

Noah Buchanan

Mr. Rigdon

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Investigating the Legitimacy of Christianity

Religion can be a sensitive topic, and I want to take a moment to address this. I am approaching this topic with the utmost respect for people of all religious affiliations or the lack thereof. I want to be clear so there's no speculation, I am a Christian. This paper is likely not free from bias, but the goal isn't to convert anyone, but rather to provide a few personal discoveries through research on this fascinating topic. Do not take this paper at face value, but continue to research yourself, as it merely scratches the surface of a timeless debate.

A curious situation has taken place in our small corner of the Milky Way galaxy, an even smaller microscopic region of a desolate universe. Through the silence, Earth and its trillion lifeforms breathe. Furthermore, a remarkably miraculous species of life, humans, have dreamed, loved, and pondered for millennia the reason for their existence. Are we just molecules in motion—a result of matter under the authority of an immutable universal law—or are we rather a creation from a creator? Do we have another purpose given by a creator beyond satisfying biological needs and desires, or have we just evolved to a point where we have the luxury of thinking there is more? In the case of the existence of a creator (who will be referred to as God for the rest of the essay), it would arguably be the most important thing ever, regardless of whether it is the one described in any of the world religions or not.

Throughout history, there has never been a scarcity of those claiming to know the answer, some claiming to know God, or even being this God. Most of these individuals have been lost to

the sands of time; forgotten lives whose claims will never be known. However, there are a handful who have been remembered, and even fewer who have made a great impact. About two-thousand years ago, another one of these people claiming divinity came into the public eye: a Jewish man who allegedly lived, was killed, and rose from the grave; supposedly living up to his claims. This man being referred to is of course none other than Jesus of Nazareth. The entire religion of Christianity lays its foundation on the claims of Jesus, whose claims, unlike others' claims, are defensible, have directly opposed the brutality of time, and through scrutinizing the evidence: his claims are trustworthy. Christianity solely relies on the truth behind Jesus' claims, and if false, billions have been misled for millennia. However, due to the great evidence ranging from philosophical arguments to historical facts, Christianity has a strong case supporting it. Following the evidence where it leads takes one to a place far from blind faith.

Chronologically, before one can even begin to present a case for the validity of Jesus' claims, we must deal with a bigger issue. The question of 'does God exist,' naturally arises and is clearly the question that first must be answered. If the answer to this question is a definitive, absolutely certain 'no', then you might choose to spend your time elsewhere. However, if there is even the slightest possibility that the answer to this question is 'yes,' if there even exists an insignificant portion of a percent that God does exist, then the only intellectually consistent course of action is to investigate the claims of Christianity (and possibly other religions). Therefore, keep reading.

This simple reasoning should be enough to segue into investigating the validity of Christianity, and furthermore the historical reliability of Jesus' claims. This is due to the establishment that even if there's a chance God exists, then it is worth the effort to investigate Christianity. However, it still is worth taking some time to discuss that there is more than just a

microscopic chance that God does exist, for by arguing that the odds are greater than a millionth of a percent, the investigation into Christianity becomes increasingly important.

Nearly all arguments for God that are at least coherent are not direct supports for Christianity, but rather supports of the existence of God. Therefore, these arguments can be applied to many religions and beliefs, including Christianity, of course. However, these arguments ultimately get us no closer to differentiating the plausibility between these different religions, and furthermore no closer to even a hint of an indication whether any of the religions even describe the true nature of God. After all, this God argued for could be a “bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser;” and an “infanticidal genocidal... malevolent bully” (Dawkins 51). Although, this ironically is the conclusion Dawkins comes to about the God of the Bible. However, in a twist of fate, Dawkins’ passionate dislike towards his interpretation of the acts of the God of the Bible may help support the case for God’s existence.

In his statement about God being a “malevolent bully” (51), Dawkins makes a few claims, specifically claims that are objective in nature. He implies that bullying is absolutely, undeniably objectively wrong, as is ethnic cleansing and infanticidal genocide. Dawkins’ claims are not simply loose statements, but rather they appear to be moral fact. These facts, among others, form the basic moral standard that all people know: it is right to be kind, it is wrong to murder, it is good to be selfless, it is wrong to steal, etc. Whether they adhere to them or not is a different story.

The question is, where does Dawkins get this standard of morality from? Where has nearly every civilization gotten this basic moral standard from? The Christian says that God gave us this morality, that it has been written upon all our hearts. However, a simple counter-argument arises. It could be a simple explanation of the evolutionary process: through natural selection, it

had been advantageous for us to be altruistic and not to hurt fellow humans, and, over time, humans developed an engrained sense of morality within them. While there is certainly an entire argument to be made against macroevolution (macroevolution describes larger changes beyond a single species seen over long periods of time, while microevolution describes smaller, more observable, and scientifically testable changes in a species typically over shorter periods of time), for the sake of argument, completely and entirely yielding that macroevolution and abiogenesis are simply true still may not defeat the argument for God.

It may almost be a presumptuous oversight to believe that God isn't needed, even if evolution and abiogenesis are true. The need for external laws, which allow life to form through these processes, does not go away. These laws such as gravitational forces, nuclear attraction forces, and other miscellaneous laws are not explained through evolution (Barnes). However, some may respond that these laws came about by sheer necessity (though there is no evidence to believe these values couldn't be different), or that this fine tuning is some sort of illusion (Barnes). They argue that if one even briefly observes the vast, empty void of space, they'll find that most of the universe is cruel, cold, and lifeless and that we rolled the lottery of the universe; Earth: a perfect goldilocks zone perfect for life (Dawkins 163). However, the fine-tuning argument doesn't only apply to just Earth's chances of life. The argument doesn't only pertain to the degree of Earth's tilt, its position to the sun, or the helpful giant that is Jupiter as it diverts asteroids away from us because of its massive gravitational forces (Dawkins 163). Yes, there are worlds with potential for other life, but it is a straw man fallacy to think that this fine tuning argument only describes the odds of life on Earth. If it was, considering the sheer size of the universe, this argument for fine tuning is swiftly defeated. The universe could obviously account for some "goldilocks zones" such as Earth (Dawkins 163). Instead, the entire fine-tuning

argument says that the odds that there is any universe at all rather than nothing are so impossibly small, that it may take more faith to believe that it arose by chance rather than some intentional designer (Barnes).

To put it simply, scientists have discovered extremely precise values, each of which represents different constants within the universe. These values, if even slightly changed, could result in the inability of life to form anywhere in the universe (Barnes 23). Furthermore, if some constants, such as the expansion rate of the universe (which is dependent upon the cosmological constant), were slightly different, then the result would be having no universe at all. (Barnes 19-22). Dawkins responds to this argument, giving an example of one such constant finely tuned for the formation of structures. The example is of the “strong force” which “binds the components of an atomic nucleus,” (170). which is a precise measurement. Dawkins writes that if the strong force had been “too small, say 0.006 instead of 0.007,” then, “chemistry without hydrogen could not generate life as we know it.” (171). He goes on to say that the explanation that God tuned these values is “deeply unsatisfying, because it leaves the existence of God unexplained.” (171). However (while it may not have been his intention due to trying to get a point across), Dawkins generously underestimates the astronomical precision of the most notable constants.

The cosmological constant is described in Barnes’ article, “The Fine-Tuning of the Universe for Life.” It is as arguably the “most severe theoretical problem in high-energy physics today,” (18) which isn’t an exaggeration due to its precision. The cosmological constant has a value of “ $1.2 * 10^{-123}$ ” (19) and has a “definitive effect on the necessary conditions for life.” (22). If it were slightly larger, then “structure formation freezes before *anything* has formed” (22). If the value were negative, then it would cause the “universe to recollapse” (22). To put it simply, this problem describes how physicists must suppose that certain vacuum energies within

a quantum field simply “cancel each other to 123 decimal places” (21). An explanation like this is a “suspiciously precise coincidence between a number of independent factors” (21).

With the picture that Dawkins described, God admittedly might be a dissatisfying answer, however, looking at the true scale of the cosmological constant compared to the (comparatively) elementary value 0.007, the difference is about 120 orders of magnitude of precision (admittedly, Dawkins may have known of this cosmological constant but opted for a less precise constant or given a simpler example of the numbers, which is understandable). This is an unfathomable difference that the human mind is incapable of comprehending. However, with this value of the cosmological constant in mind, the answer of a God fine tuning these values may still be dissatisfying or unbelievable to some, but others may find it even more dissatisfying to believe the precision of these values is just the result of a fortunate cosmic lottery.

How many times would it take you to roll double sixes in a row until you think the dice are loaded? Whatever number that might be for you, the chances still are likely many orders of magnitude smaller than the chances of the cosmological constant being the way it is. Barnes states that the multiverse theory does deal with fine tuning, but it too has been deemed as “speculative” and it is unscientific because it is “untestable” in nature (44). Therefore, one must conclude for themselves which is most reasonable: God fine-tuned these values, nothing did, or the multiverse explains it all. Ultimately, any conclusion about the precision of these values demands a verdict that requires some degree of faith.

To refocus on the original discussion, the question was: where does morality come from? However, after yielding to evolution for the sake of the argument, we can say morality is the result of the evolutionary process. Now the question changes to: why is this morality objectively good? In other words, why should we be nice, why should we not murder, why should we be

selfless and why should we not steal, and so on? Some may say that adhering to a basic morality supports others and ultimately pushes humanity forward. However, the question just shifts: why is the propagation of humanity objectively a good thing, and to Dawkins' point, why is infantile genocide objectively a bad thing? From an atheistic worldview (specifically a more materialistic view which lacks belief in any immaterial reality), without any external standard such as God, it is just one person's, rather, one animal's subjective reasoning against another's...right?

However, we know this to not be the case. There are moral standards that go beyond material understanding that individuals consistently hold as objectively true, standards that one can expect their neighbor to understand and generally adhere to.

A few common examples of us all realizing this objective morality are laid out in Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, which is referred to as the "Moral Law" (9). If your seat is taken, you expect the offender on some level beyond themselves to understand there's something wrong with the action they have committed against you: taking something that was yours (3). Another example might be when two instincts are in conflict, one might expect the stronger instinct to "win" (10). For example, an instinct to get to safety, and another instinct to save the drowning man. The louder and stronger instinct would be to get to safety, but the Moral Law says to "side with the weaker of the two impulses" (10). This Moral Law is different from what some might call evolutionary "herd instincts" that help us do the 'right' thing (11). To clarify, herd instincts are strong desires which certainly can make one want to help another. However, the common action of making a herd instinct stronger so that one might feel more inclined to help someone by "waking up our imaginations and arousing pity," cannot itself be the herd instinct (10). A quiet voice (I truly wish to put this another way as it implies a Christian view) might whisper, "Your

herd instinct is asleep. Wake it up” (10). However, that voice cannot itself be the herd instinct, it must be something else, a Moral Law (10).

A final, this more aggressive example might be how Nazi war criminals on trial resorted to defending themselves by claiming they were “just following orders” (Barajas, 2). If morality is subjective, we truly ought not to hold them accountable for their actions as they had no higher authority to follow than their superior’s commands (which might supersede their own subjective moral compass). Even if we did want to indict them, if morality was subjective, it truly would be intellectually inconsistent to impose one man’s, or one government’s morality, upon another’s morality. Clearly, this is egregious to think, we know everyone has an external standard of morality to appeal to, one above any government or any authority; an objective morality that is inexplicably ingrained within each of us.

One of the best explanations for this objective external standard of morality that we hold is the existence of God. It is a simple argument that there is likely a God if we have an objective moral standard, which we’ve established that we do indeed have. Whether or not evolution is the result of us knowing this standard still doesn’t explain its objectivity across individuals. For without God, from a specifically materialistic worldview, it is simply one animal’s opinion against another animal’s opinion, which is not the case. Therefore, after reasoning through this argument, one might reason that God exists, or at the very least: one may find it is more likely that God exists.

The strength of these arguments, especially the moral argument, may be enough to shift focus to historical Christianity as these arguments have, at the very least, made the case for God more impressive. Despite this, it may be worth to briefly mention another well known argument for the existence of God called the cosmological argument. The argument follows a simple

chronological order where the current step is dependent on the previous steps to be true. Firstly, the argument states that whatever begins to exist has a cause. Secondly, it states that the universe began to exist. Finally, it states the universe has a cause (Craig 9).

Since all premises rely on each other for the argument to be coherent, the first statement needs to be evaluated before anything else can. At first glance, saying that everything that begins to exist has a cause seems to be a simple fact of nature. Children come from parents, trees come from their seeds, and for this reason, one doesn't expect things to spontaneously come into existence without some sort of driving catalyst, not without some sort of cause. A high school chemistry student knows that one can only expect to get products from reactants. Certainly, products cannot be yielded without a reactant, and therefore something cannot exist without a cause.

The second premise states that the universe began to exist. It is simple for many religious people to agree with this statement by indicating that God created the universe, however, there is even stronger evidence to believe the universe had a beginning. Ironically the Big Bang theory which is the scientifically "generally accepted theory of how the universe emerged," supports the cosmological argument through its support that the universe had a beginning (Rich and Stingl). Due to its nature of being widely accepted, it is not worth wasting time explaining the reasons for its acceptance. The theory suggests that space, matter, and time came into existence together at one point. Further evidence discovered by Edwin Hubble suggested that the entire universe came into being at one point in the finite past (Rich and Stingl). The evidence suggests that the universe truly began to exist, and from nothing.

Finally, due to reasoning through the first and second statements of the cosmological argument, it can be said that it is likely the universe has a cause. Some may argue that the cause

of the universe was itself, but that is like saying that a person is his own father, it is logically impossible. It is more likely that the cause of the universe is beyond the universe, meaning that its cause must not be made of whatever the universe is. The cause must be “self-existent, immaterial, unimaginably powerful, supremely intelligent,” and even “personal,” because turning nothing into something requires a “choice” (Geisler and Turek). This cause is something one might call God.

However, a simple, powerful question might arise: ‘who made God?’ It is what Dawkins essentially argues in his “Ultimate Boeing 747” argument (137). Dawkins puts pressure on theists by saying that if they can use God as an explanation for the existence of complex life, then they need much more of an explanation for the existence of God because his existence is “at least as improbable” (138). He reasons that a creator must be more complex than the creation. In other words, the odds of a hurricane sweeping through a field and somehow assembling a Boeing 747 may be near impossible, similar to the odds of life emerging, and Dawkins argues that God must be just as if not more complex. Making God the “Ultimate Boeing 747” (137). However, the question of “who made God” stems from a misunderstanding of what the notion of God is.

When one attempts to find the cause of, essentially anything, one will ultimately stumble upon an infinite regress. Like a chain of dominos, where each domino needs another to knock it down, then that domino needs another domino to knock it over, and so on (Craig 32). This sort of loop is deemed as “impossible” to exist both in theory and reality because for the current domino to fall, infinite dominoes would have needed to have fallen before it (32). Similarly, if there was an infinite past, we never would have reached today. The question of ‘who made God’ remains a good question because it supports the notion that we all understand entities need causes, but, at some point, something must be uncaused. This is what Craig calls the “Uncaused First Cause”

(68). The idea of God is simply the terminator of this regress. Eventually, something will have to be the first cause; something will have to be eternal and uncaused. Something would have had to set the first domino into motion without having to be set into motion. Ultimately, this debate that has lasted all of human history comes down to these options: God who is eternal and uncaused created the universe, or nothing created the universe, out of nothing. One might reason that one option is more rational than the other, however, the debate continues.

While there is certainly more to discuss about arguments concerning the existence of God, the possibility that God may exist has been established. Unfortunately, we still are no closer to differentiating who this God may be. It would honestly be quite a leap to go from acknowledging the existence of God, to definitively deciding Christianity has the right God. However, by dissecting the cosmological argument, we can see that the character of the God of the Bible is at least consistent with what we'd expect the God described in the cosmological argument to be like, which narrows our search a little. This God must be, as previously established: self-existent, immaterial, and uncaused (Geisler and Turek).

Fortunately, to narrow down this vague idea of some God existing to feeling confident in the existence of the Christian God is very simple. As aforementioned, all of Christianity's claims rest on a singular historical event: the resurrection of Jesus. The benefit is that by having this primary foundational event, Christianity has a simple way to ensure its legitimacy or to completely debunk itself.

The first step in evaluating the evidence for the resurrection begins with the man in question: Jesus. There are common slogans chanted from the rooftops about Jesus, many of which aren't even close to being close to being true. One of these statements in particular employs a strong tactic that can really make someone question their entire beliefs up to that

point. The statement, 'Jesus never existed,' is one that is capable of entirely debunking Christianity, because if Jesus truly did never exist, if he truly is just a constructed character in fiction over two thousand years ago, Christianity cannot be true.

Bart Ehrman is an agnostic (specifically Ex-Christian) New Testament Scholar. He argues for the existence of Jesus in his book *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*. Ehrman claims that "virtually all scholars" say that Jesus truly existed (12). This version of Jesus is referred to as the historical Jesus. The man whose claims of divinity and miracles may not be true, but whose life as a "Jewish teacher" and death through "[crucifixion] under Pontius Pilate" is definitively determined. He concludes the book with a simple sentence, "Jesus did exist, whether we like it or not" (143).

While determining the validity of the historical Jesus is a good start, it does nothing to validate the resurrection. If it is known that Jesus lived, can it be known that he died? Secondly, and most importantly, can it be known if Jesus rose from the grave, proving his claims to divinity? To begin to answer any of these questions, it is helpful to be able to rely on the Bible as a historical document with accurate eyewitness accounts. However, many claim that the Bible itself is not trustworthy or reliable for many reasons, such as mistranslations, authority figures manipulating scriptures for personal gain, or other claims about the implausibility that the original document is still intact.

It is a common claim that the Bible has been handed down from civilization to civilization for centuries, and that, intentionally or unintentionally, changes were made that no one is sure of, or that the Bible is littered with errors that detract from its reliability. A common argument: since the original documents the disciples wrote are long gone, there is no way to know what they truly said. While we almost certainly do not have the original documents, it is

still far from the truth to say that we cannot know what the original New Testament authors wrote about Jesus and their experiences. There are thousands of manuscripts, which are simply copies of the original authors' text. There are over 5,700 manuscripts of the New Testament, of which, albeit few, there are some that "contain the complete New Testament" (Jackson and Judd 7). The accuracy of these copies is attributed to being 99.75 percent (Geisler 1).

For some, this may not be enough evidence to reason the New Testament documents have been successfully preserved. For historical document comparison, one of Aristotle's works has forty-nine copies, which is dated to be 1400 years after the original was written. However, Aristotle's work in this case isn't ever scrutinized or not trusted, but the works of the New Testament are. However, this is on the low end for the number of manuscripts. On the more trustworthy end of historical documents come the works of Homer, of which we have 643 manuscripts, and the gap from the original to the copy is dated to be 500 years. (Slick 1-6).

This is significant because with an increased number of manuscripts comes an increased ability for historians to reconstruct the original document. Due to this, common arguments about textual errors or variations within the text over the years of copying simply fall flat. Firstly, with the sheer amount of manuscript evidence, if there is an error that a scribe made when copying the text, by comparing this error to the other thousand manuscripts, we can piece back what the original said. Therefore, the error becomes meaningless as we are able to reconstruct the truth behind the error. This is what Geisler likely meant when he said, these errors might be truly insignificant to core Christian doctrine, as Geisler says the "New Testament is 99.9 percent free from real concern" (1).

However, scholars like Ehrman have pointed out that there are apparently more significant errors rather than smaller typos or mistranslations. Ehrman lists many different

examples of times when the disciples' accounts contradict each other, which, at first glance, appears to be a huge issue in his book *Can We Trust the Bible on the Historical Jesus?* (26). However, these contradictions are ultimately minor issues, and don't detract from the foundational event of the resurrection. In fact, these contradictions are even what one might expect in a court when two witnesses are trying to tell the truth. They may truly disagree on the minors but would agree on the majors, that Jesus rose from the dead (Geisler and Turek). So it could be that small contradictions like this might even support the notions that the New Testament authors were telling the truth.

The reliability of the New Testament documents is likely one of the greatest out of any historical document, and therefore the reliability of what the New Testament authors witnessed and wrote can arguably be concluded to be accurate. However, the question remains: were they telling truth about Jesus' death and resurrection? Some may say that Jesus didn't die, that he may have survived and appeared later to his confused disciples. However, the historical brutality of the Roman's system of crucifixion such as insured death through "death blows," which were acts of ensuring a victim is deceased (Cook 32), make this theory less plausible. Methods include dealing blows to break knees such that the victim could not pull themselves up to breathe, and piercing their side to confirm death (Cook 32). Also, some may find it hard to believe that if Jesus didn't die from crucifixion, then surviving in a cold tomb, sneaking past Roman guards who "would be killed" if they failed at their duties, and finally appearing to the disciples horribly injured is something that the disciples wouldn't have mistaken for a risen savior (Giesler and Turek 305).

The establishment of the life and death of Jesus are what Habermas includes in his "minimal facts approach," which are facts that almost all scholars of "almost every religious or

philosophical persuasion recognize as historical” (3). The death of Jesus is Habermas’ first fact, and his second is that shortly after Jesus’ crucifixion, the “disciples had experiences that they believed were appearances of the resurrected Jesus” (24). It appears that there is a consensus among scholars that the disciples saw what they believed to be the risen Jesus, however, were they lying? Could they have been deceived and made up the entire story?

Firstly, it seems to be unlikely that the disciples would have made up this story. Some argue that the disciples’ motive was power or some gain. However, this does not line up with reality. To begin to establish their possible motive of lying, we must understand that all the disciples, except Luke, were Jews (Geisler and Turek 234). As Jews, they had “every earthly motive to deny [the] Resurrection rather than proclaim it” (Geisler and Turek 234). Unless, of course, one considers getting persecuted, being kicked out of their synagogues, being tortured and ultimately becoming martyrs as great motives. It is also important to consider that they were devout Jews, which adds possible eternal damnation to the list (Geisler and Turek 234). The New Testament writers had absolutely nothing to gain but everything to lose, it is a ridiculous notion to believe that they made this up, and even more absurd to believe they kept up the hoax to the point of becoming martyrs. Another important fact to consider is to consider what sets these disciples apart from any other modern-day martyrs: the disciples wouldn’t have been dying for what they believed to be a lie, but rather, for what they knew to be a lie (Wallace 1).

Another hint to confirm they didn’t fabricate the story is to look at their accounts. If one were to make a story, they would likely want to paint themselves as heroes, or as noblemen. However, within the New Testament are many accounts of times the disciples were cowards, such as in Peter’s repeated denial (Geisler and Turek 277).

If they didn't make it up, could they have been deceived into believing Jesus rose? Theories such as a false tomb or hallucinations frequently come up within this discussion. Firstly, "hallucinations are not experienced by groups but only by individuals" (Geisler and Turek 302). Even if hallucinations did occur that made a disciple believe they saw the risen Jesus, the theory becomes increasingly difficult to accept once we realize the accounts of Jesus appearing to multiple individuals at once. Even if one yields that they were truly all hallucinating (all 500 eyewitness accounts), a simple solution arrives. The enemies of Jesus, such as the Jews, or the very Romans who crucified him, could all simply parade Jesus' body around to crush the beliefs of those with false hallucinations (Geisler and Turek 301). On the other hand, if they discovered the wrong tomb (or in many other cases where the followers of Jesus were incorrect), the same parade could be held to crush their beliefs.

Ultimately, if Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity is true. As previously established, it is likely that God exists, it is a fact Jesus lived, and it is at least reasonable to believe that the New Testament writers were telling the truth. This evidence supports the notion that Jesus rose from the dead. As a Christian myself, this research has enlightened me and truly has only made my faith stronger. I've learned that the stronger arguments against God and Christianity ironically often take some degree of faith to believe in themselves (or rather, some faith to ignore the evidence there is for God and Christianity). I sincerely hope the reader can take something away from this, whether that be a new curiosity for Christianity, a new dislike towards Christians and theologians, a realization that Christianity isn't just blind faith, but especially a desire to follow Christ more. Whatever your takeaway is, I hope you continue your own research and follow the evidence wherever it leads. This debate began before us and will surely continue after. Choosing and living a life that is indicative of an educated stance on this topic of utmost

importance is the most intellectually consistent thing one can do. However, it is a choice only you can make- you must.

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