

# Christian God-Talk While Listening to Atheists, Pluralists, and Muslims

By Ted Peters

**Abstract:** In the global conversation over religious ideas, a *de facto* debate is raging between atheism, pluralism, and Islam. Pluralism respects the claim of every religion. Atheism respects the claim of no religion. Islam respects the claim of its own religion. How should a Christian theologian construct a doctrine of God that benefits from listening to this conversation yet stresses what is important in the gospel, namely, that the God of Jesus Christ is gracious in character? What is recommended here is to (1) investigate the truth question; (2) avoid putting God in the equations; (3) affirm what is essential; and (4) practice charity.

**Key Terms:** God, Atheism, Pluralism, Islam, grace, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris.

How should Christians talk about God in a cross-fire conversation? The global conversation—if one could call it a conversation?!—consists of a cacophony of voices, each saying something different. The good news is that God is news. The confusing news is that such a mish mash of things are being said. How can a Christian speak of God in this conversation and make the all important point, namely, that the God in whom we Christians place our faith is gracious?

From within the cacophony I would like to tune in on three identifiable voices: the voices of atheism, pluralism, and Islam. One is secular and anti-religious. The other two are religious, while having a secular impact. Each has much to say about God. If Christian ears are open, what seems to be missing is an item that is important when interpreting the gospel of Jesus Christ, namely, the God of the Nazarene is a gracious God. How can this be said while alternately nodding in agreement and shaking our head in disagreement amidst the global and sometimes postmodern conversation?

David Tracy believes that “conversation” describes the role of the theologian in our emerging postmodern culture. He warns us about the challenge. “Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your own mind if the evidence suggests it.”<sup>1</sup> Yes, these are hard rules. I’ll try to obey most of them in what follows.

## A Conversation with Atheists? Pluralists? Muslims?

Like protestors in an anti-establishment march, the first shouts we will listen to belong to the new breed of *Evangelical Atheists*. Recent legal defeats

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meted out to creationism and Intelligent Design, plus a growing worldwide disdain for fundamentalism in all its forms, have emboldened the atheists. Marching to the tune of a re-tooled Darwinism, they are clamoring for the total extinction of what they deem irrational religion and its replacement with rational science.

Secondly, like a debating lawyer, *Islam* is vying for a positive verdict on the oneness of the one God. Muslims have since the days of the Qur'an insisted that the prime reality is God; and there is but one God and but one religion through which God can be properly worshipped and obeyed. The enemies of Islam's God are not only the atheists, but also the polytheists. Among the polytheists, Muslim's list their religious kin, apostate Jews and Christians. Secularized Jews have lost their loyalty to the one God, say the Muslims. But, the Christians are even more culpable of blasphemy, because of the tritheism inherent in the doctrine of the Trinity.

Thirdly, like an American idol breathing heavily into the microphone, *religious pluralists* are enticing listeners into a new relationship with their traditional past and their religious neighbors. The pluralists have no tolerance for intolerance. They see intolerance daily in religious absolutism, in narrow-mindedness, in lack of understanding and lack of charity toward believers belonging to alternative religious traditions. Pluralists want to combat religious imperialism with a doctrine of religious equality or parity so as to bring intercultural peace. Such equality can be affirmed if all will affirm the equal validity of the diverse ways in which God is experienced and worshipped and obeyed.

Pluralists respect every religion. Muslims respect their own religion. Atheists respect no religion. What kind of conversation should Christians try to engage in with partners who are, on the one hand, secular and even anti-religious, while, on the other hand, proffering conflicting approaches within religious commitment? Just how can Christians speak about a Trinitarian God who, out of boundless grace, love us and all creation?

What is a Christian to do amidst this argument in the public square? The way forward is complicated. Intellectually honest Christians appreciate

and even love the pursuit of scientific knowledge; so it is particularly unnerving to see atheists claiming that turf as their own. The pluralists appear to be morally motivated to treat people of diverse beliefs with equal rights; and this is consistent with Christian charity. Christians see Islam as a sibling of sorts within the Abrahamic family of believers: both affirm the oneness of God even if they differ over the Trinity. Christians are inclined to adapt at least in part to science, pluralism, and Islam. Yet, Christians also have something distinct to say about God. How should Christian theologians plant fruit that will blossom and nourish?

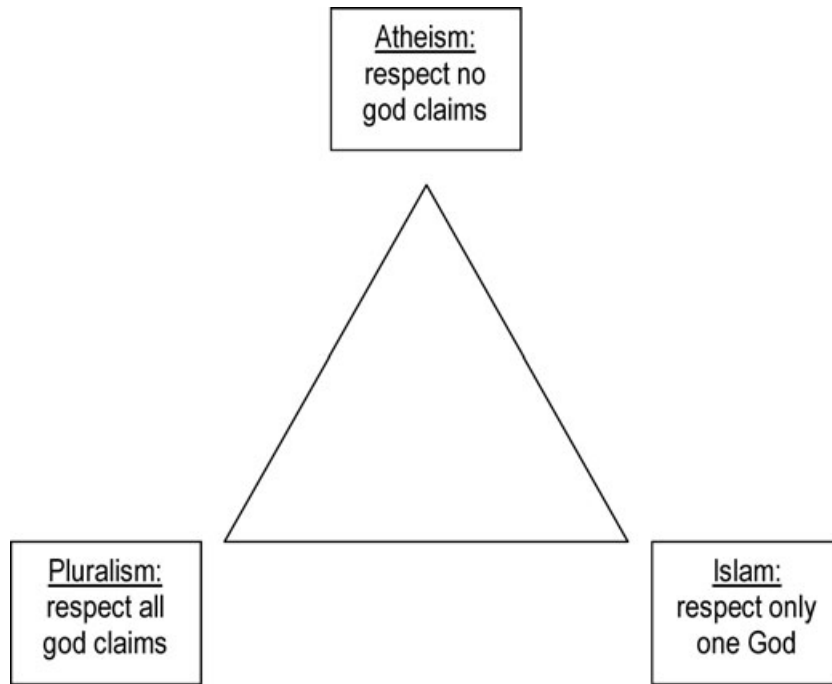
Of the three contemporary competitors who want to be heard, the most threatening to Christianity is atheism. If the new evangelical atheists turn out to be right—that scientific knowledge of the natural world is the only genuine knowledge and this leaves no room for a personal God—then they will be able to plant science where religion once grew.

In what follows, I would like to map the debate. I would like to identify the positions taken by the atheists, the pluralists, and the Muslims. Then, I would like to assess the threats to a Christian who would like to stand up for certain commitments about God. Of those commitments, the single most important one is the Christian belief that God is gracious. The God who created the world we live in, and who promises to redeem it from all imperfections, is gracious in character. Even more important to the Christian theologian than establishing that God exists is to affirm that the one God is a God of grace and love.

## The Evangelical Atheists

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“The New Atheists . . . condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God,” writes a columnist for *Wired* magazine. “Religion is not only wrong, it's evil.” Religion is irrational; and it makes societies prone to violence. Religion, especially fundamentalist religion, incites violence. What today's atheists want are more converts so they can bring peace. “A band of intellectual broth-



ers is mounting a crusade against belief in God.”<sup>2</sup> Curiously, the new atheists are evangelizing for non-belief.

If atheists would simply gather together quietly for non-worship, they would be harmless to others. If they would limit their claims to one—to the claim that no God exists—then pluralists could consider the atheist belief system just one among many, perhaps even respectable. However, the new breed of atheists is absolutist, fundamentalist, and evangelical in its approach to non-religion. Within the cultural niche traditionally occupied by religion, the new atheists want to place science. Not just any old form of atheism will do. It is a scientized atheism that is seeking to replace religion.

The new atheists are pretenders to the throne of natural science. They have staked out a claim that natural science is their kingdom. They are putting up no-trespassing signs to keep religious believers out. “Atheism, and its justification through science, is the apotheosis of the Enlightenment,” writes Oxford chemistry professor, Peter Atkins.<sup>3</sup>

The problem with this is that science is the common possession of Christians, Jews, Muslims, and non-theists the world over. Science is not the pri-

vate property of the atheists. Science does not require an exclusively materialist worldview. Nor does it require the denial of God. Yet, the atheists press forward on their crusade.

Philosopher Paul Kurtz, who describes himself as a “skeptical atheist” trying to resist the “transcendental temptation,” gives eloquent testimony to his belief in non-belief. God, he says, “is a figment of human imagination and contrivance, expressed creatively in religion, art, morality, and poetry. God does not exist. He is not a separate person or a being, an all-powerful, all-knowing, benevolent creator of the universe. These are all anthropocentric misattributions. To worship such a being is mistaken.”<sup>4</sup> More than merely mistaken; to worship God is to indulge in a childish irrationality that we need to outgrow.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most vociferous is Richard Dawkins.<sup>6</sup> Dawkins is the Oxford professor of science education who gave us the concept of the “selfish gene,” and who is known for championing the field of sociobiology.<sup>7</sup> What is so valuable to the theologian about Dawkins is that he confronts the question of God head on. Does God exist? No. Well, probably, no. The question of God is a scientific question, he avers; and scientists

can only speak in probabilities, not absolutes. So, it is Dawkins' considered scientific judgment that, most probably, God does not exist.

Now, we might ask: just what kind of God does Dawkins repudiate the existence of? After all, quite a diversity of ideas of God abound among the world's religions, and even within single religious traditions. So, just which idea of God is Dawkins combating?

Dawkins, thankfully, is quite clear. He says he is not attacking any specific divine figure such as Yahweh, Jesus, Allah, Baal, Zeus, or Wotan. Rather, he is attacking all of them at once. All belief in such divinities can be swept up into a single "God Hypothesis," which Dawkins attempts to falsify. "I shall define the God Hypothesis more defensibly: *there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.*" Dawkins advocates "an alternative view: *any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.*"<sup>8</sup> Let us be careful with the logic here. If God would exist, it would take the form of an eschatological existence, not a primordial existence. "If (which I don't believe for a moment) our universe was designed, and *a fortiori* if the designer reads our thoughts and hands out omniscient advice, forgiveness and redemption, the designer himself must be the end product of some kind of cumulative escalator or crane, perhaps a version of Darwinism in another universe."<sup>9</sup>

Even with this slim opening toward the coming into existence of a future intelligence, Dawkins closes the door on divinity. No God existed at the beginning, at the origin of the universe or at the origin of life; and no God now guides the evolutionary process of speciation. Natural selection does. Wondrously, natural selection has produced an intelligent designer, us. *We homo sapiens* are the most intelligent beings in nature's earthly history to date; and we might expect even higher intelligence to develop in the future. The evolutionary development of the human race is what Dawkins believes in; and, he contends, belief in evolution requires disbelief in God. Note how Dawkins has substituted natural selection for divine providence, and substi-

tuted the revelatory power of Darwin's theory of evolution for scripture.<sup>10</sup>

The kind of God Dawkins rejects is the kind of God who provides an explanation for a scientific description of the natural world. Is this what the God of Christian believers is supposed to do? Not exactly. Take the thought of George Coyne, for instance. Dr. Coyne is an astronomer and a Roman Catholic priest who for many years directed astrophysical research at the Vatican Observatory. Coyne cautions people of faith against trying to turn God into an explanation. He notes that the phrase, "mind of God," is used by scientists to describe the full set of nature's laws, even the will-o-the-wisp Unified Field Theory. Yet, this is not literally God. "Even if we discover the Mind of God, we will not have necessarily found God."<sup>11</sup> God the creator is a God of love; and, whether Dawkins likes this or not, a loving God needs to be described in personal language. The personal language describing God, I add, is symbolic language, not literal. What Dawkins is asking for is a literal description of God's role in natural processes. He wants to find God in the equations. A loving God described in personal language will simply not show up in the equations. If it is a requirement that God be found in the equations, and if God does not show up there, one can understand why atheism might be the conclusion drawn.

Dawkins seems like a fisherman having a bad day. He baits his hook. He throws his line in the water. Nothing bites on his worm. So, he concludes there are no fish in the lake. Because he looks for God in the equations and fails to find God there, he concludes no God is to be found anywhere.

## Atheist Liberation from Religion

If the atheist crusade against outmoded religious belief succeeds, then the gain will be a new form of freedom. Michael Shermer, publisher of *Skeptical* magazine, gives witness to the powerful attraction of atheistic liberty. "The conjuncture of losing my religion, finding science, and discovering glorious contingency was remarkably empowering and

liberating. It gave me a sense of joy and freedom. Freedom to think for myself. . . . With the knowledge that his may be all there is, and that I can trigger my own cascading changes, I was free to live life to its fullest.”<sup>12</sup> Note how science has replaced religion, for Shermer; and this has led to freedom of thought and control over his own life changes. Religion oppresses. Science liberates. This is the message of evangelical atheism.

Science is messianic, proclaim the evangelical atheists, as if they owned an exclusive patent. Yet, they patently do not. The materialist worldview they espouse is in fact an ideological add-on, a superimposition. Atheism is not inherent to scientific inquiry itself. For Dawkins to apotheosize natural selection within evolutionary theory is simply unwarranted, as many religious Darwinists would attest. Perhaps Nancy Murphy speaks for the pro-science Christian when she writes, “I am not at all sympathetic with any of the antievolution movements, but I am sympathetic with theists who object to the promotion, in the name of science, of materialistic worldviews.”<sup>13</sup> Murphy disavows the illegitimate move Dawkins makes from his science to his theological judgment, namely, there is no God.

Michael Ruse, in partial contrast, argues that Dawkins is actually a theological ally, not an enemy. Beyond his surface atheism, Dawkins provides a way in which Christian theology can connect with the Darwinian model of evolution. Development if not progress is the connector; and the human race comes out unique, special. “Dawkins is an evolutionary progressionist who thinks that humans emerged naturally and predictably from the way of evolution—at least, predictably in the sense that the processes of evolution keep pushing organisms up the scale and consciousness is at the top of the scale. . . . And that, I take it, is just what the Christian needs.”<sup>14</sup> Dawkins, according to Ruse, is paradoxically supporting Christian claims regarding the eminent place to which the human race as evolved in nature.

What I appreciate about the new breed of atheists is their strong advocacy for natural science. The pursuit of scientific inquiry feeds the human soul hungry for knowledge. Yet, I object to the un-

necessary ideology of materialism which they attach to science. Rather than admit that their atheistic commitment is an act of faith, they attempt to borrow the prestige of science to buttress their cause. The problem is that science belongs to all of us, not merely to the atheists among us.

## Religious Pluralism

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Aggressive atheism is not the only competitor shouting down its opposition. Religious pluralists are also vying for the same hearing. And, like the atheists, pluralists believe their own beliefs are more peaceful than traditional beliefs in a personal God when associated with fundamentalist or absolutist religion. Although the majority of pluralists are liberal Protestants or liberal Roman Catholics, the position could in principle garner disciples from any of the world’s sophisticated religious traditions. Like the atheists, the pluralists would like to bring peace among warring religious groups. Unlike the atheists, who deny respect to every religious belief system, the pluralists believe the way to peace is through respecting everyone’s beliefs equally. So, it appears that these two, atheism and pluralism, are opposites. Well, at least this is the way it appears. A closer look, however, will show that atheism and pluralism share some fundamental commitments, including disrespect for tradition-specific religious beliefs.

Now, before we proceed, let me clarify the term we are using here, *pluralism*. As a *description*, this term describes the current cultural situation in which people from a diversity of religious traditions live together and work together. As a *prescription*, this term prescribes adherence to an ideology with two fundamental principles: first, metaphysically, all religious beliefs are finite perspectives on a single trans-finite reality; and, second, ethically, because of this metaphysical unity members of competing religious traditions are morally obligated to recognize the equality or parity of alternative religious viewpoints. By adhering to these two principles, pluralists hope that we can bring peace between otherwise competing religions. It is pluralism in the prescriptive or ideological form that makes it a contender

for the religious niche in contemporary culture.

Although the word “pluralism” is the one most frequently used to identify this school of thought, the position can also be described as the “parity model” or the “mutuality model.” Paul Knitter describes it this way: “proponents of this model presume . . . ‘rough parity’ among religions. That doesn’t mean that all the religions are the same or that they are equal in every respect. But it does mean that they all have ‘equal rights’ to speak and be heard, based on their inherent value. So this model is uncomfortable with, and seeks to avoid, any claims that one religion has a pre-given (especially if it’s a God-given) superiority over all the others that makes it ‘final’ or ‘absolute’ or ‘unsurpassable’ over all the others.”<sup>15</sup> Over against the particular religious traditions we have inherited from history, the model of religious pluralism looks for a common denominator or, more, a higher or more universal form of the sacred which could absorb the array of culturally specific images of the divine.

Langdon Gilkey may provide an example of the parity model. By “some sort of parity” he means “the elimination of our assumption of unquestioned or a priori superiority of our religion . . . it is this new attitude that I name *plurality*.”<sup>16</sup> As a theologian, Gilkey can grant parity within plurality because he acknowledges “the presence of healing grace and truth in other communions.”<sup>17</sup> The pluralistic model is itself a theological position that attributes genuine revelation to multiple religious traditions; and, on this basis, grounds an ethic of respect for religious rights in the larger social order. What pluralists oppose is religious imperialism, the military conquering or even the cultural colonizing of one religious tradition by another. The chief weapon against such imperialists is a new theology, a pluralistic theology that grounds religious unity across traditional lines.

John Hick, for whom the one God has many names, provides us with perhaps the definitive example of such a new theology. He explores what he calls the “pluralistic hypothesis,” which holds that “the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the ma-

ior variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is taking place.”<sup>18</sup> Hick’s term, “the Real,” designates what others mean when speaking of God, the Sacred, the transcendent, the ultimate reality, and such. When persons claim experiences of revelation, Hick refuses to call them “illusory.” Rather, “they are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the real.”<sup>19</sup> On the basis of the pluralistic hypothesis described this way, Hick finds two reasons why we should respect the beliefs of all the world’s great religions. First, it is human. Each religion formulates in its own culturally specific way what it means to be a human being. Second, the plurality of cultural perspectives on what he calls “the Real” do not obviate the fact that the Real is communicating with human minds. What persons experience as the transcendent is, in fact, the transcendent Sacred in manifestation.

Withdrawing the religious warrant for violence is as important to the pluralists as it is for the atheists. Harvard’s Gordon D. Kaufman identifies himself with “humanistic theism,” and he tries to launch a criticism of traditional Christianity from this vantage point. “It is important that Christians never forget that the crusades against those regarded as infidel Muslims were conducted in the name of the crucified one, and the tortures of the Inquisition were intended to compel submission to precisely a church that claimed to be the exclusive mediator of Christ’s salvation. These sorts of actions and claims, of which Christians have often been guilty, far from promoting the humane order for which Jesus died, have further undermined it by dividing humans from each other instead of reconciling them, by setting them at war with each other instead of bringing peace.”<sup>20</sup>

This leads to a more general commitment: fight fundamentalism. “Today fundamentalistic reifications of religious positions appear around the globe with increasing frequency, offering religious legitimation for dangerously parochial social and ethnic movements and practices that, in their divisiveness and destructiveness, are a threat to all humanity. We need a way to understand our religiousness that can honor the integrity and meaning of each religious

tradition and yet open it to an appreciation of and reconciliation with others.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, if we can stop the fundamentalists, then we can stop religiously inspired violence. This is the social goal within the conceptual model of religious pluralism.

What is the step that must be taken to move our global society from religious violence to religious peace? Answer: we must convert the leaders of specific religious traditions to pluralism. This is how Kaufman recommends such a conversion. “If the great religious traditions could come to understand their deepest insights and truth in the historical and pluralistic way I am proposing . . . —that is, as contributions to the ongoing larger conversation of humankind on the deepest issues with which life confronts us humans—we would move a step further toward finding a way to live together on our small planet as a single, though pluriform, humanity.”<sup>22</sup> What Kaufman is asking religious leaders to do is subordinate their specific religious insight to Kaufman’s “larger conversation.”

This plan is doomed to failure, it seems to me, because the very religious traditions Kaufman is inviting to the conversation each hold to some level of definitive or absolute truth. Yet, pluralists persist. If each could surrender what is essential to his or her religious claim to truth, then they could join the club of religious pluralists. If all the world’s religious traditions would join this club, then religious rivalry and hence violence would cease. So goes the theory here.

Might we see an alliance between the pluralists and the atheists? After all, they both want to overcome the violent expressions of religion due to belief in a personal God with its accompanying absolutism and fundamentalism. However, atheists show only disdain for the pluralists. Referring to religious pluralists as “liberals” or “moderates,” they object to the gentle respect shown for otherwise ridiculous or even dangerous religious doctrines. Sam Harris denounces such tolerance of unacceptable religious views. “Tolerance is not without its problems. Our fear of provoking religious hatred has rendered us unwilling to criticize ideas that are increasingly maladaptive and patently ridiculous.”<sup>23</sup>

Yet, a closer look will show that the pluralist position is much closer to the atheist posi-

tion than one might at first suspect. Why? Because each representative of a traditional religious position must give up reliance upon the definitiveness of his or her religious perspective in order to join the pluralist club. Despite what they say, members of the pluralist club do not in fact respect the positions articulated by each religion’s specific theology. Kaufman is able to admit this. “For the *authoritarian* and *absolutistic* characteristics of traditional religious truth-claims are not, in fact, given full respect in this more democratic, open, dialogical understanding.”<sup>24</sup> On the surface, atheists and pluralists appear to be polar opposites. But when the dust settles, they both hold the same disrespect toward the specific claims of each specific religious tradition.

Could one modify the pluralist position to show respect for some religious claims but deny respect to others? Within the pluralistic model, some theologians do wish to recognize differences, and even evaluate some differences as better than others. Respect for everyone else’s point of view need not erase entirely one’s critical faculties. Following Hick with a slight demure is Paul O. Ingram, who leaves us with such a caution. “The idea that the religious traditions of the world are culturally and historically limited responses to a single reality that each names differently does not inherently imply that all religious traditions teach the same things or are equally true or equally valid responses to the Sacred. There is much in all religious traditions that is nonsense. The truth claims of some religious traditions may be closer approximations than others . . .”<sup>25</sup> Perhaps with this modification some pluralists and some atheists could justify an alliance against just those religious traditions they disrespect, namely, the fundamentalist strain within many larger religious traditions.

What I appreciate about the religious pluralists is their implicit ethic of protecting the rights of all religious traditions in our pluralistic world. When exclusivist claims made by aggressive religions lead to cultural imperialism if not military imperialism, the rights of colonized religious believers are squashed right along with their beliefs. Pluralists defend these rights, and rightly so.

However, the theoretical grounds for such defense of religious rights takes its own form of

colonization. Pluralists are like worms burrowing within religious fruit, changing its taste. On the one hand, pluralists extend the hand of respect toward each established religious tradition. Yet, as soon as that tradition exhibits any signs of exclusivity, the respecting hand is withdrawn. In effect, adherents to the existing world religions are being asked to convert to pluralism from within their own tradition; and this implies in some cases a sacrifice of their own strongest commitments to beliefs regarding the ultimately Real. The pluralist position collapses under the weight of its own self-contradiction.

The pluralist position especially collapses in the face of Islam, where belief in the Real of which John Hick speaks is already a tradition-specific belief. What the pluralist believes and what the Muslim believes about the Real are virtually the same, yet the pluralist uses this belief in two ways, both to respect Islam and to ask Islam to convert from exclusivity to pluralism. The lack of coherence becomes visible when the pluralist position is put to the test of actually respecting tradition-specific religious claims.

## Islam and the “Real” God

Islam champions the oneness of God. It also champions God’s transcendent essence, an essence that lies beyond all attributes and even beyond what has been revealed to us about God. Islamic piety bows in humble reverence and total submission before Allah, the most sublime, the most majestic, the most awesome.

A Muslim in good conscience must compete with atheists and pluralists as well as TV images of terrorism for a religious hearing. The atheist must be mistaken, thinks the Muslim, because God exists. There is more. God’s existence comes prior to our own existence, and is the source of our existence. God is more real than we are. To deny God’s existence would be blasphemous.

For two different reasons, the pluralist must also be mistaken, according to the Muslim. First, the model of religious pluralism asks us to tolerate if

not accept a wide variety of belief systems, each with a separate god or goddess or even a pantheon of divinities; and this tolerance constitutes a form of subjective polytheism. Second, all these beliefs are wrong. The definitive, absolute, and unsurpassable revelation is found in one decisive location, the Qur’an. The *Shahada* or Muslim confession states this without ambiguity or compromise: “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet.” For non-Muslims to respect the Muslim religion, they must respect this religious tradition in its exclusivist self-understanding. Neither atheism nor pluralism is capable of this.

To think of God as the transcendent creator of all things leads contemporary Islamic theology into conflict not just with atheism, but also with the Western natural science claimed by the new atheists as their support. Muslims object because the scientist pursues knowledge of this material world without reference to its creator, God. God does not appear in scientific equations, and this bothers some Muslims. Seyyed Hossein Nasr trumpets rhetorical questions. “How can Islam accept any form of knowledge that is not rooted in God and does not necessarily lead to Him? How can it explain the universe without ever referring to the Transcendent Cause of all things, of which the Noble Qur’an speaks on almost every page?”<sup>26</sup>

If Muslims belong to a theological club, it would be monotheism. Divine oneness is central. This means all polytheism or even sympathies with polytheism are eschewed. “Choose not two gods. There is only One God. So of Me, Me only, be in awe” (Qur’an 16:51). To flirt with polytheism or even to entertain suggestions that any being could receive even a share of our worship would be to commit *shirk*, to illegitimately associate any partner with God. *Shirk* is a blasphemous form of sin.

*Tawhid* characterizes the Muslim’s spiritual disposition as well as theological commitment. *Tawhid* is the activity of asserting or affirming the unity of God, of Allah. The very activity of asserting God’s oneness disposes the Muslim to live in proper relationship to God. And because God is the “real”—the “Real” is one of God’s hundred names—living *Tawhid* draws a person into reality. It is to become



fully human. In contrast, to commit *shirk*—that is, to associate something or someone with the one God and compromise the unity of God—is to remove oneself from the “real” and drop into a state that is less than fully human.

The oneness of God has two dimensions, one exclusive and the other inclusive. The exclusive unity emphasizes that God is unique. Nothing is like God. God is absolutely other, holy. God is the creator, and nothing within creation rivals God. The inclusive unity of God refers to the unifying impact God has on all of reality. All things find their reality in the one God. If we ask a Muslim, “where in the world is God?”, he or she would likely answer: “God is not *in* the world; but the entire world finds its unity and reality in God.”

## Islam and the Trinity

What this implies, further, is that no plurality within the single divine life is acceptable. The idea of anything like human family relations within God’s life must be excluded. “Say: He is Allah, the One! Allah, the eternally Besought of all! He begetteth not nor was begotten. And there is none comparable unto Him” (Qur’an 112:1–4). Badru D. Kateregga says that “Islam makes clear that God has no son, no father, brother, sister, wife, or daughters. The pre-Islamic idea of calling goddesses daughters of Allah was condemned by the Prophet.”<sup>27</sup> The rejection here of begetting accomplished two things within the original seventh century context of Arabia. It repudiated flatly any syncretism with previously existing polytheistic traditions. In addition, by repudiating the idea of divine sonship, Islam repudiated the Christian concepts of incarnation and Trinity.

Here is the definitive passage, wherein the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is confronted. “The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God, and His Word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. So have faith in God and His messengers, and do not say ‘Three’. Refrain, better it is for you. God is only One God” (Qur’an 4:171).

Now, curiously, just what Trinity is being rejected here? Is it the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Not exactly. The Qur’an seems to assume that the Christian Trinity consists of God, Jesus, and Mary. “And when God said, ‘O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, ‘Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God?’ He said, ‘To Thee be glory! It is not mine to say what I have no right to’” (Qur’an 5:116). Given that the Qur’an appeared in the late seventh century in the part of the world where Eastern Christianity was widely known, perhaps the new religion was reacting against Mary understood as *theotokos* or “Mother of God.” Perhaps it was Mariology that prompted this anti-trinitarianism. If so, then the Qur’an misunderstands Christian theology, even though popular Christian piety may have been appropriately perceived. Be that as it may, this is a historical speculation. The theological agenda regarding divine oneness and the Trinity remains.

Mark Swanson observes that “this misunderstanding mattered little. Later Muslim thinkers were equally mystified and offended by more technically correct expositions of the Christian Trinity.”<sup>28</sup> At best, Muslims find Christian Trinitarian theology confusing. At worst, tri-theism. “The Christians have followed a procedure which has obliged them to proclaim the existence, conceptually and objectively, of three Gods,” writes al-Ghazali.<sup>29</sup> By violating divine oneness when imputing threeness, Christians are guilty of *shirk*.

The problems with Trinitarian thinking are multiple, from an Islamic point of view. First, the strict oneness of God denies all plurality within divinity. This oneness is a simple oneness, in the philosophical sense of simplicity. Second, because all plurality belongs to this world and not to the divine realm, for worshippers to treat the plurality of divine manifestations as themselves divine is to commit *shirk*. Third, to treat God as “Father” is to so humanize God as to functionally deny God’s transcendence to all that is human. Fourth, because God is not a family man, so to speak, it makes no sense to speak of Jesus as the “Son of God.” And, fifth, the suffering of the Son could not result in the suffering of the Father. Jesus’ suffering was this-worldly only.

God is beyond passion, beyond suffering. Muslims reject patripassianism.

The astute Kenneth Cragg recommends that when Christians interpret their beliefs to Muslims, they should ask Muslims to “ponder the Christian Trinity, not as a violation of Unity, but as a form of its expression. We cannot proceed except on the understanding that we are both firmly and equally believers that God is One. We both stand squarely in the Hebrew tradition: ‘The Lord our Lord is ONE Lord.’”<sup>30</sup> Yet, this might not be as easy as it sounds. The unity of which Christians speak is a complex unity, a oneness of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If Islam, in contrast, insists that Allah’s unity is simple, then this complex unity internal to the divine life would still be unacceptable.

## Muslims and Christians in Dialogue

Nevertheless, Christian apologists should not give up. They should press on, seeking as much shared understanding about God as is possible. Locating genuine if subtle differences within shared understanding becomes the next task. David Shenk, who presses the dialogue forward while identifying the subtle nuances, distinguishes two types of revelation. For Islam, what is revealed is God’s will, not God’s being. For Christianity, what is revealed is God in Godself. “The Qur’an stresses the revelation of God’s commands and His names to humans. In the Bible we perceive God as the One Who reveals Himself to humankind . . . . Yahweh reveals not only His will, commands, and names to humankind, but also Himself in personal self-disclosure . . . . God gives Himself in suffering, redemptive love. Because of His love, He sorrows when we sorrow, He suffers when we suffer, He is pained by our sin. God loves us totally.”<sup>31</sup> What Shenk is describing here is the economic Trinity—that is, God engaging the world. The suffering of the Son is taken up into the divine life. And through the Spirit all our experiences of suffering are felt equally by God, the one who loves

totally and unconditionally. Even though Christian systematic theologians have historically striven to protect the first person of the Trinity from patripassionism, clearly the thrust of Shenk’s position is that the sufferings of the world are empathetically shared by God. I find myself applauding Shenk at this point.

Kateregga does not like this much world-involvement ascribed to God, however. He raises difficulty with the symbol of the Father within Trinitarian thought. To ascribe fatherhood to God risks humanizing God. God is not literally a Father. And we ought not consider hypostases such as the Son or Spirit as equally divine. Trinitarian thinking de-divinizes God, so it appears. “God, according to Muslim witness, is absolute and transcendent . . . . God is not to be conceived as having human form or attributes . . . . A Muslim cannot invoke him in the name of the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit. All the divine attributes are well embedded in his perfect unity.” The divine essence, it is assumed here, transcends the attributes we perceive in the divine manifestations. From an Islamic point of view, Christians fail to distinguish God’s attributes from God’s essence, which transcends these attributes.

Yet, one might counter, that the language of Father, Son, and Spirit is symbolic, not conceptual. The being of God, according to Christian theology, transcends these symbolic images. This places Islamic and Christian thinking close, even though still not isomorphic. Shenk responds to Kateregga: “When Christians refer to God as Father, they should not think of God as being human. Christians share with Muslims the prohibition against conceiving of God in the form of an image.”<sup>32</sup>

Not all conversation between Muslims and Christians needs to be focused on such differences, let alone contentious. “When Christians and Muslims talk about God, they are talking about the same God,” writes Kateregga.<sup>33</sup> According to Mark Swanson, “Shared belief in one creator God—who reveals his will to human beings, who hears their prayers, and who will raise the dead on the Last Day—enables Christian and Muslim neighbors and co-workers throughout the world to share texts and experiences, explain practices, and reflect on what

it means to live a human life in God's sight, to God's honor."<sup>34</sup>

What I appreciate about Islam is its humility in respect to the majesty and glory of God. The ninety nine names Muslims use to refer to God each protect the heavenly mystery; so that we become conscious of God while resisting the temptation to tread on the holy. Yet, what seems to be inherent in the New Testament revelation is divine involvement in the world. God as Son suffers, dies, and undergoes resurrection. God as Spirit calls, gathers, and enlightens. God is active in the world, active in the hearts and lives of persons of faith. Somehow, this active presence of God needs some theological accounting for that Trinitarian thinking is able to supply.

## Could Islam Embrace Pluralism?

Contemporary Muslims are caught between monolithic Islamic countries where religion and state are unified, on the one hand, and the lure of democratic societies which separate church and state, on the other hand. It appears that the idea of religious pluralism can flourish only in the latter, but not the former.

"Here I take religious pluralism to mean the acknowledgement of the intrinsic redemptive value of competing religious traditions," writes Abdulaziz Sachedina at the University of Virginia. "It is expected, however, that beliefs and values essential to one community will contravene those of others; herein lurks the potential for conflict and violence."<sup>35</sup> Sachedina recognizes that the absolutism of Islam appears to be irreconcilable with the concept of religious tolerance or the ideology of pluralism. It seems to be, at least.

Yet, he asks: are there resources within Islam itself that could provide a "fresh" review of the heritage and re-dispose Islam toward freedom of religion? Yes, he responds. Sachedina's interpretation of the Qur'an is that Islamic society could organize itself around two jurisdictions, one in the horizontal direction of law for the common good and the other in the vertical dimension of a person's rela-

tionship to God. After all, one's internal heartfelt decision for or against the claim of faith cannot be enforced by external law. This concept of double jurisdiction would allow an Islamic state to permit freedom of religion within it.

This double jurisdiction is based upon a double source of revelation, the moral law which comes to us in creation and the divine law which comes to us through the special revelation of the Qur'an. "God provides two forms of guidance: universal moral guidance that touches all humans qua humans, and particular revelatory guidance that is given to a specific faith community. On the basis of universal guidance, it is conceivable to demand uniformity because an objective and universally binding moral standard is assumed to exist that guarantees true human well-being. . . . However, on the basis of particular guidance through scripture, it is crucial to allow human beings to exercise their volition in matters of personal faith. . . . This clarification regarding the two forms of guidance that the Qur'an speaks about provides us with a scriptural basis for freedom of religion."<sup>36</sup>

What we see here is a conscientious struggle from within the parameters of an absolutist religious tradition—the kind of religious tradition opposed by both atheists and pluralists—to accommodate and even embrace social structures that would bring peace between rival religious traditions.

## How Hot is the Crossfire?

Despite the admirable search for religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence, the competition between these three—atheism, pluralism, and Islam—is red hot. The verbal acid of the atheists is eating at the roots of religion, all religion. A line between good and evil is being drawn, with atheism on the good side and religion on the evil side. Religion incites war, says Susan Blackmore, extending Dawkins' arguments. "The history of warfare is largely a history of people killing each other for religious reasons."<sup>37</sup>

Among the atheists who see religion as unambiguous evil is Sam Harris. His complaint is that "religious faith remains a perpetual source of human

conflict.”<sup>38</sup> In order to bring global peace, we need to stamp out religion. The religions Harris particularly wants to eliminate are Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. These irrational and violence prone holdovers from a pre-modern era must be dispensed with. “All reasonable men and women have a common enemy . . . . Our enemy is nothing other than faith itself.”<sup>39</sup>

Islam sits atop Harris’ hit list. Don’t think it is only the “extremists” who are a danger to society, warns Harris. Islam at its core is violent. “The idea that Islam is a ‘peaceful religion hijacked by extremists’ is a fantasy . . . because most Muslims are *utterly deranged by their religious faith*.”<sup>40</sup>

Why does Harris go after the core of Islam? Harris contends that the foundational book, the Qur’an, thought to be literally the word of God, teaches devout Muslims to commit themselves to holy war against all non-Muslims. Harris cites one dangerous passage after another, such as, “The only true faith in God’s sight is Islam . . . . He that denies God’s revelations should know that swift is God’s reckoning” (Qur’an 3:19). The Qur’an and its concept of *jihad* or holy war are essential not just for suicide bombers, but for all devout Muslims. “On almost every page,” writes Harris, the Koran instructs observant Muslims to despise non-believers. On almost every page, it prepares the ground for religious conflict . . . . Islam, more than any other religion human beings have devised, has all the makings of a thoroughgoing cult of death.”<sup>41</sup> According to Harris, this cult of death gets additional energy from teaching young men that, if they become a suicide bomber, they will go straight to paradise, avoid the judgment, and receive a reward of seventy virgins for their pleasure. What can we expect from a religious teaching such as this? “The only future devout Muslims can envisage—*as Muslims*—is one in which all infidels have been converted to Islam, subjugated, or killed.”<sup>42</sup>

After drawing this picture of Islam as the cult of death, Harris prescribes what Western civilization should do to defend itself. First, we should teach rationality. We should teach our children to think critically, to evaluate religious claims on the basis of evidence. Once we have examined religious beliefs, they will be seen to be unfounded. We will emerge

from our outmoded faith into the freedom of a truly liberal society. If teaching reason is less than adequate, however, then we should move toward a second form of self-defense.

We need to ask: will this gradual conversion from irrational religion to rational atheism move fast enough to prevent inundation by the Islamic menace? Can we pass through the transition before Muslims get their hands on nuclear or biological weapons? Perhaps not. Might pre-emptive self-defense be called for? Yes, says Harris. This threat might even call for a nuclear first strike. “The only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own. Needless to say, this would be an unthinkable crime—as it would kill tens of millions of innocent civilians in a single day—but it may be the only course of action available to us, given what Islamists believe.”<sup>43</sup> Harris is giving expression to Western anxiety, to fear; and this leads him to propose his own form of atheist jihad against Islam. “The West must either win the argument or win the war. All else will be bondage.”<sup>44</sup>

If religious peace is the objective, might a tactic other than Harris’ be equally effective while avoiding a bloody counter jihad? Might the religious pluralists be able to persuade Muslims to be peaceful through respecting Islamic beliefs? If Muslims receive respect from the West, might this mitigate their hostility? No, says Harris. Referring to pluralists as “religious moderates,” Harris indicts them as part of the problem. By respecting Islam’s literalism, religious moderates tacitly approve of Muslim belligerency.

Dawkins agrees. “I do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself, not just against so-called ‘extremist’ faith. The teachings of ‘moderate’ religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism.”<sup>45</sup> Dawkins continues: “Suicide bombers do what they do because they really believe what they were taught in their religious schools; that duty to God exceeds all other priorities, and that martyrdom in his service will be rewarded in the gardens of Paradise.”<sup>46</sup> The very tolerance shown by moderates—read ‘religious pluralists’—imputes respect to religious fundamentalists and extremists who do not deserve that respect.

Respect for Islam is not effective. What we need is a critical examination of both Islam and Christianity; but the moderates do not have the backbone to launch this criticism. “They do not want anything too critical said about people who *really* believe in the God of their fathers, because tolerance, perhaps above all else, is sacred. To speak plainly and truthfully about the state of our world—to say, for instance, that the Bible and the Koran both contain mountains of life-destroying gibberish—is antithetical to tolerance as moderates currently conceive it. But we can no longer afford the luxury of such political correctness. We must finally recognize the price we are paying to maintain the iconography of our ignorance.”<sup>47</sup>

On the one hand, it must be said of the pluralists (or religious moderates) that they are as opposed to scriptural literalism as is Harris or Dawkins. Pluralists have no tolerance for fundamentalism in either Christianity or Islam. Conservative representatives within most religious traditions stay away from pluralists because of this. So, it would be inaccurate of Harris or Dawkins to imply that moderates actually encourage either literalism or violence. On the other hand, pluralists are not nearly as evangelical or aggressive as the new breed of atheists. They do not advocate their own version of jihad to stamp out the fundamentalism they equally abhor. The atheists will not tolerate tolerant bystanders: either join in the anti-religious crusade or be identified as part of the enemy.

## Atheism and Genocide

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Now, let us ask: if we could subject anachronistic religious traditions to criticism and begin to govern our civilization on atheistic principles, would we establish a society of peace, justice, and love? Do atheists have a record of higher virtue than religious people? Not according to history. Here is one description. “The most horrible genocidal atrocities of the past century and, indeed, in recorded history, Hitler’s Holocaust in Central Europe, Stalin’s purge of non-Communists in the former Soviet

Union and Eastern Bloc, and the Khmer Rouge’s killing fields in Cambodia (which currently holds the record for the largest number of human casualties) were all perpetrated in the name of atheistic ideologies that made no provisions for an afterlife and were sometimes directed at eliminating those who believed in an afterlife. What more compelling evidence could there be that it is misguided to point the finger of blame for this or other humanly perpetrated atrocities at religion per se or at the belief in some form of life after death?”<sup>48</sup>

Harris has heard such criticisms of atheism before. He believes he can dismiss them because these genocides were perpetrated not by true rationalists but by rationalists contaminated by ideology. Stalin and Mao were victims of Marxist ideology. And Nazism was not genuine atheism, because it fed off Christian anti-Semitism. “Nazis were agents of religion.”<sup>49</sup> Even if atheists perpetrated genocide, we can still say atheism is scientific and good while religion is unscientific and bad.

Dawkins responds similarly, by saying that Stalin’s atrocities were due not to his atheism but to his Marxism; and Hitler was probably a Catholic influenced by Martin Luther’s anti-Semitism. Curious. “Stalin was an atheist and Hitler probably wasn’t but even if he was, the bottom line of the Stalin/Hitler debating point is very simple. Individual atheists may do evil things but they don’t do evil things in the name of atheism. Stalin and Hitler did extremely evil things, in the name of, respectively, dogmatic and doctrinaire Marxism, and an insane and unscientific eugenics theory tinged with sub-Wagnerian ravings. Religious wars really are fought in the name of religion, and they have been horribly frequent in history.”<sup>50</sup> Even though atheists are responsible for genocide on a horrendous scale, the Marxist and Nazi perpetrators belong to the equivalent of a different sect or denomination of atheism, not the scientific kind of atheism Dawkins and Harris espouse. In short, a specifically scientific, rational, critical form of atheism would not, once in power, engage in genocide; rather, it would eliminate the atrocities of both religion and the unorthodox forms of historical atheism. This seems to be the position advocated here by the new evangelical atheists.

Now, just what do the Muslims think about all of this? How much ducking do Muslims need to do in the face of shots fired from atheists and pluralists? Munawar Anees, for one, would firmly disagree with Harris' portrait of Islam as a cult of death. Anees denies that the core teachings of Islam support suicide bombings. What Islam teaches is reverence for God and lives of righteousness. "Islam teaches that life is a sacred trust given to human beings by the Creator. Like other Abrahamic faiths, it prohibits suicide as a grave sin. It is forbidden under all circumstances, including war."<sup>51</sup> Anees blames a "highly distorted theology" within some Islamic circles for the promotion of suicide bombing. "It plays upon the young vulnerable psyche that yearns for leading a purposeful life. It systematically misconstrues and misrepresents the Islamic doctrine of salvation."<sup>52</sup> In short, this Muslim's sympathies lie totally with the victims of this brand of religious violence; and he asserts that suicide bombers do not express the heart and center of Islamic teaching. Like the atheists and pluralists, Anees yearns for peace. Yet, his vision of peace derives from his Islamic commitment.

## Where in the World is God?

As a theologian considers standing up to reflect out loud about the God affirmed by the Christian faith, he or she must adapt to an environment of competition coming from at least these three directions. The atheists would contend that the burden of proof lies on the shoulders of the theologian to demonstrate that God exists. Ordinarily, theologians proceed on the assumption that there is a divine reality to which the word "God" refers; they seldom stop to provide an image of God which will pass the existence test. Then, it gets worse. Whatever image of God the theologian might defend against the atheists would be disputed by the pluralists, who would contend that this God is but one among many manifestations of the Real which is still more ultimate. And the Muslims will object if the Christian God is portrayed as fully present in

the incarnate Son and the gathering Spirit. What's a theologian to do? Let me suggest four recommendations: (1) investigate the truth question; (2) avoid putting God in the equations; (3) affirm what is essential, namely, that the God in whom Christians place their faith is gracious; and (4) practice charity.

## 1: Investigate the Truth Question

When the aggressive atheists complain that religious claims fail to persuade because they lack evidence, the truth of the Christian faith is questioned. Christian claims become subject to analysis. Either they are true, or they are false. Atheists believe they are false.

Christian theologians ought not dodge this challenge. The question of the truth of the Christian claim is internal to theology—that is, theologians need to ask and re-ask: just what is the basis for our belief in God? "The presentation of Christian teaching cannot begin by presupposing the truth," writes Wolfhart Pannenberg. "Theology has to present, test, and if possible confirm the claim. It must treat it, however, as an open question and not decide it in advance."<sup>53</sup> The attacks of the aggressive atheists simply remind the theologian of this responsibility.

The criteria by which these atheists evaluate truth claims might not be acceptable to the theologian, however. As we have seen, what they consider evidence is restricted to the kind of evidence gathered by scientific research on the causal nexus of the material world. Like a shoe that is two sizes smaller than the foot, it just does not fit.

The god rejected in the so-called god-hypothesis is a supernatural person responsible for creation and providence, an overgrown human being, in effect. In the poetic language of religious symbolism, this God relates to the world and responds personally to us when we pray. Such an overgrown personal being who relates personally to the natural world cannot be found in scientific equations. Could it be that scientific inquiry only asks about impersonal forces? Could it be that scientific inquiry only asks about natural forces? Could it be that a personal

and supernatural personal being might not answer the phone if we don't dial the right number?

More importantly, the religious vision rising from within both Islam and Christianity is that our faith is placed not in the symbolic image of a supernatural or overgrown human person; rather, our faith is placed in ultimate reality. That ultimate reality—the really Real, so to speak—transcends both nature and super-nature. God as God transcends even our symbolic images of God. This recognition that the reality of God is beyond our conceptions of God is built right into the self-critical conceptual framework of these two religious traditions. The pluralist position adds nothing that was not already present within these tradition-specific theologies. What this implies is that the evangelical atheists commit a straw religion fallacy, so to speak, by alleging that these two religions teach a primitive supernaturalism with an overgrown human person as their absolute object of devotion. The evangelical atheists have not taken the time to investigate just what Christianity and its sister tradition, Islam, actually teaches about God.

Ducking from arrows shot by the evangelical atheists is not enough, however. What remains is for the Christian theologian to return to classic affirmations regarding God understood as the ultimate reality. Because the truth question within religious discourse looks different than it does in scientific discourse, the theologian will ask whether the concept of divine ultimacy is coherent and whether it gives authentic expression to what we believe to have been revealed by God in the events surrounding Jesus Christ. The theologian will ask whether the biblical claim that God is the creator makes coherent sense and provides illuminating understanding to the creation as pictured by natural science. The truth test of Christian claims regarding God is the illuminating power of the concept of God for understanding the world which, according to our faith, God has created.<sup>54</sup>

Even if the Christian concept of God proves itself to illuminate and to expand our understanding, this will not produce unambiguous truth. It will not provide absolute confirmation that our ideas of God are accurate. For the time being, theological ideas about God must maintain a hypotheti-

cal character. Our ideas about God must include recognition of their finite and correctable character, awaiting God's eschatological revelation. "Now we see through a mirror dimly," writes St. Paul. Only eschatologically will we see "face to face" and know God as God has known us (1 Corinthians 13:12).

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## **2: Avoid Putting God in the Equations**

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If we listen carefully to what the atheists say, there is no place in the world for God. God is missing from the equations; therefore, no God exists. God does not aid us in providing explanations for specific natural phenomena; therefore, no God exists. Should the Christian apologist go back to the equations and add a divine factor? No, I do not recommend this. Rather, I believe the role the concept of God should play in our explanations is a more comprehensive one, a role that draws on both scientific knowledge of the physical world plus knowledge gained from special revelation in Jesus Christ. Because scientific explanations are methodologically reductionistic—that is, by methodological decision scientists look only for proximate physical causes when making an explanation—divine creation and divine providence are excluded from the picture. This is not a problem, as long as the reductionist interpretation remains within the scope of its respective research domain. The theologian, in contrast, offers a more comprehensive explanation based upon distinctively theological resources.

The result should be a picture of the world as the theater of God's gracious presence and care. Theology is a field encompassing field, encompassing what we learn from science but not limiting ourselves to only what can be explained scientifically. God's action in the world is more than what science can explain; but what God does is consistent with what science can explain.

With this in mind, let us turn back again to Dawkins. An assumption as big as a horse in a Volkswagen that Dawkins and the new atheists

make is that the material world is a closed causal nexus. Physical explanations are the only explanations for any and every phenomenon. There is only one god, the material world, and science is its prophet. But, I ask: suppose the physical world is not merely a closed causal nexus? Are the biological atheists still living in Newton's world of classical physics? The assumption that the causal nexus is closed is just that, an assumption. Perhaps Dawkins should open the Volkswagen door so we can see the horse inside.

Now, what about openness in natural processes, especially evolutionary processes? At the quantum level, for example, the chain of cause and effect is not yet in place, at least according to the Heisenberg school of interpretation. At the quantum level—the most fundamental level of physical activity—no underlying and fully determinate system is governing. Events are contingent, not pre-determined by a fixed set of prior causes. Natural laws can still describe what happens, to be sure; but these are laws of statistical probability. They are not reducible to a set of determining causes. And, because the laws of physics apply everywhere, including biology, we can find openings everywhere, including biology.

Let us take a look at a theological explanation which capitalizes on this observation about openness in the physical realm. Physicist and theologian Robert John Russell locates divine action at the quantum level. He locates divine activity within the realm of statistical probabilities. Because multiple scenarios are statistically possible, whatever action God takes is the actualization of what had previously been possible. God can and does act everywhere in nature, and at no point is a law of nature broken. No interventions. No miracles. Just ubiquitous divine presence. Russell calls this “NIODA: Non-Interventionist Objective Divine Action”. The idea is that there is an inherent openness in the evolutionary processes itself in which God can act. This is not a ‘gaps’ argument since God is not intervening in evolution; rather God is already immanent in nature as Trinity, acting within the openness that God gifted to the universe in creating it.”<sup>55</sup>

Now does this model of divine action ubiquitous to the material world at the quantum level constitute a proof for the existence of God? Does

it constitute an explanation for natural phenomena that includes God in the equations? No, neither of these. Much more modestly, Russell is trying to provide us with a model of divine action in the natural world that is consistent with science, even if not entailed by science.

As a theologian, Russell has much more to say about reality than he could say as a physicist; but what he says theologically is not inconsistent with what he would say as a physicist. Russell provides us with an example of theological explanation that is consistent with, yet more comprehensive than, scientific explanation. I believe such a method permits us to affirm what is important—that God acts graciously—without restricting ourselves to the suffocating framework within which the atheists require their proofs. It affirms the presence of God while not trying to prove the existence of a personal God within a presumably impersonal and closed causal nexus.

What Russell provides for us is one among many ways in which a Christian theologian can illuminate the world of creatures in light of our understanding of God as the creator and sustainer of this world. God is beyond the equations because God is beyond the world; yet, drawing a picture of the moment by moment dependence of the world upon its divine creator illuminates what surrounds the equations and, indirectly, the equations themselves.

### 3: Affirm What is Essential

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Journalists are told by their editors to write the most important point at the beginning of the article. Hit the big one first. If at a later time the editor needs to cut the article to fit the space, the editor snips off the final paragraphs. If the main point had been made at the beginning, it gets printed.

Perhaps we can borrow this principle for theological construction. What is the main point that Christian theologians want to make? Is it that God exists? Not exactly. More important than God's existence is the claim a Christian makes about God's character. The main point of the New Testament



witness to Jesus Christ is that the one God—previously the God of Israel but now everybody’s God—is gracious. The creator of and redeemer of our universe loves and cares for us and for our world. God hears the cry of those who suffer. God heals the sick. God liberates the oppressed. God raises the dead. God redeems creation with new creation. These are the promises the New Testament has passed on to our generation. What is essential to the Christian witness is this: God is gracious.

Dawkins relishes criticizing the classical Christian proofs for the existence of God. What kind of God appears in these proofs? In Anselm’s ontological proof, God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. In Thomas Aquinas’ cosmological proof, God is the first cause of all other causes. These two are Christian answers to the fundamental and shocking question: why is there something and not nothing? The Christian answer is that the God of Israel is responsible for the creation of the world. This does not suffice for Dawkins. “To suggest that the first cause, the great unknown which is responsible for something existing rather than nothing, is a being capable of designing the universe and of talking to a million people simultaneously, is a total abdication of the responsibility to find an explanation. It is a dreadful exhibition of self-indulgent, thought-denying skyhookery.”<sup>56</sup> Note that Dawkins cannot actually demonstrate the falsity of the claim that God as primordial cause is responsible for creation; but he believes he can safely deny that God has the kind of personhood that places him in the position of designing the universe and answering millions of prayers.

Just how important is it for a Christian theologian to successfully persuade a non-believer to take on board divine ultimacy in the form of “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” or first cause? It is pretty important, to be sure. But, many religions, including Islam, can postulate God as the first principle. And, certainly Dawkins has the right to ask whether this divine first principle can aid in explaining nature’s laws. Yet, just any old divine action will not suffice for the Christian claim. What counts for the Christian claim is that the God who acts is gracious, loving, caring, and redeeming. Finding God as one cause among

many other natural causes could be interesting, to be sure; but in itself this would not feed the Christian hunger for grace.

In order to bring grace to theological articulation, we would need to rely consciously on the scriptural witness. This would make our faith commitment particularistic. Even though it has universal implications because it deals with the whole of reality; it derives from a historically specific source, namely, God’s history with ancient Israel. It takes the form of *confessional universalism*, which I have described elsewhere.<sup>57</sup> This theological articulation will find some continuity along with some discontinuity with what a Muslim might want to affirm. This theological assessment would resist subordination to a higher “Real” or to a lower common denominator in the conceptual framework of the religious pluralist. The Christian claim is either right or wrong. It is not a brick to be built into someone else’s wall. What is at stake here is not the particularist nature of the Christian claim, but rather its truth value for understanding the whole of reality.

#### 4: Practice Charity

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Affirming the presence of a gracious God leads to a life of love, a life of charity. Jesus is unambiguous. <sup>NRS</sup> Luke 10:27: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” That we should love the other as other rather than as a means to further our own ends becomes clear when Jesus tells us to love even our enemies. <sup>NRS</sup> Matthew 5:44: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” The impact of faith in a God of love is a life of love.

Curiously, this has epistemological implications. What Christians have learned through our long history is this. The only way to come to know the God of Jesus is to live the life of a follower of Jesus. Discipleship is what leads to knowledge of God. God cannot be found in the equations; but God can reveal the Godself to the disciple,

to the follower of Jesus. The life of love becomes revelatory.

An aspect of the Theology of the Cross might be relevant here. It is difficult if not impossible to see God as the all-powerful and eternal deity when looking at the focal revelation, namely, the suffering of Jesus on the cross. God's eternal life is hidden behind a mask of death. God's healing grace is hidden behind a mask of suffering. Martin Luther puts it this way: "The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness . . . in the humility and shame of the cross."<sup>58</sup> To understand God, says Luther, we must look at the cross and recognize that we do not understand God. What we add to this epistemological paradox is the role of discipleship. To walk the walk of Jesus places us in a position to gain the insight, to be visited by the knowledge that there is a God, and this God is gracious. It is the cross-walk, so to speak, that makes knowledge of our gracious and loving God possible.

Although virtually all Christians agree on the priority of discipleship and the life of love, some disagreement has arisen regarding just how to practice charitable love. Does Jesus' act of self-giving love which incarnates God's grace constitute a unique divine capacity? Or, do we, the followers of Jesus, have the same capacity to go to the same extreme Jesus did? Is it possible for us to realize in our own lives in this world the very disinterested (*agape*) love by which God has loved us?<sup>59</sup> Or, because of the inevitable and inescapable conflicts in our social life, should we engage in a compromising morality? Should we embrace full passivism and practice total nonviolence; or, should we construct a theory of the just war to warrant occasional violent actions on behalf of justice and peace? Regardless of which side a Christian elects, both are committed to loving God and neighbor. Deeds of love have their own voice in conversation.

As we listen to the debate taking place in the public square, we note how the two focal concerns seem to be knowledge of God and peaceful co-existence with someone who is other. Although Christian theologians should feel responsible to address the epistemological concerns raised

by atheism, pluralism, and Islam, the indispensable role played by discipleship in knowing God needs to find its rightful place. In an era where a violent world is scrambling painfully to find a road to peace, perhaps the road of discipleship which begins with a commitment to a loving peace might lead to a more illuminative understanding of God.

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## Endnotes

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1. David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987) 19.
2. Gary Wolf, "The Church of the Non-Believers," *Wired* (November 2006) 182–193.
3. Peter Atkins, "Atheism and Science," in Philip Clayton and Zachary Simpson, editors, *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) 136. In my own attempt to classify the variety of ways in which science and religion relate, the most belligerent is *scientism*, a warfare model in which science attempts to defeat religion entirely and replace it. Ted Peters, *Science, Theology, and Ethics* (Aldershot UK: Ashgate, 2003) 16–17. Daniel C. Dennett provides an example. "If we persist with the [religious] myths, if we dare not run them in for scientifically sound replacements—which are available—our flying days may be numbered. The truth really will set you free." *Freedom Evolves* (New York: Viking, 2003) 22.
4. Paul Kurtz, *The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986) 316.
5. Definitions of "atheism" can be tricky. Does atheism entail an active denial of God's existence or only a passive non-affirmation of same? On the one hand, George H. Smith allows the passive non-belief to be considered inclusive. "Atheism, in its basic form, is not a belief: it is the absence of belief. An atheist is not primarily a person who believes that a god does not exist; rather he does not believe in the existence of a god." *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo NY: Prometheus Books, 1979) 7, italics in original. On the other hand, Smith takes up the cause of "critical atheism" which actively asserts that "belief in a god is entirely unsupported and, further, that there are many reasons for not believing in a god." *Ibid.*, 18.
6. Simon Conway Morris describes Richard Dawkins as "arguably England's most pious atheist." *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 315.
7. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, 1989).
8. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006) 31, Dawkins' italics. See the official Dawkins website: <http://richarddawkins.net/home>. Dawkins has sparked support among like minded scientists, such as Nobel Prize winning biologist, David Baltimore. "I am glad Dawkins took the time to write *The God Delusion* at this moment in history. In the United States, there is an increasingly pervasive assumption that Christianity is our state religion. In fact, the tolerance of other religions that was so much a part of American politics, at least in the post-World War II era, is giving way to an increasing focus on Christianity as the only true belief." See his "A Defense of Atheism" in *American Scientist* (January–February 2007): <http://www.americanscientist.org/template/AssetDetail/assetid/54417>.

9. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 156. Wesley J. Wildman contrasts two models of God extant in the current dialogue between science and religion. The first model treats God as a *determinate entity*, to assert that “God is an existent entity with determinate features including intentions, plans, and capacities to act.” It would appear that the God Dawkins and his atheist fellow travelers reject is this determinate entity. This is the pre-modern God of supranaturalism. Wildman goes on to identify a rival model, *Ground-of-Being* theism, which “challenges the very vocabulary of divine existence or non-existence.” Because God is being-itself, according to this second model, there is no personal entity or determinate being along side the rest of us beings. Such a God would be invisible to a Dawkins style analysis. “Ground-of-Being Theologies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, 612.

10. Not everyone who examines evolution concludes that atheism follows. The famous atheistic philosopher, Anthony Flew, at age 81, drew exactly the opposite conclusion, so it seems. Investigation into the evolution of DNA has “shown by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce [life], that intelligence must have been involved.” Cited by Richard N. Ostling, “DNA Draws Atheist to God—Sort of,” *Chicago Sun-Times* (December 10, 2004). The emergence of life supports a rational belief in God. Now, the God of Flew looks a bit more desitic than theistic—that is, God orders nature but does not get involved. This leads William Schweiker to caution us about “how little Professor Flew is actually saying. Religiously and theologically considered, it is not at all clear that atheism is actually in retreat. It may hve merely assumed another guise.” “The Varieties and Revisions of Atheism,” *Zygon* 40:2 (June 2005) 271.

11. George V. Coyne, S.J., “The Evolution of Intelligent Life on Earth and Possibly Elsewhere: Reflections from a Religious Tradition,” in *Many Worlds: The New Universe, Extraterrestrial Life and the Theological Implications*, edited by Steven Dick (Philadelphia and London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2000) 186.

12. Michael Shermer, *How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science* (New York: W.H. Freeman and Col, 2000) 236. Shermer would not agree completely with Dawkins. When Dawkins blames religion for suicide bombers and other recent violent incidents, Shermer comments. “In my opinion, many of these events—and others often attributed solely to religion by atheists—were less religiously motivated than politically driven, or at the very least involved religion in the service of political hegemony.” “Arguing for Atheism,” *Science*, 315:5811 (26 January 2007) 463.

13. Nancey Murphy, “Is Altruism Good? Evolution, Ethics, and the Hunger for Theology,” *Zygon* 41:4:985–994 (December 2006) 993.

14. Michael Ruse, “Darwinism: Foe or Freund?” *The Evoution of Rationality: Interdisciplinary Essays in Honor of J. Wentzel van Huyssetn*, edited by F. LeRon Shults (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006) 238.

15. Paul F. Knitter, *Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2002) 110. Menno Simons would not likely be considered an ally by religious pluralists. With his emphasis on purifying the Christian community and on exclusive communion, he might be dubbed an “exclusivist.” He wrote, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature; he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not, shall be damned.” *Dat Fundament des Chrystelycken leers*, or “The Foundation of Christian Doctrine” (1539).

16. Langdon Gilkey, *Through the Tempest: Theological Voyages in a Pluralistic Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 181.

17. *Ibid.*, 153.

18. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) 240.

19. *Ibid.*, 242.

20. Gordon D. Kaufman, *God, Mystery, Diversity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 118–119. Although Kaufman is not a disciple

of John Hick on all counts, he grants that he is sympathetic. *Ibid.* 187.

21. *Ibid.*, 191.

22. *Ibid.*, 202. Kaufman also attempts to revise his understanding of God in light of evolutionary science and ecological ethics. Rejecting as does Dawkins the idea of God as a person, Kaufman describes God as *serendipitous creativity*. “If God is understood as the creativity manifest throughout the cosmos—instead of as a kind of cosmic person—and humans are understood as deeply embedded in, and basically sustained by, this creative activity in and through the web of life on planet Earth, we will be strongly encouraged to develop attitudes and to participate in activities that fit properly into this web of living creativity, all members of which are neighbors that we should love and respect.” *In the Beginning... Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) 48. This reconstruction of the image of God has implications for anthropology and ecclesiology. “We humans are indissolubly a part of the created order. In this picture the too-easy human-centeredness, and Christian-centeredness, of traditional Christian thinking is thoroughly undercut.” *Ibid.*, 50.

23. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006) 80.

24. Kaufman, *God, Mystery, Diversity*, 202.

25. Paul O. Ingram, *Wrestling with God* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2006) 9.

26. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “Islam and Science,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, 76.

27. Badru D. Kateregga and David W. Shenk, *A Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Scottsdale PA and Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1997) 28.

28. Mark N. Swanson, “The Trinity in Christian-Muslim Conversation,” *Dialog* 44:3 (Fall 2005) 257.

29. Al-Ghazali, “The Elegant Refutation,” in *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: The Classical Texts and Their Interpretation*, edited by F.E. Peters (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990) 1087.

30. Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 308.

31. Kateregga and Shenk, *Dialogue*, 34–35.

32. *Ibid.*, 121.

33. *Ibid.*, 120.

34. Swanson, “The Trinity,” 261.

35. Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Role of Islam in the Public Square: Guidance or Governance?* (Leiden: Amsterdam University Press, 2006) 5.

36. *Ibid.*, 14–15.

37. Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 199. Research scientists are showing an interest in the possible connection between religion and violence. One hypothesis is that “if violence is presented as the authoritative voice of God, it can increase the possibility of more violence.” “Scriptural Violence Can Foster Aggression,” *Nature* 446: 7132 (8 March 2007) 114–115. The question is whether religion is the “cause” of violence or if something else is the cause while religion exacerbates violence. New Religious Movements scholar Mark Juergensmeyer is cited saying, “Religion is not the problem; but it can make a secular problem worse.” *Ibid.*

38. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2004) 236.

39. *Ibid.* 131.

40. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 85, author’s italics.

41. Harris, *End of Faith.*, 123.

42. Ibid., 110.
43. Ibid., 129.
44. Ibid., 131.
45. Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 306.
46. Ibid., 308.
47. Harris, *End of Faith*, 22–23. Bishop John Shelby Spong recently acknowledged some value to the criticisms of “Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris.” Yet, he went on to say, “Their biggest problem is not their criticism, which I find quite accurate, but that the Christianity they reject is a very poor representation of what Christianity was meant to be. It is because they know no other Christianity than this popular expression, they believe that atheism is the only viable alternative to the Christianity they have known and rejected. They have never explored the essence of Christianity because that essence lives in such tiny and hidden places.” “Bishop Spong Q&A On When People Talk About God,” [qna@johshelbyspong.com](mailto:qna@johshelbyspong.com), 1/17/2007.
48. Tom Pyszczanski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2003) 148.
49. Harris, *End of Faith*, 79.
50. Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 278.
51. Munawar A. Anees, “Salvation and Suicide: What Does Islamic Theology Say?” *Dialog* 45:3 (Fall 2006) 277.
52. Ibid., 278.
53. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, tr. by Geoffrey W. Bromily, 3 Volumes (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991–1998) 1:50.
54. The method of testing Christian theological claims centers on what I call “explanatory adequacy.” An illuminative concept of God and God’s relationship to the world should provide increased explanatory power, I contend. This methodological understanding is described in chapter two of Ted Peters, *GOD—The World’s Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2000).
55. Robert John Russell, *Cosmology, Evolution, and Resurrection Hope: Theology and Science in Creative Mutual Interaction*, edited by Carl S. Helrich on behalf of the Fifth Annual Goshen Conference on Religion and Science (Kirchener, Ontario: Pandora Press and Adelaide, South Australia: ATF Press, 2006) 28. See: *God’s Action in Nature’s World: Essays in Honor of Robert John Russell*, edited by Ted Peters and Nathan Hallanger (Aldershot UK: Ashgate, 2006) 9–12; 57–58; 99–104.
56. Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 155.
57. Peters, *GOD—The World’s Future*, Chapter 11. Pannenberg embraces confessional universalism when raising the truth question. “My truth cannot be mine alone. If I cannot in principle declare it to be truth for all . . . then it pitilessly ceases to be truth for me also.” *Systematic Theology*, 1:51.
58. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vols. 1–30, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing Company, 1955–1967); Vols. 31–55, edited by Helmut T. Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1955–1986) 31:53.
59. “There has been disagreement among Christians from that time to the present over whether Jesus’ example of selfless love (agape) was meant to be followed to similar extremes by other members of the Christian community.” Mark Juergensmeyer, “Nonviolence,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by Lindsay Jones (14 Volumes: New York: MacMillan, Gale, 2005). 10:6647.