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Christianity Today, July, 2008

God Is Not Dead Yet

How current philosophers argue for his existence.

William Lane Craig | posted 7/03/2008 10:50AM

You might think from the recent spate of atheist best-sellers that belief in God has become intellectually indefensible for thinking people today. But a look at these books by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, among others, quickly reveals that the so-called New Atheism lacks intellectual muscle. It is blissfully ignorant of the revolution that has taken place in Anglo-American philosophy. It reflects the scientism of a bygone generation rather than the contemporary intellectual scene.

That generation's cultural high point came on April 8, 1966, when *Time* magazine carried a lead story for which the cover was completely black except for three words emblazoned in bright red letters: "Is God Dead?" The story described the "death of God" movement, then current in American theology.

But to paraphrase Mark Twain, the news of God's demise was premature. For at the same time theologians were writing God's obituary, a new generation of young philosophers was rediscovering his vitality.

Back in the 1940s and '50s, many philosophers believed that talk about God, since it is not verifiable by the five senses, is meaningless—actual nonsense. This *verificationism* finally collapsed, in part because philosophers realized that verificationism itself could not be verified! The collapse of verificationism was the most important philosophical event of the 20th century. Its downfall meant that philosophers were free once again to tackle traditional problems of philosophy that verificationism had suppressed. Accompanying this resurgence of interest in traditional philosophical questions came something altogether unanticipated: a renaissance of Christian philosophy.

The turning point probably came in 1967, with the publication of Alvin Plantinga's *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*. In Plantinga's train has followed a host of Christian philosophers, writing in scholarly journals and participating in professional conferences and publishing with the finest academic presses. The face of Anglo-American philosophy has been transformed as a result. Atheism, though perhaps still the dominant viewpoint at the American university, is a philosophy in retreat.

In a recent article, University of Western Michigan philosopher Quentin Smith laments what he calls "the desecularization of academia that evolved in philosophy departments since the late 1960s." He complains about naturalists' passivity in the face of the wave of "intelligent and talented theists entering academia today." Smith concludes, "God is not 'dead' in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy

departments."

The renaissance of Christian philosophy has been accompanied by a resurgence of interest in natural theology, that branch of theology that seeks to prove God's existence apart from divine revelation. The goal of natural theology is to justify a broadly theistic worldview, one that is common among Christians, Jews, Muslims, and deists. While few would call them compelling proofs, all of the traditional arguments for God's existence, not to mention some creative new arguments, find articulate defenders today.

The Arguments

First, let's take a quick tour of some current arguments of natural theology. We'll look at them in their condensed form. This has the advantage of making the logic of the arguments very clear. The bare bones of the arguments can then be fleshed out with further discussion. A second crucial question—what good is rational argument in our supposedly postmodern age?—will be dealt with in the next section.

The cosmological argument. Versions of this argument are defended by Alexander Pruss, Timothy O'Connor, Stephen Davis, Robert Koons, and Richard Swinburne, among others. A simple formulation of this argument is:

1. Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause.
2. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God.
3. The universe exists.
4. Therefore, the explanation of the universe's existence is God.

This argument is logically valid, so the only question is the truth of the premises. Premise (3) is undeniable for any sincere seeker of truth, so the question comes down to (1) and (2).

Premise (1) seems quite plausible. Imagine that you're walking through the woods and come upon a translucent ball lying on the forest floor. You would find quite bizarre the claim that the ball just exists inexplicably. And increasing the size of the ball, even until it becomes co-extensive with the cosmos, would do nothing to eliminate the need for an explanation of its existence.

Premise (2) might at first appear controversial, but it is in fact synonymous with the usual atheist claim that if God does not exist, then the universe has no explanation of its existence. Besides, (2) is quite plausible in its own right. For an external cause of the universe must be beyond space and time and therefore cannot be physical or material. Now there are only two kinds of things that fit that description: either abstract objects, like numbers, or else an intelligent mind. But abstract objects are causally impotent. The number 7, for example, can't cause anything. Therefore, it follows that the explanation of the universe is an external, transcendent, personal mind that created the universe—which is what most people have traditionally meant by "God."

The *kalam* cosmological argument. This version of the argument has a rich Islamic heritage. Stuart Hackett, David Oderberg, Mark Nowacki, and I have defended the *kalam* argument. Its formulation is simple:

1. Everything that begins to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.

3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.

Premise (1) certainly seems more plausibly true than its denial. The idea that things can pop into being without a cause is worse than magic. Nonetheless, it's remarkable how many nontheists, under the force of the evidence for premise (2), have denied (1) rather than acquiesce in the argument's conclusion.

Atheists have traditionally denied (2) in favor of an eternal universe. But there are good reasons, both philosophical and scientific, to doubt that the universe had no beginning. Philosophically, the idea of an infinite past seems absurd. If the universe never had a beginning, then the number of past events in the history of the universe is infinite. Not only is this a very paradoxical idea, but it also raises the problem: How could the present event ever arrive if an infinite number of prior events had to elapse first?

Moreover, a remarkable series of discoveries in astronomy and astrophysics over the last century has breathed new life into the *kalam* argument. We now have fairly strong evidence that the universe is not eternal in the past, but had an absolute beginning about 13.7 billion years ago in a cataclysmic event known as the Big Bang.

The Big Bang is so amazing because it represents the origin of the universe from literally nothing. For all matter and energy, even physical space and time themselves, came into being at the Big Bang. While some cosmologists have tried to craft alternative theories aimed at avoiding this absolute beginning, none of these theories have commended themselves to the scientific community.

In fact, in 2003 cosmologists Arvind Borde, Alan Guth, and Alexander Vilenkin were able to prove that any universe that is, on average, in a state of cosmic expansion cannot be eternal in the past but must have had an absolute beginning. According to Vilenkin, "Cosmologists can no longer hide behind the possibility of a past-eternal universe. There is no escape, they have to face the problem of a cosmic beginning." It follows then that there must be a transcendent cause that brought the universe into being, a cause that, as we have seen, is plausibly timeless, spaceless, immaterial, and personal.

The teleological argument. The old design argument remains as robust today as ever, defended in various forms by Robin Collins, John Leslie, Paul Davies, William Dembski, Michael Denton, and others. Advocates of the Intelligent Design movement have continued the tradition of finding examples of design in biological systems. But the cutting edge of the discussion focuses on the recently discovered, remarkable fine-tuning of the cosmos for life. This finetuning is of two sorts. First, when the laws of nature are expressed as mathematical equations, they contain certain *constants*, such as the gravitational constant. The mathematical values of these constants are not determined by the laws of nature. Second, there are certain *arbitrary quantities* that are just part of the initial conditions of the universe—for example, the amount of entropy.

These constants and quantities fall into an extraordinarily narrow range of life-permitting values. Were these constants and quantities to be altered by less than a hair's breadth, the life-permitting balance would be destroyed, and life would not exist.

Accordingly, we may argue:

1. The fine-tuning of the universe is due either to physical necessity, chance, or design.

2. It is not due to physical necessity or chance.
3. Therefore, it is due to design.

Premise (1) simply lists the present options for explaining the fine-tuning. The key premise is therefore (2). The first alternative, physical necessity, says that the constants and quantities *must* have the values they do. This alternative has little to commend it. The laws of nature are consistent with a wide range of values for the constants and quantities. For example, the most promising candidate for a unified theory of physics to date, superstring theory or "M-Theory," allows a "cosmic landscape" of around 10^{500} different possible universes governed by the laws of nature, and only an infinitesimal proportion of these can support life.

As for chance, contemporary theorists increasingly recognize that the odds against fine-tuning are simply insurmountable *unless* one is prepared to embrace the speculative hypothesis that our universe is but one member of a randomly ordered, infinite ensemble of universes (a.k.a. the multiverse). In that ensemble of worlds, every physically possible world is realized, and obviously we could observe only a world where the constants and quantities are consistent with our existence. This is where the debate rages today. Physicists such as Oxford University's Roger Penrose launch powerful arguments against any appeal to a multiverse as a way of explaining away fine-tuning.

The moral argument. A number of ethicists, such as Robert Adams, William Alston, Mark Linville, Paul Copan, John Hare, Stephen Evans, and others have defended "divine command" theories of ethics, which support various moral arguments for God's existence. One such argument:

1. If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist.
2. Objective moral values and duties do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.

By *objective* values and duties, one means values and duties that are valid and binding independent of human opinion. A good many atheists and theists alike concur with premise (1). For given a naturalistic worldview, human beings are just animals, and activity that we count as murder, torture, and rape is natural and morally neutral in the animal kingdom. Moreover, if there is no one to command or prohibit certain actions, how can we have moral obligations or prohibitions?

Premise (2) might seem more disputable, but it will probably come as a surprise to most laypeople to learn that (2) is widely accepted among philosophers. For any argument against objective morals will tend to be based on premises that are less evident than the reality of moral values themselves, as apprehended in our moral experience. Most philosophers therefore do recognize objective moral distinctions.

Nontheists will typically counter the moral argument with a dilemma: Is something good because God wills it, or does God will something because it is good? The first alternative makes good and evil arbitrary, whereas the second makes the good independent of God. Fortunately, the dilemma is a false one. Theists have traditionally taken a third alternative: God wills something because *he* is good. That is to say, what Plato called "the Good" is the moral nature of God himself. God is by nature loving, kind, impartial, and so on. He is the paradigm of goodness. Therefore, the good is not independent of God.

Moreover, God's commandments are a necessary expression of his nature. His commands to us are therefore not arbitrary but are necessary reflections of his character. This gives us an adequate

foundation for the affirmation of objective moral values and duties.

The ontological argument. Anselm's famous argument has been reformulated and defended by Alvin Plantinga, Robert Maydole, Brian Leftow, and others. God, Anselm observes, is by definition the greatest being conceivable. If you could conceive of anything greater than God, then *that* would be God. Thus, God is the greatest conceivable being, a maximally great being. So what would such a being be like? He would be all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, and he would exist in every logically possible world. But then we can argue:

1. It is possible that a maximally great being (God) exists.
2. If it is possible that a maximally great being exists, then a maximally great being exists in some possible world.
3. If a maximally great being exists in some possible world, then it exists in every possible world.
4. If a maximally great being exists in every possible world, then it exists in the actual world.
5. Therefore, a maximally great being exists in the actual world.
6. Therefore, a maximally great being exists.
7. Therefore, God exists.

Now it might be a surprise to learn that steps 2–7 of this argument are relatively uncontroversial. Most philosophers would agree that if God's existence is even possible, then he must exist. So the whole question is: Is God's existence possible? The atheist has to maintain that it's impossible that God exists. He has to say that the concept of God is incoherent, like the concept of a married bachelor or a round square. But the problem is that the concept of God just doesn't appear to be incoherent in that way. The idea of a being which is all-powerful, allknowing, and all-good in every possible world seems perfectly coherent. And so long as God's existence is even possible, it follows that God must exist.

Why Bother?

Of course, there are replies and counterreplies to all of these arguments, and no one imagines that a consensus will be reached. Indeed, after a period of passivity, there are now signs that the sleeping giant of atheism has been roused from his dogmatic slumbers and is fighting back. J. Howard Sobel and Graham Oppy have written large, scholarly books critical of the arguments of natural theology, and Cambridge University Press released its *Companion to Atheism* last year. Nonetheless, the very presence of the debate in academia is itself a sign of how healthy and vibrant a theistic worldview is today.

However all this may be, some might think that the resurgence of natural theology in our time is merely so much labor lost. For don't we live in a postmodern culture in which appeals to such apologetic arguments are no longer effective? Rational arguments for the truth of theism are no longer supposed to work. Some Christians therefore advise that we should simply share our narrative and invite people to participate in it.

This sort of thinking is guilty of a disastrous misdiagnosis of contemporary culture. The idea that we live in a postmodern culture is a myth. In fact, a postmodern culture is an impossibility; it would be utterly unlivable. People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather, they are relativistic and pluralistic in matters of *religion* and *ethics*. But, of course, that's not postmodernism; that's modernism! That's just old-line verificationism, which held that anything you can't prove with your five senses is a matter of personal taste. We live in a

culture that remains deeply modernist.

Otherwise, how do we make sense of the popularity of the New Atheism? Dawkins and his ilk are indelibly modernist and even scientistic in their approach. On the postmodernist reading of contemporary culture, their books should have fallen like water on a stone. Instead, people lap them up eagerly, convinced that religious belief is folly.

Seen in this light, tailoring our gospel to a postmodern culture is self-defeating. By laying aside our best apologetic weapons of logic and evidence, we ensure modernism's triumph over us. If the church adopts this course of action, the consequences in the next generation will be catastrophic. Christianity will be reduced to but another voice in a cacophony of competing voices, each sharing its own narrative and none commending itself as the objective truth about reality. Meanwhile, scientific naturalism will continue to shape our culture's view of how the world really is.

A robust natural theology may well be necessary for the gospel to be effectively heard in Western society today. In general, Western culture is deeply post-Christian. It is the product of the Enlightenment, which introduced into European culture the leaven of secularism that has by now permeated Western society. While most of the original Enlightenment thinkers were themselves theists, the majority of Western intellectuals today no longer considers theological knowledge to be possible. The person who follows the pursuit of reason unflinchingly toward its end will be atheistic or, at best, agnostic.

Properly understanding our culture is important because the gospel is never heard in isolation. It is always heard against the background of the current cultural milieu. A person raised in a cultural milieu in which Christianity is still seen as an intellectually viable option will display an openness to the gospel. But you may as well tell the secularist to believe in fairies or leprechauns as in Jesus Christ!

Christians who depreciate natural theology because "no one comes to faith through intellectual arguments" are therefore tragically shortsighted. For the value of natural theology extends far beyond one's immediate evangelistic contacts. It is the broader task of Christian apologetics, including natural theology, to help create and sustain a cultural milieu in which the gospel can be heard as an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women. It thereby gives people the intellectual permission to believe when their hearts are moved.

As we progress further into the 21st century, I anticipate that natural theology will be an increasingly relevant and vital preparation for people to receive the gospel.

William Lane Craig is research professor of philosophy at Talbot School of Theology. He is the coeditor with J. P. Moreland of the forthcoming Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology. His website is reasonablefaith.org. All of the traditional arguments for God's existence find intelligent and articulate defenders in the contemporary philosophical scene.

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Recommended Reading

Books on the existence of God.

William Lane Craig | posted 7/03/2008 09:02AM

Introductory Works

Twenty Compelling Evidences That God Exists

Kenneth Boa and Robert Bowman

David C. Cook, 2005

GOD?: A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist

William Lane Craig and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong

Oxford University Press, 2004

Does God Exist?: The Debate Between Theists & Atheists

J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen

Prometheus Books, 1993

The Case for a Creator

Lee Strobel

Zondervan, 2005

Advanced Works

Philosophy Of Religion: A Reader and Guide

William Lane Craig, ed.

Rutgers University Press, 2002

Does God Exist?: The Craig-Flew Debate

William Lane Craig and Antony Flew

Ashgate, 2003

God, Reason and Theistic Proofs

Stephen T. Davis

Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997

God and Ethics: A Contemporary Debate

Nathan King and Robert Garcia, Eds.

Rowman and Littlefield, 2008 (forthcoming)

Universes

John Leslie

Routledge, 1996

Theism and Ultimate Explanation: The Necessary Shape of Contingency

Timothy O'Connor

Wiley-Blackwell, 2008

The Nature of Necessity

Alvin Plantinga

Oxford University Press, 1979

The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment

Alexander Pruss

Cambridge University Press, 2006

The Future of Atheism: Alister McGrath and Daniel Dennett in Dialogue

Robert Stewart, ed.

Fortress Press, 2008 (forthcoming)

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Christianity Today, July, 2008

A New Day for Apologetics

People young and old are flocking to hear — and be changed by — winsome arguments for the Christian faith.

Troy Anderson | posted 7/02/2008 08:50AM

Despite all the recent attacks on faith — or, perhaps, because of them — these are definitely the best of times for Christian apologists such as Lee Strobel, William Lane Craig, Ben Witherington III, Darrell Bock, and J. P. Moreland. They are making documentaries, writing books, giving media interviews, attending debates and conferences, and presenting the public with what they say is a growing mountain of scientific and archaeological evidence documenting the truth of Christianity.

"There has been a resurgence in Christian apologetics as a direct result of the challenges Christianity has faced in the form of militant atheism in college classrooms, on the Internet, and in TV documentaries and best-selling books," says Strobel, former legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune* and most recently the author of *The Case for the Real Jesus: A Journalist Investigates Current Attacks on the Identity of Christ*.

Dinesh D'Souza, who wrote *What's So Great About Christianity?* (CT, March 2008), says the New Atheists are raising new types of questions requiring "21st-century apologetics."

"The apologetics of the 1970s and '80s are useful if you are teaching in a church camp, but it's not that relevant to the claims the New Atheists are making, which are very different," D'Souza says.

"The New Atheists are really surfing the waves of 9/11, equating Islamic radicalism with Christianity. These are not questions addressed by C. S. Lewis or Josh McDowell."

This spate of attacks has also kindled an unexpected surge of interest in apologetics among youth.

"It wasn't too many years ago that scholars were writing off apologetics because we live in a postmodern world where young people are not supposed to be interested in things like the historical Jesus," Strobel says. "The biggest shock is that among people who communicated to me that they had found faith in Christ through apologetics, the single biggest group was 16- to 24-year-olds."

Last summer, hundreds had to be turned away from a Focus on the Family- sponsored apologetics conference for teenagers that drew an overflow crowd of 1,500. Meanwhile, the hotbeds of apologetics education — Biola University and its Talbot School of Theology (CT, June 2003), Southern Evangelical Seminary, and Liberty University — are crammed with students pursuing graduate degrees in philosophy and apologetics.

As this fascination with the evidence for Christianity has piqued the popular mind, Craig, D'Souza, and others are debating some of the principal atheist philosophers and liberal Bible scholars at universities and other forums in the U.S., Canada, and Europe. These debates often draw

thousands of college students. Young people are curious whether Christianity can be rationally defended. Last year more than 2,000 students packed Central Hall in London to hear Craig debate biologist Louis Wolpert on the topic, "Is God a Delusion?" The moderator was BBC commentator John Humphrys, whom Craig calls the "Mike Wallace of Great Britain."

"He was stunned," Craig says. "He said, 'As I look out at this sea of young faces before me, whether or not you believe in God, something is going on here. I have never seen this kind of interest before in religious things in Britain.' Everywhere we go the reaction has been that people want to hear both sides presented. And when [they are], they will come out in droves to hear a discussion of the existence of God or the evidence for Christianity."

John Bloom, a physics professor at Biola, moderated what was billed as a "wild head-to-head debate" on Intelligent Design and Darwinism. Bloom says the recent challenges to Christianity coincide with celebrations marking the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

Reclaiming Jesus

Then there are the attacks on the New Testament's picture of Jesus as the Son of God.

Witherington, a New Testament professor at Asbury Theological Seminary, says the claims made by the Jesus Seminar and others have set off alarms among orthodox Bible scholars. Darrell Bock is a research professor in New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary and author of *Dethroning Jesus*. Bock speaks at forums nationwide about the Gospel of Judas and the Gospel of Thomas, which are used to argue that the Christ of Christianity is contrived and the real Jesus is a less divine figure.

"A cottage industry has developed to debunk the Bible," Bock says. "Their goal has been to take this more skeptical reading of the Bible out of the ivory tower and into the public square."

Christian apologists are beginning to make headway in telling the other side of the story. D'Souza, a former policy analyst in the Reagan White House, has received international media exposure debating atheist pundit Christopher Hitchens, *Skeptic* magazine publisher Michael Shermer, and others.

And although Strobel and others are appealing primarily to the intellect, people are responding with their hearts. Strobel says the recent aggression against the faith has provided a great opportunity to present Christ to non-Christians. Strobel is convinced apologetics helps bring people to God. He notes that more than 700 made professions of faith during his last book and speaking tour. Many people have a spiritual sticking point—a tough question about the faith. And once they find an answer, Strobel says, it often turns out to be the last barrier between them and God.

One of those people was Evel Knievel, the motorcycle daredevil who died in November 2007. Earlier that spring, Knievel called Strobel after a friend gave him a copy of *The Case for Christ*. Knievel said the book was instrumental in his conversion from atheism to Christianity. Strobel, a motorcycle fanatic since childhood, and Knievel became friends, speaking weekly over the telephone.

"He just transformed in amazing ways," Strobel says. "I know his last interview was with a macho men's magazine, and he broke down crying, talking about his newfound relationship with Christ. He was so grateful. He knew he had lived a very immoral life and regretted that. He told me many times how he wished he could live his life over for God, and yet God reached down in his last days

and dragged him into the kingdom. He was so overwhelmed by God's grace. Here was this macho daredevil who became this humble, loving, and sincere follower of Jesus. It was an amazing thing to behold."

Troy Anderson is a reporter for the Los Angeles Daily News.

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