlikely that the person who didn't see that being would have missed something so easy to see, if it was actually there for anybody to observe.

At the same time, the witnesses involved in the SDE cases mentioned above did often agree about a variety of paranormal phenomena they experienced together. The disagreements in their reports are accompanied by significant agreements.

Like NDEs, SDEs seem to be both largely subjective and largely objective. Both elements have to be taken into account. Many people mostly or entirely ignore one of those two elements when attempting to explain NDEs, resulting in a faulty explanation. We need to avoid repeating that mistake with SDEs. Both the subjective and the objective elements need to be addressed.

Moody describes a case in which a woman had an SDE with her son, who was dying of cancer. The woman witnessed her son's life review, a somewhat common element in NDEs. As a result:

The information this woman gathered from her son's life review was so specific that when it was over, she was able to recognize his friends and visit places that she had seen in the shared vision. (10)

Here's what another experiencer of an SDE said in "her own words" (10) regarding a life review she witnessed with a dying person:

Still, I saw him with girls when he was very young. Later I searched for them in his high school yearbook and was able to find them, just based on what I saw during the life review during his death. (11)

Sometimes more than one living person is involved. Moody discusses a case in which five people experienced an SDE together, and he comments that "this is told by one of the sisters, but all who were there corroborate the account" (13). He mentions an account given to him by two sisters, and "both of them" confirmed that they experienced the same paranormal phenomena, at the same time, in the room where their mother was dying (14). He also mentions other accounts that involved more than one living person, in addition to the individual who died (e.g., 35).

He discusses "'predictive experiences,' in which the shared death experience reveals the death of someone else who is not expected to die anytime soon." (15)

I don't know of any SDE case that would meet or surpass the level of evidence we have for the most evidential NDEs, like the Pam Reynolds case. However, some SDEs do seem to be supported by significant evidence. See, for example, pages 59-62, 90-91, 111-113, and 122-124 in Moody's book. Some researchers apparently have interviewed multiple witnesses and have attained significant confirmation of what was reported by the person who experienced the SDE.

