

# **Atheism and the Christian Faith**

Proceedings from the 2016 Conference  
Atheism and the Christian Faith  
Canadian Centre for Scholarship  
and the Christian Faith  
At Concordia University of Edmonton  
Alberta, Canada

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With Foreword by  
Richard Swinburne

**Vernon Series in Philosophy of Religion**



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*In Loving Memory of Russ Nelson:  
A Truly Brilliant Scholar and the Epitome of  
Christian Faith*

*Is man merely a mistake of God's? Or God merely  
a mistake of man?*

*~ Nietzsche Twilight of Idols*

*Small amounts of philosophy lead to atheism, but  
larger amounts bring us back to God*

*~ Francis Bacon Of Atheism*

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# Foreword

Atheism is popular today. Probably most academics in both the sciences and the humanities are atheists; and the “new atheists” such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have helped to make it widely influential. Yet this growth of atheism has been counter-balanced by a great growth of interest among professional philosophers, some of whom are atheists and some of whom are theists, in the issues of whether there are any good arguments for or against the existence of God, and of whether we need arguments or even beliefs in order to practice a religion. The Canadian Centre for Scholarship and the Christian Faith held a public conference at Concordia University of Edmonton in May 2016 on these issues, all-important for Christians; and this volume contains some of the lectures delivered at that conference.

These lectures are generally of a kind readily accessible to most readers, and do not require any knowledge of the sometimes rather sophisticated philosophical books and essays being written today. There are here lectures giving positive arguments for the existence of God, lectures purporting to refute arguments for atheism, lectures purporting to refute arguments against atheism, lectures on whether faith without evidence is ethically permissible, and a lecture claiming that what is important about religion is too big to be captured by arguments, and much else. While not everyone will find that every lecture speaks to their condition, I feel confident that almost every reader will find something of value and interest to them somewhere in this volume.

Richard Swinburne  
July 2017



# Preface

I am the Director of the Canadian Centre for Scholarship and the Christian faith. I also did my Ph.D. in biblical studies under an atheist. So I am very familiar with the arguments on both sides of the debate and everywhere in-between. CCSCF is outside the box, open, inclusive and tolerant, as well as highly valuing academic rigor in all its pursuits.

The theme for CCSCF's 2016 conference was "Atheism and the Christian Faith". This book represents the proceedings of that conference. The project is highly driven by philosophers and philosophy. This anthology is also highly eclectic—representing atheist, agnostic and theist viewpoints. So there is something for everyone here. Because I am trained as a biblical scholar and theologian (though I examined scepticism in the Book of Ecclesiastes), I was thrilled by the education that I received through editing this book—and I am sure that you will be too! I am grateful to each and every contributor of the book to this end.

Any survey of the state of affairs in the atheism-theism discussion reveals that there appears to be an impasse. Or as Martin puts it in Chapter 6: "Talking about Something Else", i.e., both sides are not really listening and are talking past each other. This has led to misunderstanding, prejudice and bad behavior (sometimes embarrassingly so for all parties concerned). Whether we agree or disagree in the final analysis is immaterial. It is all about the academic process and truth wherever and whenever it may be ascertained. If atheists, agnostics and theists are to have genuine dialogue, then it must be truly open, honest and respectful. Part of the goal of this book is to foster such a disposition. Perez in Chapter 10 discusses "Intellectual Honesty in the Atheism-Theism Conversation". Knibbe further assists in Chapter 5 by "Helping Atheists and Christians Understand One Another" (subtitle).

Swinburne opens this anthology in Chapter 1 on "Why Believe That There is a God?". A more specific argument is offered by astrophysicist Page later in Chapter 11 on "The Optimal Argument for the Existence of God". These are countered by other chapters in the book.

The problem of evil and suffering has been used to argue against theism and for atheism. Johnson employs that argument vigorously in Chapter 2 on “Moral Culpability and Choosing to Believe in God”. But this too is something that Swinburne addresses in the last chapter on “Why God Allows Suffering”.

There are also chapters which deal with problematics in the atheism-theism discussion. Perez very much challenges some of the hermeneutical underpinnings of atheism in Chapter 4 on “Nietzsche: Master *of* Suspicion or Mastered *by* Suspicion”. Brigham in Chapter 9 welcomes the reader to World 5 and articulates “The Modal Argument Against Naturalism”. Small argues in Chapter 7 for “Why Atheists should be Antinatalists”. Ethics and Ontology are explored by Strand and Rodgers respectively in Chapters 3 and 8.

Unfortunately, the atheism-theism discussion has been plagued by misrepresentation and misunderstanding. There has been close-minded dogmatism and intolerance from every party. But let us put this issue to rest as represented by this book: There are intelligent, well-educated and reasonable representatives on all sides of the discussion—all of whom should be taken seriously.

As Elder and Paul point out in *Critical Thinking*, the highest level of scholarly competency is when one has the ability to situate oneself in another’s shoes in order to think and feel like them (why I did a Ph.D. under an atheist). This allows one to understand where others are coming from and fosters an attitude and conduct which is fair and respectful with arguments and positions with which one disagrees. I hope that the reader, regardless of one’s disposition or beliefs or unbelief, will be open to learning from a variety of different people and positions in a critically engaged but fair way. This will insure a common goal for many atheists, agnostics and theists alike—namely the dignity of all human beings—as well as tolerance and appreciation for differing views.

William H. U. Anderson  
July 2017

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I would like to acknowledge the assistance and advice of two of my colleagues from the Philosophy Department here at Concordia University of Edmonton, Dr. Jonathan Strand and Dr. Travis Dumsday, without whom this book would not have come to fruition. My research assistant, Christopher Legerme, compiled the bibliography and index for this book. I am grateful to the Executive Board of the Canadian Centre for Scholarship and the Christian Faith who provide me with endless support and encouragement to think outside the box, be creative with rigorous scholarship, and produce “Cutting Edge Theology”. The Government of Canada Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) made this project possible through grants made to CCSCF.





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**Don N. Page** is Distinguished Professor of Physics at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. He did post-doctoral studies with, and is a personal friend of, Stephen Hawking at Cambridge University.

**Jahdiel Perez** recently earned a Master of Divinity in Philosophical Theology from Harvard University and is on his way to do a Ph.D. in Theology under Michael Ward and Alister McGrath at Oxford University. He was awarded a Doctoral Fellowship from the Oxford Center for Christian Apologetics.

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**Richard Swinburne** is a Fellow of the British Academy. From 1985 until 2002 he was Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at Oxford University. He is the author of many books on philosophical issues, mostly ones concerned with the meaning and justification of religious claims.

## Chapter 1

# Why Believe That There Is A God?

Richard Swinburne

St. Paul famously claimed that pagans who did not worship God were “without excuse”, because “ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things which he has made”.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by this text, many Christian thinkers from the second to the eighteenth centuries put forward arguments from premises “evident to the senses” to the existence of God. To adduce such arguments is to do “natural theology”. My own natural theology is inductive, i.e., it seeks to show that the evident phenomena are best explained by supposing that a God causes them, and that makes it probable that there is a God. In this chapter I shall have time to consider only the inductive force of four very evident general phenomena: that there is a physical universe; that it is governed by very simple natural laws; that those laws are such as to lead to the existence of human bodies; and that those bodies are the bodies of reasoning humans who choose between good and evil. For reasons of time I shall not be able to discuss arguments against the existence of God here, such as the argument from the existence of pain and other suffering; though I will address them in the last chapter of this book.<sup>2</sup>

### The Nature of Explanatory Hypotheses

Theism, the claim that there is a God is an explanatory hypothesis, one which purports to explain why certain observed phenomena (i.e., data or evidence) are as they are. There are two basic kinds of explanatory hypothesis—personal and inanimate (or scientific) hypotheses. A personal hypothesis explains some phenomenon in

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to the Romans 1:20.

<sup>2</sup> For the fully developed account of my natural theology, see my *The Existence of God*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For a shorter version see *Is There a God?* rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

terms of it being caused by a substance (i.e., a thing), a person, acting with certain powers (to bring about effects), certain beliefs (about how to do so), and a certain purpose (or intention) to bring about a particular effect, either for its own sake or as a step towards a further effect. I (a substance) cause the motion of my hand in virtue of my powers (to move my limbs), my belief (that moving my hand will attract attention) and my purpose (to attract attention). An inanimate (or scientific) explanation is usually represented as explaining some phenomenon in terms of it being caused by some initial state of affairs and the operation on that state of laws of nature. The present positions of the planets are explained by their earlier positions and that of the Sun, and the operation on them of Newton's laws. But I think that this is a misleading way of analyzing inanimate explanation—because “laws” are not things; to say that Newton's law of gravity is a law is simply to say that each material body in the universe has the power to attract every other material body with a force proportional to  $Mm/r^2$  and the liability to exercise that power on every such body. So construed, like personal explanation, inanimate explanation of some phenomenon (e.g., the present positions of the planets) explains it in terms of it being caused by substances (e.g., the Sun and the planets) acting with certain powers (to cause material bodies to move in the way codified in Newton's laws) and the liability always to exercise those powers. So both kinds of explanation explain phenomena in terms of the actions of substances having certain powers to produce effects. But while personal explanation explains how substances exercise their powers because of their purposes and their beliefs, inanimate explanation explains how substances exercise their powers because of their liabilities to do so.

### **The Four Criteria for Judging an Explanatory Hypothesis to Be Probably True**

I suggest that we judge a postulated hypothesis (of either kind) as probably true insofar as it satisfies four criteria. First we must have observed many phenomena which it is quite probable would occur and no phenomena which it is quite probable would not occur, if the hypothesis is true. Secondly, it must be much less probable that the phenomena would occur in the normal course of things, i.e., if the hypothesis is false. Thirdly, the hypothesis must be simple, i.e., it must postulate the existence and operation of few substances, few kinds of substance, with few easily describable properties correlated

in few mathematically simple kinds of way.<sup>3</sup> We can always postulate many new substances with complicated properties to explain anything which we find. But our hypothesis will only be supported by the evidence if it is a simple hypothesis which leads us to expect the various phenomena that form the evidence. And fourthly, the hypothesis must fit in with our knowledge of how the world works in wider fields—what I shall call our “background evidence”.

I now illustrate these criteria at work in assessing postulated explanations. I begin with a postulated personal explanation. Suppose that there has been a burglary: money has been stolen from a safe. A detective has discovered these pieces of evidence: John’s fingerprints are on the safe, someone reports having seen John near the scene of the burglary at the time it was committed, and there is in John’s house an amount of money equivalent to the amount stolen. The detective puts forward as the explanation of the burglary the hypothesis that John robbed the safe, using his normal human powers, in the light of his belief that there was money in the safe, with the purpose of getting the money. If John did rob the safe, it would be to some modest degree probable that his fingerprints would be found on the safe, that someone would report having seen him near the scene of the crime at the time it was committed, and that money of the amount stolen would be found in his house. But these phenomena are much less to be expected with any modest degree of probability if John did not rob the safe; they therefore constitute positive evidence, evidence favoring the hypothesis. On the other hand, if John robbed the safe, it would be most unexpected (it would be most improbable) that many people would report seeing him in a foreign country at the time of the burglary. Such reports would constitute negative evidence, evidence counting strongly against the hypothesis. Let us suppose that there is no such negative evidence. The more probable it is that we would find the positive evidence if the hypothesis is true, and the more improbable it is that we would find that evidence if the hypothesis is false, the more probable the evidence makes the hypothesis.

But a hypothesis is only rendered probable by evidence insofar as it is simple. Consider the following hypothesis as an explanation of the detective’s positive data: David stole the money; quite unknown to David, George dressed up to look like John at the scene of the crime, Tony planted John’s fingerprints on the safe just for fun; and,

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<sup>3</sup> For a full account of the nature of simplicity, see my *Simplicity as Evidence of Truth* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997); or my *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chapter 4.

unknown to the others, Stephen hid money stolen from another robbery (coincidentally of exactly the same amount) in John's house. If this complicated hypothesis were true, we would expect to find all the positive evidence which I described, while it remains not nearly as probable otherwise that we would find this evidence. But this evidence does not make the complicated hypothesis probable, although it does make the hypothesis that John robbed the safe probable; and that is because the latter hypothesis is simple. The detective's original hypothesis postulates only one substance (John) doing one action (robbing the safe) which leads us to expect the various pieces of evidence; while the rival hypothesis which I have just set out postulates many substances (many persons) doing different unconnected actions.

But as well as the evidence of the kind which I have illustrated, there may be "background evidence", i.e., evidence about matters which the hypothesis does not purport to explain, but comes from an area outside the scope of that hypothesis. We may have evidence about what John has done on other occasions, for example evidence making probable a hypothesis that he has often robbed safes in the past. This latter evidence would make the hypothesis that John robbed the safe on this occasion much more probable than it would be without that evidence. Conversely, evidence that John has lived a crime-free life in the past would make it much less probable that he robbed the safe on this occasion. A hypothesis fits with such background evidence insofar as the background evidence makes probable a theory of wider scope (e.g., that John is a regular safe-robbler) which in turn makes the hypothesis in question more probable than it would otherwise be.

The same four criteria are at work in assessing postulated inanimate (or "scientific") hypotheses. Consider the hypothesis that Newton's theory of gravitation explains many phenomena known in 1687 when Newton proposed his theory: evidence about the paths taken (given certain initial positions) by our moon, by the planets, by the moons of planets, the velocities with which bodies fall to the earth, the motions of pendula, the occurrence of tides, etc. Newton's theory consisted of his three laws of motion and his inverse square law of gravitational attraction. These laws were such as to make it very probable that previous observed phenomena, such as the positions of the Sun and planets five hundred years ago, will be followed by various present observed phenomena, such as the present positions of the planets. It would be very unlikely that the latter phenomena would occur if Newton's theory were not true. There was no significant negative evidence. The theory was very

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