

"Jesus, the Truth?" An Introduction

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (Jesus)

"Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important" (C.S. Lewis)

Welcome to the inaugural edition of "Jesus, the Truth?" The members of the NCAC, including those on the editorial board of this journal, believe the answer to the question of whether or not Jesus is "the Truth," as he claimed to be, is a resounding "Yea." We recognize that there are others who have thoughtfully, intelligently, considered the question, and they answer, "Nay." This publication is intended to engage all those who have an interest in the person of Jesus and the religion of Christianity, whatever their views. We hope that Christians will find their thinking challenged, and their learning stretched, by hearing the evidence against their Faith presented by those who reject Christianity. Conversely, we hope that those who do not presently offer their allegiance to Jesus will seriously consider the evidence in favor of Christianity.

This journal will be rooted in a few basic principles. First; Civility. Disagreement is a natural part of everyday life; the question is can we disagree respectfully? Article submissions will only be considered if they meet this foundational principle. Second: Reason. We trust you will find the contents of this journal well reasoned regardless of your perspective.

Beyond these two basic principles, we also hope this publication will bear several other characteristics. We hope it will be accessible to all, while remaining challenging in its content. We will strive to find a balance between providing content that is intellectually stimulating, yet not so cerebral as to require a PhD in order to understand it. We will also strive to ensure that the literature is engaging. After reading this material we hope you will want to keep reading, keep researching, keep learning, keep questioning and keep talking.

And if you haven't been doing that, think of this journal as an invitation to get into the conversation. Welcome, make yourself at home. Let's talk.

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Jesus, the Truth? may be freely distributed. If you are reading a paper copy, an electronic version with hyperlinks is available at www.whyjesus.ca. The views presented in this journal do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the members of the NCAC. Submission guidelines are also available at our website.

Worldviews in the News

As September 11, 2010 approached, a pastor of a small-town church in Florida organized a “Quran Burning” day (which was subsequently cancelled). How does one balance the need to respect the views of others with the need to stand up for the Truth?

France banned the wearing of the Islamic Burqa by Muslim women because its symbolism conflicted with France’s national Secularism. Some nations enforce the wearing of the Burqa. Other nations outlaw it. To what extent should governments prescribe fashion?

Dr. Craig Evans visited Calgary in late September 2010, providing a series of presentations defending the reliability of the New Testament. Some people feel the New Testament record is substantially unreliable; on what evidence is such a conclusion based? How many Scholars, of a caliber at least matching Dr. Evans, agree with them?

In a new book, *The Grand Design*, Stephen Hawking made some extraordinary claims about the beginning of the universe and the lack of a role for God in creating it. Various Christian scholars [responded to such speculation](#).

Calgary became the first major Canadian city to elect a Muslim Mayor, Naheed Nenshi. Should a leader’s religion / philosophy be a factor when making an election decision in a democracy?

Some time in 2011, Calgary will be one of several Canadian cities to see another round of Atheist ads on city transit buses and C-trains. If the response to these new ads is like the response to the 2009 ads, why do so many people find them offensive?

Further Reading

Articles:

[K-W-C](#) – Knowledge, Wisdom, Character; from Stand to Reason

[The Trinity](#) – A brief overview

[The Leavers: Young Doubters Exit the Church](#) – Sociological trends among a recent generation of “deconverts.”

Podcasts/Videos:

[The Christian Use of Mind](#) – John Lennox describes the need for an intellectual love of God.

[Five limitations of Apologetics](#) – Coffee Cup Apologetics. More of a summary of how Apologists err than inherent limitations of Apologetics as a discipline.

[Fabricating Jesus: An Interview with Author Craig Evans](#) – Dr. Evans talks about his book and related subjects.

[Did Jewish slaves build the Pyramids?](#) – From Skeptoid.com

Websites:

[www.infidels.org](#) – The premier Atheist website on the Internet.

[www.answering-islam.org](#) – Pretty much what the name says.

Letters from the Front

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I recently had the enlightening experience of getting a cold-call from a Jehovah’s Witness. He found our website and took issue with the Trinitarian Statement of Faith. Within minutes I realized I was out-scholared. He was clearly very well educated and had all his notes right in front of him. I had not reviewed that subject for some time and had recently rebuilt my laptop so my Bible study software was not yet fully installed. He had rebuttals for each of my arguments, though his own arguments were obviously weak. I was simply unprepared.

I started noticing something else at play beyond his knowledge of the subject; his discussion “tactics.” For each of my points he would quickly reply with two or three counter-points (with verses). Sometimes he would

then immediately move on to his next point without giving me a chance to reply, or if I did fit a word in edge-wise then he would interrupt me, offer two or three more counter-points to that one reply (to only ONE of his points) and the cycle continued. Within minutes I was drowning under a sea of Bible verses and sound-byte arguments that I was clearly losing track of.

This is not a discussion; it is verbal bombardment. This is a rhetorical tactic that is sometimes used to give somebody the false impression of "winning" a debate. I know, because I was foolish enough to try such tactics in the past. I, too, used to concern myself more with rhetorical victory than Truth: winning the argument instead of the person.

How well did I handle this conversation? In such a situation success takes on a very different measuring stick. I am proud to say that I did not lose my cool. I did not lash out at him, nor did I respond to his poor argumentation style with my own poor argumentation style. I tried, more than once, to explain to him that his manner was unacceptable but, ironically, he kept interrupting me as I did so.

Eventually I just told him not to call me back and I hung up. But then I realized my mistake; I had no way to re-open communication. I had no phone number, no email address, nothing. It was no longer possible to continue the conversation, if I wanted to. In some ways I was successful in that conversation. I kept my cool and tried to push the conversation toward reason over rhetoric. I also failed in a couple of ways. First off, one should always be prepared (to borrow a motto), and I was not. Secondly, I failed in the end because the door was irreversibly shut to future conversation. Lessons learned for next time.

The importance of keeping the lines of communication open between differing perspectives is part of the inspiration for this journal. You will find many divergent perspectives, but hopefully you will not find any closed doors. Let the conversation continue...

Negative Theology

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It's not often I write notes while listening to a lecture, let alone put "waste of time!" into words.

But alas, I wound up doing both recently. Two pastors had put together a talk on the arguments Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens had "gotten right" in their commentary on religion. I was intrigued.

As hinted, it did not go well. One of the pastors praised Dawkins' attacks on the proof from design, and gave Hitchens a nod for railing against religious extremists. Neither were news to me; the majority of Christian denominations have conceded that evolution is a better explanation for design, and only the smallest of cults openly praise fanatics, and even then only their own fanatics. What did surprise was that the pastor seemed never to have read any Dawkins or Hitchens, instead confusing their tomes with some obscure book called "The God Illusion." I lobbed a softball question at the pastor during the Q&A, hoping for proof that he'd actually read Dawkins, only to have it sail across the plate with only the vaguest of elaborations.

At least the free cookies were good.

I never did attend the follow-up lecture, sadly; it was the final carrot that lured me in. The topic was how negative theology could "save" religion from the "New Atheist's" criticisms.

For those unaware, there are two distinct approaches to describing God. "Positive" theology (or if you're looking to win in Scrabble, "Cataphatic" theology) describes what God is: "He is omnipotent," "He is good and caring," and so on. This can lead to problems, as Hume and others have pointed out:

EPICURUS's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil? ¹

Labeling God with attributes, especially absolute ones like omniscience and a perfect sense of justice, quickly leads to contradictions. No proof I've seen can dodge around this; Gödel's infamous ontological proof, which is currently number one on my charts, fails miserably if you declare God to be both "perfectly just" and "merciful." Mercy implies at least one person or thing is treated less harshly than it deserves, yet being perfectly just implies everyone and -thing is treated as they deserve.

You don't even need to pit two attributes against each other to get a contradiction, as was discovered by Pseudo-Denys in the 5th century, Averroës in the 12th, and Homer in the 21st:

Could Jesus microwave a burrito so hot that he himself could not eat it?²

When it's so easy to create contradictions, what's an apologist to do?

Fight the classics with more classics. Plotinus will do nicely:

Yet: our knowledge of everything else comes by way of our intelligence; our power is that of knowing the intelligible by means of the intelligence: but this Entity transcends all of the intellectual nature; by

¹ *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume, 1779

² "Weekend at Burnsies," Episode DABF11 of Season 13, "The Simpsons"

what direct intuition, then, can it be brought within our grasp?³

God is so far beyond our understanding that any attribute we assign to him is meaningless. Instead of saying what God "is," we would be better to say what God "is not." This neatly side-steps the contradiction issues. Observe:

1. God is not constrained by any physical limit.
2. God was not created.
3. God is not evil.

How, exactly, can those contradict? Since they say only what God is not or cannot do, these statements create fewer restrictions than their positive counterparts. As a result, we can't pit them against each other. This keeps us free and clear of science's roving eye, too. Science's entire bag is making a positive statement about the world, then repeatedly attempting to prove it false. In order to settle something like "God was not created," it would have to assume the negation of that and attempt to prove that true, a clear impossibility.

With some careful wording, we can even sneak some of God's positive attributes back into the mix; look carefully at the first and last bullets. Even if we did trip up and craft a contradiction, we have a perfect excuse lying in wait: since God is unknowable by default, we can easily invoke human fallibility and claim our Earthly biases led us astray.

For all these reasons, negative theology (Scrabble version: "Apophatic" theology) can be found in many popular religions, ranging from Islam to Hinduism. Even Buddhists can indulge in it, despite their lack of a God. Christianity has not pursued it so enthusiastically, mostly due to the emphasis on revelation, but thinkers ranging from Tertullian to C.S. Lewis have invoked it to good effect.

Unfortunately, negative theology is more flawed than its popularity suggests.

Look over that list again. Do you see the assumption behind each and every one of those statements? No? Let me spell it out: "God exists." That's a positive statement, unfortunately, which means it can be tested. Let's do so, right now. Consider the same list, or any other similar one you'd like to create, and check each statement against this assumption instead: "God does not exist." You'll find that not only is every statement equally truthful, but now you've got another negative statement you can add to the very end of the list!

Philosophers have long known that every statement about a non-existent thing is true, save the obvious exception. Suppose that instead of trying to learn more about God, I was interested in discovering more about, oh... "Snothux." Now I take the same list as above, and do the following:

1. ~~God~~ Snothux is not constrained by any physical limit.
2. ~~God~~ Snothux was not created.
3. ~~God~~ Snothux is not evil.

I just invented "Snothux" by mashing my computer's keyboard, and a quick search on Google turns up zero results; as far as I know, a "Snothux" does not exist. And yet every statement on that list checks out! There are no limits on things that do not exist, non-existent things can never be created (otherwise they'd exist), and evil requires action, something that's clearly beyond the ken of a being that doesn't exist.

³ Ennead III.8.9.17

Fortunately, there's a patch available. More sophisticated theologians append this item to their list:

4. God neither exists nor non-exists, as we can think of those terms.

It's a clever addition. By excluding things that do not exist, we can no longer scratch out God's name and pencil in a non-existent being in His place. We know it doesn't exist, after all.

"Snothux," though, is in neither category. Scan back, and note that I used the magic words "as far as I know." While it's true that I made up that word, that doesn't rule out a lucky break on my part. People re-invent things all the time by fluke, just ask Gottfried Leibniz and Isaac Newton, or Carl Gauss and nearly every mathematician since. Even searching for the term on Google isn't a guarantee; while they have the largest archive of information in private hands, that's still not every scrap of information that's ever been made or found.

I can say it's unlikely that "Snothux" exists, but I can never be certain. I can say it's likely that "Snothux" does not exist, but again I can't claim total authority. Since it cannot guarantee either title definitively, "Snothux" slips past the patch and again fouls up our list of non-attributes.

I suppose someone clever could come up with another non-attribute that blocks potentially-existing things, and tack it onto the list. Let's say they do, and while doing so declare that we can't out-think it. Is negative theology saved, at long last?

Not even close. Astute readers will have noticed a flaw some ways back. Negative theology claimed God was beyond human understanding... then used human reason to understand God.

It is true that negative statements leave open an infinite number of possibilities. Suppose I'm thinking of a number. If I tell you it's six, there's only one number it could be, whereas if I tell you it's not five, there are an infinite number of choices remaining. Either way, you'd never bother asking me if it was five; you understood what I said, and was able to use that to guide your reasoning about some part of me.

"God is not evil" is a reasoned statement about God. While it leaves an infinite number of alternatives open, some of which may be beyond our understanding, the statement itself is still well within human comprehension. Some aspect of God must be understandable by us as a consequence, in this case that He is not evil, and thus all of the consequences of that. If negative theology truly followed its maxim, it would have nothing more to say about God, and in so doing it would say something about God, in violation of that maxim!

At best, negative theology needs a little positive theology to get off the ground, in which case it has the flaws of both styles but without the gains promised on the box. At worst, it's unworkable by definition.

Still, it would have been nice to hear an expert's opinion on the subject. At least the cookies would be good...

[HJ Hornbeck is a general-purpose ne'er-do-well, though he sometimes fakes a specialty in art or math. He's currently trying to prove God exists, in book form; it's not going well...]

A Reply to Michael Martin

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[Ed. The following is the first in a two-part article. The second half will appear in the Spring issue]

Horse Nonsense, a book of which I was once inordinately fond, includes a passage on pilling horses. Here the reader is earnestly advised that, should she choose the method of blowing the pill into the back of the horse's mouth through a tube, she should remember that the horse can blow too. Michael Martin, the well-known atheistic philosopher, has done me the honor of [writing a criticism of my book](#) on Christian apologetics.¹ He raises a great many points of interest, which I think merit a reply. He was courteous enough to mention the one point where he seemed to think my book had some merit.² --- that I take seriously the well-known 'Euthyphro dilemma'. So let us start with that.

Does God command us to perform certain actions, and not to perform others, because they are good or bad in themselves? Or are actions good or bad just because God commands us to perform them or not to perform them? Either way out seems to have awkward consequences for the theist. If she takes the first, it seems to derogate from the sovereignty of God, who is presumably free to command whatever God wishes; if the latter, then God's commands would appear to be arbitrary. (This has been a headache in Muslim as well as Christian theology.) My proposed solution was that we had two ways of knowing what God commanded: (a) through some alleged special revelation (b) through a study of human individual and social nature, and what conduced in general to a fair and happy human life. The latter, which accounted for the very large measure of agreement by believers and unbelievers on moral matters, is ultimately due to the divine command as expressed in the constitution of nature, including human nature.

Any alleged divine revelation would commend itself by being in general conformity with this; if an alleged divine revelation implied that we should be in the habit of defrauding our neighbors, or of committing lethal violence against them whenever it suited our immediate ends, this would constitute substantial grounds for saying that it was not divine revelation at all. So, in one sense, actions are good or bad in themselves; in another, their being so depends on the divine command. One must not overlook the fact that it is the same God whose commands are supposed to underlie the very constitution of nature on the one hand, and who is claimed to have told us something of the divine nature and purposes for us in special revelation on the other. Virtuous atheists, who conform to the divine commands out of sheer devotion to the good as such, without believing in God or any special revelation, are rather like the heroine of Jane Austen's *Emma*, who is really in love with Mr. Knightley throughout the novel, but not consciously so until the very end; they love God without knowing it.³

Martin says: '... this solution hardly escapes the dilemma since Meynell has not shown that it would be impossible to know what is good if God did not exist.' For the life of me, I cannot see the relevance of this objection. Indeed I believe that if there were no God, since God is that on which everything else depends for its existence, then there would be no human beings to think about what was good and bad, or to wrangle over the Euthyphro dilemma. But I have just made clear, and thought I had made clear in the book, that I

¹ *Is Christianity True?* (London: Chapman, 1994).

² Cf. the dramatic critic who wrote: 'We may mention, by way of exception, the parrot in Act IV. That at least was word-perfect.'

³ One may compare the moving account of Emeth's relation to Aslan at the end of C. S. Lewis's *The Last Battle*; or, for that matter, *Matthew 25:37-40*.

maintain that human beings are able to use their minds to come to sound conclusions on what is good and bad, quite independently of the question of whether God exists or not.

Martin will have it that my remarks on the relevance to morality of belief in an afterlife are 'problematic'. I don't know just what he is getting at by this, but I can say briefly what my opinions on the subject amount to. I maintain that the common secular view that 'enlightened self-interest' is enough for morality, unless one assumes that we are to expect some kind of afterlife, is a fraud and a swindle. That habitual immediate yielding to impulses of desire or fear is not conducive to an individual's long-term happiness, whatever be the case about the afterlife, is true, but irrelevant. So far as his long-term interest in the present life was concerned, Andrei Sakharov would have been much better off if he had kept quiet about human rights, and so been the pampered pet of the Soviet establishment as their most distinguished scientist. And his case is by no means untypical. Unless one has a very peculiar temperament indeed, the view that twinges of conscience can make one suffer more than the full resources of a modern state is sentimental hogwash. I do not say, whatever Immanuel Kant may have thought in some moods, that this provides evidence for the reality of an afterlife; only that the lack of an afterlife, and some tendency in it to redress the moral imbalances of the present, would be morally a much more serious matter than some would have us believe. As Kant rightly noted, the *summum bonum*, where a person's happiness is in proportion to her virtue, is certainly not realized when only the present life is taken into account.

Martin says that I should have taken more seriously than I did arguments to the effect that the doctrines of the Trinity and of the Incarnation, which are of course central to traditional Christianity, are self-contradictory or incoherent. The claim by philosophers, less fashionable now than it was sixty years ago, that some widely accepted and valued belief or way of talking is to be thus impugned, is one for which I have in general little respect, largely on inductive grounds. The successors of these philosophers have usually admitted, as Peter Geach used to put it, that they were talking through their mortar-boards. I would wager that few go cheerfully to their deaths on behalf of the proposition that the square root of two has whiskers, or that democracy is salmon pink. The 'logical positivists', to take what is perhaps the most notorious illustration of the fashion which I have just mentioned, dismissed the statements of metaphysics and theology as nonsensical, on the basis of their 'verification principle' --- which finally turned out to be nonsensical by application of itself to itself, being neither true by definition, nor such that it tended to be verified or falsified by some course of experience (Rudolf Carnap's wonderful suggestion, that it as a very important form of nonsense which prevented you from talking nonsense of other kinds, did not generally commend itself.) Radical empiricism issues in logical positivism; and logical positivism self-destructs. Yet we may properly feel that there is something right about empiricism; at least very often, for us to make sense of a statement of contingent fact is for us to know what course of experience would tend to verify or falsify it --- one may think of 'My aunt will visit me tomorrow', or 'if you mix hydrochloric acid and caustic soda in the right proportions, you will get a solution of common salt in water.'

What has been called 'generalized empirical method' takes advantage of the fact that we not only undergo experiences, but actively hypothesize, judge and decide on the basis of our experience, when we come to know the world, or to do good within it. The concept of 'God' is that of a being who conceives all possibilities, and wills what actually exists and occurs, rather as you and I will our comparatively restricted actions and products. Rather as you or I can decide here and now to go for a walk, or to cook some fish, or to do nothing; so God in eternity can decide to create a universe with quasars and Monica Lewinsky in it; or to create a universe without these interesting items; or not to create at all. One may conceive of a being who is aware of self as both human and divine, as God and as man. That this conceivable state of affairs has

actually been realized is the doctrine of the incarnation. Might not such a being speak and act rather as we find Jesus doing in the gospels? As the Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner has put it, when he reads the gospels, he feels like exclaiming, 'Who did that man think he was? God or something?' Human beings as such are aware of having two sorts of consciousness; that consisting of sensation and feeling which we share with other animals; and that of performing acts of conception and abstraction which seem more or less peculiar to us as human beings. This perhaps provides us with a remote conception of what it might be to be conscious of oneself as at once human and divine.

[Hugo Meynell received his Ph. D. at Cambridge, taught in the Department of Religious Studies in the University of Calgary, and was elected to the Royal Society of Canada in 1993. He has published a book defending a cosmological argument for the existence of God (The Intelligible Universe), and another of Christian apologetics (Is Christianity True?).]