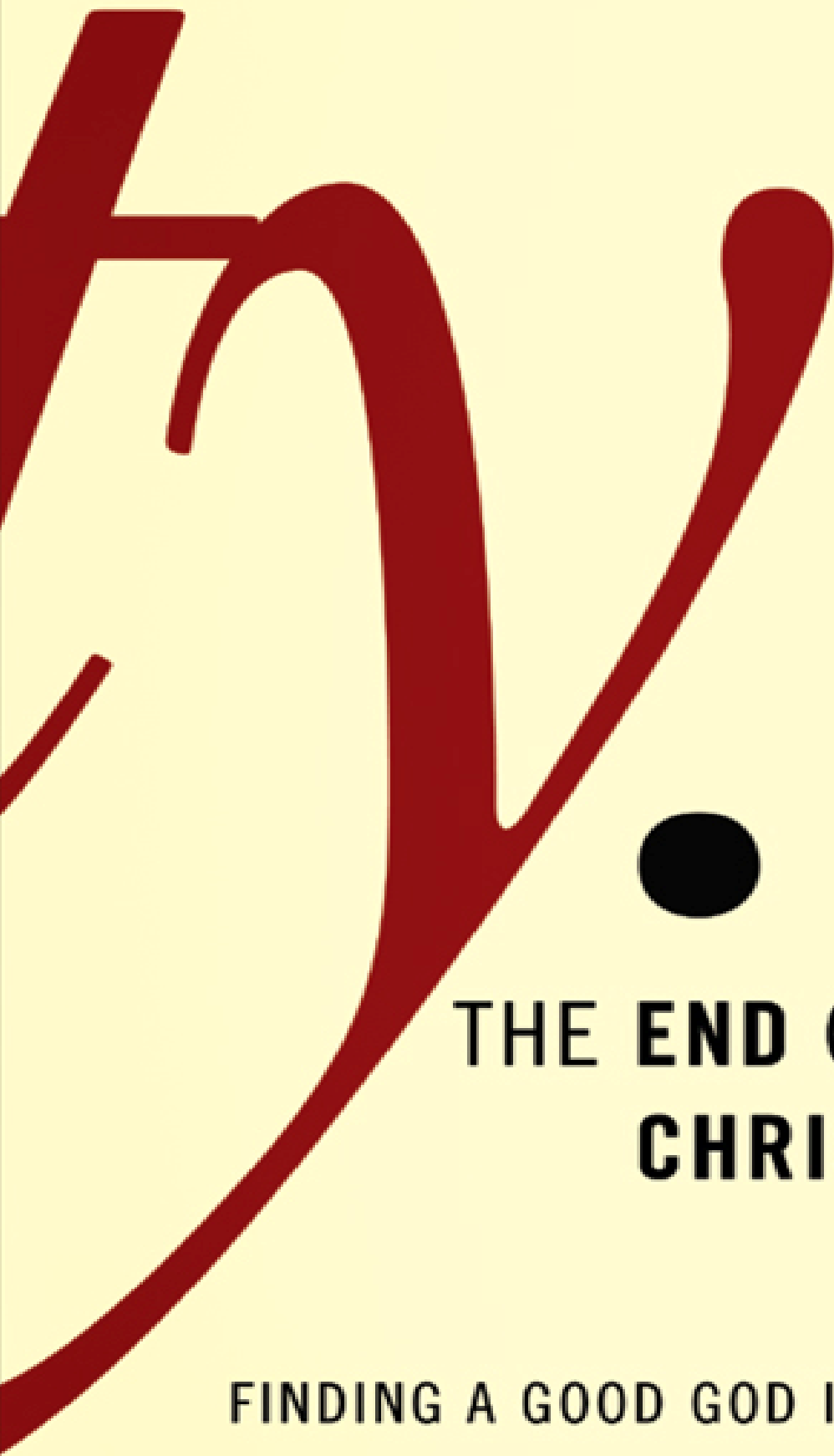


WILLIAM A. DEMBSKI



**THE END OF
CHRISTIANITY**

FINDING A GOOD GOD IN AN EVIL WORLD

The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World

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v. 50

Dedication: In memory of Ethel and Harry Cooper, John 13:35

Epigraph: “What you believe to be true will control you, whether it’s true or not.” —Jeremy LaBorde

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Foreword

For some years I have felt like a cork on a teeming sea tossed by the random nature of suffering. I was left holding on to the Christ who saves me and the Christ who will return, but with a heart that aches for meaning and purpose in the present and that too often is robbed of joy. I have felt like an actor on a stage and wondered whether anyone really is living a genuine life.

The week that I read this book I began to feel different. It has profoundly influenced my thinking. I am grateful to my friend Bill Dembski for writing it. I got to know Bill through his work on intelligent design (ID), for which he is well-known. Indeed, his contributions in this field have been seminal. And yet, I suspect he will be remembered for the ideas in this book as much as for his shepherding of the intelligent design movement.

Bill is a brilliant man who speaks and writes without fear. It has been his life's work to know, love, and understand God as He is revealed in Jesus Christ and in creation. I am personally grateful that it isn't only a private matter for him. He has a consuming passion to help explain to others the mysteries he has come to grasp. The clear aim of all he does is to shine a brighter light on the One he loves, or rather to stand aside while the Light of the World shines into the lives of ordinary people like me.

On entering the Christian life I devoured the Bible in frequent large portions and worked tirelessly to understand the history and purposes of God and to integrate them into a cogent whole. It was natural for me to opt for a plain reading of the Bible. And what could be plainer than the teaching of Genesis on creation? A young-earth perspective therefore seemed to me the only viable approach to anyone who took the Bible seriously.

To survive a medical education, I had a bubble into which I placed what I perceived to be theologically incompatible data. Surprisingly, not much in medical studies challenged a plain reading of the Bible. Yet there were times when the faculty insisted on enlightening us by inserting an evolutionary perspective on life and the human body. Uncomfortable as I was during these times, I felt inside that someday my beliefs in the Bible would trump the findings of science.

At the same time, in biochemistry, physiology, anatomy, and histology, I was studying complex systems that to me, as a former engineering student, looked obviously to be the product of intelligent

design. I had to wait a long time for the birth of an articulated theory that confirmed my intuitions. I am thankful to Bill for his part in the development of such a theory.

In my twelve years in a rural hospital in Papua, New Guinea, I saw a lot of suffering. I saw the killing and maiming that resulted from tribal warfare—suffering inflicted by men. But I also saw innocent babies and mothers dying in childbirth, people dying in a flooded river, and the ravages of diseases such as malaria or tuberculosis—suffering inflicted by nature.

This is a broken world. We can all think of changes that we would make if we were God. Theologically, I understand all this evil and suffering to derive from rebellion against God. This understanding of evil and suffering can be more readily maintained when people are guilty of behaving badly. 9/11 cannot be blamed on God. It is far more difficult, however, to maintain this understanding of evil and suffering where no guilty party is immediately evident.

I never intended to depart from a plain reading of Genesis. It was forced upon me with great pain and with tears. It tore me apart. I felt like an infidel. I kept it quiet, knowing how I myself would have responded earlier in my walk with God. To question a young-earth reading of Genesis was to question the entire Bible and to place one's faith in jeopardy.

I was not coaxed away from a plain reading of Genesis by theological arguments, by so-called liberals or higher critics. I was compelled by the scientific evidence: stars are a long way off and very old; the earth and its landforms seem clearly the result of millions of years of normal processes; the world presents strong evidence of suffering and death that occurred well before Adam and Eve opened their minds and closed their teeth on the forbidden fruit.

The principle of “double truth,” in which reason teaches one thing and faith can teach the exact opposite, has always left me cold. Some people are comfortable with holding apparent contradictions in tension. One young-earth geologist I know is comfortable writing about millions of years of geological history in his doctoral dissertation. Yet you would never know from reading it that he believes the world to be less than 1 percent of a million years old! Unlike this geologist, I couldn't live in parallel universes, one old and one young.

Wallowing in this no man's land that pitted science against faith and without someone to whom I could confess my agony, I nonetheless approached with considerable scepticism Bill's undertaking to explain how the Fall of Adam and Eve could be held accountable for natural evils that were occurring hundreds of millions of years before them. How could the cause (the sin of Adam and Eve) come after the effect (millions of years of natural evil)? I expected that Bill would engage in rationalizations and verbal gymnastics that in the end would leave me unconvinced.

What I experienced was nothing short of an epiphany. In my mind, sealed compartments like bubbles were straining not to touch one another, lest one should swallow the other. I feared God's reputation would be hurt by any attempt to unify faith and reason. I now feel that that these two separated parts of my life are at peace, that head and heart are back together again.

The End of Christianity provides a remarkable theological framework that reveals God as He is in all His glory, that makes sense of the Cross in cosmic history, that shows us as we are in all our self-inflicted peril, and that accepts the physical world as it really is. It demonstrates that the power of the Fall, like the power of Christ's death and Resurrection, is not only prospective but also retrospective—it applies not only forward in time but also backward.

Every pastor needs to read this book. Once its ideas are grasped by God's people, it will free those who are chained to a young earth, fearing the Cross will be annulled if death and suffering is allowed to precede the Fall. This book won't force you to stop believing in a young earth. But it will force you to stop believing that a young earth is the only way to be biblically sound and theologically faithful.

I love God more for having read this book. Because of it, I am more eager to give my life in loving service of Jesus Christ and of those He loves. I now understand better the seriousness of my own sin and the incredible costly grace of God at work in my life. I also understand the cosmic consequences of human sin and that the redemption in Christ covers all of reality. I have a deeper respect for the Word of God revealed in the Bible. I have a fresh hope of an eternity delighting in the presence of God, my Creator and Redeemer.

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Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to Ethel and Harry Cooper, a precious African-American couple who meant so much to me growing up in Chicago. Harry worked at Garrett Theological Seminary in Evanston, Ethel at Marshall Field's in the Loop. In the late 1960s, during a very turbulent time in America, my family would spend Thanksgivings at their place on the south side of Chicago. Ethel's mother, who was living with them, died the fall of 1969. That December, weeks later, Harry died. My own mother had just been diagnosed with cancer, so Ethel hesitated at first to reveal to her that Harry had died—not until my mother shouted into the phone “*Ethel, what's wrong?*” In 1981, Ethel herself succumbed to pancreatic cancer. I was able to visit her and offer some comfort. I wish I had done more. Harry and Ethel's kindness and generosity continue to testify to me of the love of Christ. Without people like them, everything in this book would be hollow and straw.

The End of Christianity began as a paper posted on my website (www.designinference.com). It was titled “Christian Theodicy in Light of Genesis and Modern Science.” That paper touched a nerve, and many people offered useful insights as I was conceiving and revising it and then writing this book. Here I would like to thank Jake Akins, Barry Arrington, the ASA list (www.calvin.edu/archive/asa), Robert Bass, John Baumgardner, Chris Beling, Ray Bohlin, Joel Borofsky, Jon Buell, Jack Collins, Samuel Conner, Bryan Cross, Stephen Davis, Ted Davis, Edward Fackerell, Mark Fitzmaurice, Michael Flannery, Bruce Gordon, Jack Greenoe, Paul Hodge, Michael Keas, Mario Lopez, Robert Marks, Donald McLaughlin, J. P. Moreland, Terry Mortenson, Bill Newby, Denyse O'Leary, Don Page, J. Brian Pitts, Fuz Rana, Brock Ratcliff, Geoff Robinson, Hugh Ross, Greg Smith, David Snoke, Southwestern Seminary's annual “Creation Conversation,” Ide Trotter, Rick Wade, Mark Whorton, and Peter Zoeller-Greer. I'm especially grateful to Mark Fitzmaurice for writing the foreword and to Denyse O'Leary for superb editing of the final draft.

Research, reflection, and writing on this project has spanned the greater part of the decade. During that time I enjoyed some very helpful institutional support. Here I would like to thank the Templeton Foundation, which provided generous financial support for a project on the metaphysics of information (part III of this book derives from that project and will eventually become a book of its own titled *Being as*

Communion). I would also like to thank Berkeley's Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, which through the encouragement of Bob Russell and Ted Peters first got me writing on the topic of theodicy (in 2003 at the Graduate Theological Union they had me deliver a paper titled "Making the Task of Theodicy Impossible? Intelligent Design and the Problem of Evil"). Additionally, I want to thank Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, whose moral, intellectual, and financial support has been indispensable over the years. Finally, I'm grateful to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, which under the direction of President Paige Patterson and Provost Craig Blaising have provided me with an immensely fruitful environment in which to work.

Many people over the years have shaped my views about the goodness of God in creation. The most influential in this regard have been Diogenes Allen, Louise Cowan, William Lane Craig, Thomas Hopko, Steve Kreissl, John Stott, and above all my beloved wife Jana. My heartfelt thanks go to all of them. Jana and I met as students at Princeton Theological Seminary. I've found her theological instincts and literary sensibilities unsurpassed. Hers is the last chapter of this book, titled "Luminous with Purpose."

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Postscript. Twenty percent of this book consists of explanatory and reference notes. A careful reading therefore requires attention to the notes.

Introduction: Our Mental Environment

We inhabit not just a physical environment but also a moral environment. Cambridge philosopher Simon Blackburn defines our moral environment as “the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live.”¹ Though we cannot help but be aware of our physical environment, we are often oblivious of our moral environment. Yet our moral environment is always deeply influential. As Blackburn notes,

It determines what we find acceptable or unacceptable, admirable or contemptible. It determines our conception of when things are going well and when they are going badly. It determines our conception of what is due to us, and what is due from us, as we relate to others. It shapes our emotional responses, determining what is a cause of pride or shame, or anger or gratitude, or what can be forgiven and what cannot.²

Blackburn’s moral environment belongs to a still larger environment—our *mental environment*. Our mental environment is the surrounding climate of ideas by which we make sense of the world. It includes our moral environment since our ideas about how to live are a prime way we make sense of the world. But our mental environment is broader still. It includes our ideas about what exists, what can be known, and what counts as evidence for our beliefs. It assigns value to our life and work. Above all, it determines our plausibility structures—what we find reasonable or unreasonable, credible or incredible, thinkable or unthinkable.³

¹Simon Blackburn, *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.

²Ibid.

³A mental environment differs from a worldview. A mental environment applies corporately to a group, population, or culture. On the other hand, a worldview is, in the first instance, held individually, though it can be shared and therefore held corporately. Thus we may speak of “the Christian worldview.” Your worldview is the set of beliefs that you hold about what the world is like. As such, it doesn’t distinguish between beliefs that are held intensely and those that are taken more lightly. A mental environment, by contrast, emphasizes the deeply entrenched cognitive and moral structures by which we make sense of life. A mental environment therefore tends to be far more influential than a worldview. Born again Christians, for example, hold, as part of their worldview, that marriage is sacred. Yet divorce among them is as prevalent as elsewhere in the culture. Nor do they attach to it much of a stigma. The prevalence and widespread acceptance of divorce in our culture, and even among born again Christians, reflects less on our worldviews than on our mental environment. For the divorce rate among born again

I finished what I thought would be my last graduate degree in 1988, a doctorate in mathematics from the University of Chicago. On completing that degree, I began a postdoctoral fellowship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). There I was struck by how readily my colleagues regarded Christianity as passé. They did not think that Christianity was dangerous and had to be stamped out. They thought that Christianity lacked intellectual vitality and deserved to be ignored. Its stamping out was, in their minds, a long-accomplished fact—the war was over and Christianity had lost.

In the mental environment of my MIT colleagues, Christianity carried no weight. As a Christian who believed then (and still does now) that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is humanity's chief truth, I found this light dismissal of Christianity troubling. How could my colleagues so easily reject the Christian faith? I had to get to the bottom of this question and therefore set aside a promising career as a research mathematician to pursue further studies in philosophy and theology.

Much has happened in our culture in the twenty years since my time at MIT. Notably, the intelligent design movement has grown internationally and pressed Western intellectuals to take seriously the claim that life and the cosmos are the product of intelligence. To be sure, many of them emphatically reject this claim. But their need to confront and refute it suggests that our mental environment is no longer stagnating in the atheistic materialism that for so long has dominated Western intellectual life. That atheistic worldview, supposedly buttressed by science, has constituted a major obstacle, at least in the West, to taking Christianity seriously.⁴ With atheistic materialism now itself in question, Christianity is again on the table for discussion.

This is not to say that the discussion is friendly or that Christianity is about to find widespread acceptance at places like MIT. Instead of routinely ignoring Christianity as they did twenty years ago, many Western intellectuals now treat it with open contempt, expending a great

Christians, see The Barna Group, "Born Again Christians Just As Likely to Divorce As Are Non-Christians," September 8, 2004, available online at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=170> (last accessed February 13, 2009).

⁴For a critique of how science is abused to justify atheism, see John Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2007).

many words to denounce it. But this is progress. The dead are ignored and forgotten. The living are scorned and reviled. I was therefore gratified to see the recent rash of books by the “neo-atheists” such as Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens’s *god Is Not Great* (Hitchens insists on not capitalizing references to the deity), and Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith*.⁵ These books would be unnecessary if Christianity, and theism generally, were not again a live issue.⁶

The neo-atheists’ first line of attack in challenging religious belief, and Christianity in particular, is to invoke science as the principal debunker of religion. Science is supposed to show that any God or intelligence or purpose behind the universe is not merely superfluous but an impediment to reason. Yet evidence from science shows the opposite. The case for a designing intelligence producing life and the cosmos is now on solid ground, as can be seen from such books as *The Design of Life* and *The Privileged Planet*.⁷ Indeed, the neo-atheists are not having a good time of it when they attempt to disprove Christian faith simply by appealing to science. True, their denunciations of Christianity contain many references to “science.” But the denunciations are ritualistic, with “science” used as a conjuring word (like “abracadabra”). One finds little actual science in their denunciations.

Instead of presenting scientific evidence that shows atheism to be true (or probable), the neo-atheists moralize about how much better the world would be if only atheism *were* true. Far from demonstrating that God does not exist, the neo-atheists merely demonstrate how earnestly they desire that God not exist.⁸ The God of Christianity is, in their view, the worst

⁵Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette, 2007); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004).

⁶The neo-atheists have many faults, but apathy is not one of them. According to psychologist Rollo May, “Hate is not the opposite of love; apathy is.” In that case, we’ve made considerable progress since my MIT days. The quote by May is from *Love and Will* (New York: Norton, 1969), 29.

⁷William Dembski and Jonathan Wells, *The Design of Life: Discovering Signs of Intelligence in Biological Systems* (Dallas: Foundation for Thought and Ethics, 2008); Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay W. Richards, *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos Is Designed for Discovery* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004).

⁸Wish-fulfillment does not a valid argument make.

thing that could befall reality. According to Richard Dawkins, for instance, the Judeo-Christian God “is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction. Jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic-cleanser; a misogynistic homophobic racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”⁹

Dawkins’s obsession with the Christian God borders on the pathological. Yet, he underscores what has always been the main reason people reject God: they cannot believe that God is good. Eve, in the Garden of Eden, rejected God because she thought he had denied her some benefit that she should have, namely, the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.¹⁰ Clearly, a God who denies creatures benefits that they think they deserve cannot be good. Indeed, a mark of our fallenness is that we fail to see the irony in thus faulting God. Should we not rather trust that the things God denies us are denied precisely for our benefit? Likewise, the neo-atheists find lots of faults with God, their list of denied benefits being much longer than Eve’s—no surprise here since they’ve had a lot longer to compile such a list!

In an interview several years back, Princeton philosopher Cornel West was asked “What is your overall philosophical project?”¹¹ He responded: “I think that fundamentally it has to do with wrestling with the problem of evil.”¹² Wrestling with the problem of evil is a branch of philosophical theology known as *theodicy*. Theodicy attempts to resolve how a good God and an evil world can coexist. Like Cornel West, the neo-atheists are wrestling with the problem of evil. Unlike him, however, they demand a simplistic solution. For them, God does not exist, so belief in God is a

⁹Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 31.

¹⁰At least part of Eve’s fault was that she uncritically accepted Satan’s explanation of God’s refusal to let her eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. She didn’t ask who Satan was or why he was suddenly supposed to be an authority about God. If she had done any checking at all, she would have discovered that Satan had been kicked out of heaven, that his current address was far from God’s, and that he was widely regarded as a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44).

¹¹Cornel West, “On My Intellectual Vocation,” in *The Cornel West Reader*, 19-33 (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), 33. Originally published in George Yancy, ed., *African American Philosophers: 17 Conversations* (London: Routledge, 1998), 32-48.

¹²*Ibid.*

delusion. But it is not just any old delusion. It is the worst of all possible delusions—one that, unchecked, will destroy humanity.

Dawkins, for instance, regards belief in a God who does not exist as the root of all evil. He even narrated a 2006 BBC documentary with that very title—*The Root of All Evil?*¹³ Demonizing religious faith is nothing new for Dawkins. A decade earlier he remarked, “I think a case can be made that faith is one of the world’s great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate.”¹⁴ Dawkins might be surprised to learn that he was here echoing Adolf Hitler: “The reason why the ancient world was so pure, light, and serene was that it knew nothing of the two great scourges: the pox and Christianity.”¹⁵ Given that belief in God is humanity’s greatest scourge, the only legitimate business of theodicy would be to eradicate it.

By contrast, the challenge of this book is to formulate a theodicy that is at once faithful to Christian orthodoxy (thereby underscoring the existence, power, and goodness of God) and credible to our mental environment (thereby challenging the neo-atheists at their own game).¹⁶

¹³See http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/C/can_you_believe_it/debates/rootofevil.html (last accessed May 22, 2008).

¹⁴Richard Dawkins, “Is Science a Religion?” *The Humanist* 57 (Jan./Feb. 1997): 26.

¹⁵Quoted from *Hitler’s Table Talk* (1941–1943), presented in Alan Bullock’s *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 672. I emailed Dawkins on January 13, 2006: “Had you seen Hitler’s quote before you came up with yours or did you come up with it independently?” He replied to me the same day: “You ask whether I was aware of the Hitler quote when I made my own statement. The answer is no, but I have become aware of it more recently in the course of investigating Hitler’s religious beliefs.” He then immediately defended his own atheistic worldview, remarking that it is “ludicrous” to suggest “that Hitler, Stalin and Mao were motivated by atheism in committing their atrocities.” It seems, then, that Dawkins was unsurprised to learn that he was echoing Hitler.

¹⁶The type of theodicy I am proposing thus falls under *philosophical theology*. Philosophical theology begins with theological data and tries to make sense of them philosophically. In the case at hand, it tries to make philosophical sense of the biblical data about evil, sin, and suffering. A different type of theodicy falls under *philosophy of religion*. Looking to universally accessible data rather than to specifically theological data, philosophy of religion tries to understand, in general philosophical terms, how a God who is good and powerful can coexist with evil. A prime goal of this type of theodicy is to answer critics who claim that the problem of evil is insurmountable for Christian theism, making it collapse into logical absurdity. For an example of this type of theodicy, see Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

But is developing such a theodicy worthwhile? Should we, as Christians, even care whether such a theodicy is credible? And credible to whom? Is not credibility vastly overrated? After all, Scripture teaches that the human heart is corrupt, that expedience rather than principle dictates many of our actions, and that too often we use our minds not to seek truth but to justify falsehoods that we wish were true (see Jeremiah 17:9). It would follow that our mental environment is itself corrupt and that credible ideas may well be false. In fact, given a sufficiently corrupt mental environment, what would be the point of appearing credible? A proposition's credibility in that case might even constitute a positive reason for rejecting it!

As Christians, we must not confuse making our faith credible to the world with seeking its approval. Craving the world's approval is a sure road to perdition. Notwithstanding, Christianity refuses to abandon the world to itself but seeks instead to restore it to God. Now, such restoration, minimally, means changing the way people think.¹⁷ And changing the way people think means entering and reshaping their mental environment. We need to start somewhere. Not everything in even the most corrupt mental environment is wrong. We must look for points of entry, which are often the points of greatest need or doubt in a culture.¹⁸ At such points, by contending for the truth and relevance of the Christian faith, we can demonstrate its credibility. Moreover, we must do this without watering down the faith or selling it out to preserve a vain shine of respectability.

¹⁷In Romans 12:2, the apostle Paul wrote, "Be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." Nineteen hundred years later, J. Gresham Machen described what happens when Christians do not take Paul's words here to heart: "False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the Gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion." Quoted from J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1951), 162.

¹⁸Missionaries approaching a completely unreached people group understand this point implicitly. See, for instance, Don Richardson, *Peace Child*, 4th ed. (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 2005). Here Richardson describes the Savi people of New Guinea, who placed a premium on deceit and treachery. Yet they had one inviolable principle, that the peace offering of a child exchanged between warring factions must at all costs be honored. This presented an opening for the Gospel by identifying Jesus Christ as God's "peace child" to humanity. As a consequence, the Savi people converted in overwhelming numbers to Christ.

The theodicy formulated in this book attempts to combine credibility in the current mental environment with faithfulness to Christian orthodoxy. As such, it needs to be fairly elaborate. This elaborateness, however, raises a worry: what are we to make of people who in times past got by without elaborate theodicies, even though they faced many more evident sufferings than we do today? In the fourteenth century, for instance, plague killed a third of the population of Europe. Infant mortality in times past was much higher than it is now, touching virtually every family. Yet despite such afflictions and hardships, there was no call for elaborate theodicies. Why, then, do we need one now? Is it that pampered Western intellectuals simply have too much time on their hands and fret about minutiae that our more hardy ancestors would have ridiculed? Two brief responses:

- (1) Just because people didn't feel the need to construct elaborate theodicies in times past doesn't mean that they didn't feel the weight of the problem of evil. More likely, it just means that they thought they had an adequate theodicy. For instance, Augustine's theodicy, in which evil is mitigated by the ultimate good that God brings out of it, has satisfied many Christians over the centuries. In fact, I take this theodicy to heart as well, only I propose to build on it.
- (2) The need to construct more elaborate theodicies has arisen because science has raised a new set of issues about the goodness of God in creation. Young-earth creationism was historically the position of the Church up through the Reformation. With the rise of modern science, especially advances in geology and biology in the nineteenth century and in physics and cosmology in the twentieth century, the problem of natural evil prior to the Fall and, perhaps more significantly, the truth of Scripture in its depiction of creation, came to the fore and needed addressing.

Simply put, we need more elaborate theodicies because people are now asking harder questions about divine benevolence. Answers that may have worked for past mental environments don't work any longer. What's needed are answers that make the goodness of God credible in the current mental environment. In setting the stage for a specifically Christian theodicy, let us therefore turn to the task of theodicy in general.

Theodicy is fundamentally about the benevolence of ultimate reality—whether what ultimately underlies the world is benevolent. A successful theodicy demonstrates that, despite evil, ultimate reality is benevolent. Though I use the terms interchangeably, I prefer “benevolence” to “goodness” because “goodness” often refers to impersonal things or abstractions, and therefore can be indifferent to human welfare. Benevolence, on the other hand, suggests an interest in and active fostering of individual and corporate human welfare. Accordingly, I take theodicy’s main task as convincing us that ultimate reality is benevolent and that we humans are an object (perhaps the chief object) of that benevolence.

Many contemporary thinkers have abandoned the task of theodicy. Materialists, who regard ultimate reality as consisting of material entities governed by unbroken natural laws, are a case in point. Take Richard Dawkins: “In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.”¹⁹ Clearly, for Dawkins and his fellow atheistic materialists, rock-bottom reality is not benevolent.

For Christians, on the other hand, God is the ultimate reality and God’s benevolence toward his creation is typically taken for granted. But on what basis are Christians entitled to believe that God is benevolent? According to John Milton, we need an argument: “What in me is dark / Illumine, what is low raise and support; / That, to the height of this great argument, / I may assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men.”²⁰ Yet the idea that an argument can justify the ways of God and thereby convince us of God’s benevolence will strike many of us as hollow. How do we preserve our confidence in divine benevolence given the world’s evil and cruelty? This is the challenge ever before us. Life’s circumstances do not always go our way. When they go against us,

¹⁹Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 133.

²⁰*Paradise Lost*, I.22–26. For the complete works of John Milton, see <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/milton/miltbib.htm> (last accessed December 29, 2008).

sometimes violently, our confidence in divine benevolence depends less on an argument than on an attitude.

Epictetus summarized this attitude as follows: “For everything that happens in the world it is easy to give thanks to Providence if a person has but these two qualities in himself: a habit of viewing broadly what happens to each individual and a grateful temper. Without the first he will not perceive the usefulness of things which happen; and without the second he will not be thankful for them.”²¹ The Apostle Paul displayed this same attitude by noting that God works all things out for good (Romans 8:28) and that we are to thank God for all things (Ephesians 5:20). Such an attitude, however, is warranted only if what ultimately underlies the world is benevolent. And how do we know that? It seems, then, that we need some argument for divine benevolence after all, if only to justify this attitude.

Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher, looked to his philosophy to justify this attitude. Christians look to Christian theology to formulate a specifically Christian theodicy and thereby justify this attitude. According to Catholic theologian Edward Oakes, the task of a Christian theodicy is to “show that an omnipotent and benevolent God can coexist with evil in His finite creation.”²² The key to resolving the theodicy problem for Oakes is an insight of Augustine’s. In his apologetics manual *The Enchiridion*, Augustine writes, “God judged it better to bring good out of evil than not to permit any evil to exist.”²³ For Augustine, like Epictetus, theodicy requires a broad perspective. The triumph of good over evil cannot be seen from a narrow vantage. Instead, the infinitely broad vantage of God’s ultimate purposes for the world is needed. Accordingly, for Oakes,

²¹Epictetus, *Discourses*, I.6, in Epictetus, *Discourses and Enchiridion*, T. W. Higginson, transl. (New York: Walter J. Black, 1946), 17. Compare William Law’s remark: “Would you know who is the greatest saint in the world? ... It is he who is always thankful to God, who wills everything that God willeth, who receives everything as an instance of God’s goodness and has a heart always ready to praise God for it.” From *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, ch. 15, available online at <http://www.worldinvisible.com/library/law/seriouscall/scch15.htm> (last accessed 29 March 2003).

²²Edward T. Oakes, “Edward T. Oakes and His Critics: An Exchange,” *First Things* 112 (April 2001): available online at http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=2168 (last accessed June 3, 2008).

²³Augustine, *Enchiridion* (trans. A. C. Outler), ch. 27. See <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/enchiridion.txt> (last accessed March 15, 2007).

Augustine's theodicy requires that the world be viewed "both as a totality and under the aegis of eschatology."²⁴

All this is sound Christian theodicy as far as it goes. But a Christian theodicy needs to go further. It needs, additionally, to make peace with three claims:

- (1) God by wisdom created the world out of nothing.
- (2) God exercises particular providence in the world.
- (3) All evil in the world ultimately traces back to human sin.

Mainstream academic theology regards the first two of these as problematic and the third as, frankly, preposterous. By contrast, I'm going to argue that all three claims are true and can be situated within a coherent Christian theodicy.

Claim (1), creation out of nothing by an all-wise God, has of late fallen on hard times. In the interest of theodicy, mainline theologians now increasingly adopt a pared-down view of divine wisdom, knowledge, and power. We thus get a god who means well but can't quite overcome the evil in the world, a god who is good but in other ways deficient. The goodness of God is thus preserved, but at the cost of his other attributes. Process theology, in which the world is autonomous and God changes with the world, is a case in point.²⁵ Evolving gods constrained by natural laws are much the rage these days. Because creation out of nothing suggests a God to whom everything is subject, the diminished gods of these theologies tend not to be ultimate but rather depend on still deeper aspects of reality.²⁶

²⁴Oakes, "His Critics."

²⁵See, for instance, process theologian Charles Hartshorne's *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1983). In classical Christian theology, autonomy was never a feature of the world. Rather, as Georges Florovsky summarized the teachings of the Church Fathers on creation, the world exhibits an "absolute creatureliness and non-self-sufficiency." See Georges Florovsky, "Creation and Creaturehood," in William A. Dembski, Wayne J. Downs, and Fr. Justin B. A. Frederick, eds., *The Patristic Understanding of Creation: An Anthology of Writings from the Church Fathers on Creation and Design* (Riesel, Tex.: Erasmus Press, 2008), 552.

²⁶A particularly striking example in contemporary theological reflection of this shift to an ultimate reality beyond God may be found in James E. Huchingson, *Pandemonium Tremendum: Chaos and Mystery in the Life of God* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001).

Claim (2), concerning *particular providence*, refers to God's willingness and ability to act for the good of creation at particular places and times. Accordingly, God acts not just on the creation as a whole but on particular parts of it, the most important part being us—humans. God's particular providence includes miracles, answers to prayer, predictive prophecy, and, most significantly for the Christian faith, the redemption of humanity through Christ and his Cross. Particular providence contrasts with *general providence*, whereby God guides the course of the world as a whole (as by ordaining the seasons and their weather). A god of general but not particular providence may thus ordain a pattern of weather; but he takes no responsibility for the tornado that blew down your barn and pays no attention to your prayers for protection from such tornados. A god of particular providence knows your name and the number of hairs on your head; not so a god of general providence.

Claim (3), which ascribes to human sin the entrance of evil into the world, is the most difficult to square with our current mental environment. It is also the key to resolving the problem of a specifically Christian theodicy. If you're going to blame evil on something besides God, you've got two choices: conscious rebellion of creatures (as in humans or the devil disobeying God) or autonomy of the world (as in the world doing its thing and God, though wringing his hands, unable to make a difference). The current mental environment prefers an autonomous world. It seeks to contract the power of God at every point where God might do something to cast doubt on his goodness. Indeed, contemporary theology's resistance to claims (1) and (2) reflects its desperate need to preserve God's goodness even if that means contracting God's power. But if evil is not a consequence of the world's autonomy, then there is no need to contract God's power. It follows that once claim (3) is shown to be plausible, claims (1) and (2) become plausible as well.

Although I will address all three claims in this book, if there is any originality here, it is my analysis of claim (3). In asserting that all evil in the world ultimately traces back to human sin, claim (3) is not attributing to humanity an absolute origin of evil. Rather it is asserting that human sin is the immediate or proximate cause of evil in the world. In Genesis 3, humans are tempted by a serpent, who is traditionally understood as Satan, a fallen angel, and thus a creature that is not embodied in the material stuff out of which humans are made. Consequently, the fall of humanity

presupposes the fall of angelic beings. And the fall of angelic beings may presuppose some still deeper features of reality that bring about evil.²⁷

In any case, the crucial question is not the ultimate origin of evil, but whether all evil in the world traces back to humanity and its sin. According to this view, humanity is the gatekeeper through which evil passes into the world. In this metaphor, the Fall becomes the failure of the gatekeeper to maintain proper control of the gate. This metaphor works regardless of the ultimate source of evil that lies outside the gate (be it something that crashes the gate or suborns the gatekeeper or both).

Much of my past work has been on intelligent design and the controversy over evolution. Nothing in this book, however, takes sides in that debate. In arguing that the Fall marks the entry of all evil into the world (both personal and natural evil), I make no assumptions about the age of the Earth, the extent of evolution, or the prevalence of design. The theodicy I develop here looks not to science but to the metaphysics of divine action and purpose. At the heart of this theodicy is the idea that the effects of the Fall can be retroactive as well as proactive (much as the saving effects of the Cross stretch not only forward in time but also backward, saving, for instance, the Old Testament saints).

The view that all evil in the world ultimately traces back to human sin used to be part and parcel of a Christian worldview—standard equipment in our mental environment. As the *Catholic Encyclopedia* notes:

Christian philosophy has, like the Hebrew, uniformly attributed moral and physical evil to the action of created free will. Man has himself brought about the evil from which he suffers by transgressing the law of God, on obedience to which his happiness depended.... [T]he errors of mankind, mistaking the true conditions of its own well-being, have been the cause of moral and physical evil.²⁸

²⁷A full-blown theological determinism, for instance, would trace the ultimate origin of evil to God himself (biblical passages used to support such a view include Is. 45:7, Lam. 3:38, Rom. 9:11–13, Ex. 14:4, and 1 Kings 24:1). Within such a determinism, God is not the origin of evil in the passive sense of creating the conditions in which evil can occur spontaneously; rather, God is actively decreeing the very means by which the evil occurs. Within Christian theology, there is a stream of thought flowing from Paul to Augustine to Calvin that accepts such a determinism.

²⁸*Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Evil,” available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05649a.htm> (last accessed March 15, 2007). In support of this passage, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* cites Dionysius the Areopagite and Augustine. “Moral evil” here

In arguing for this traditional understanding of how evil came into the world, I will in subsequent chapters need to review how our mental environment came to regard it as increasingly implausible.

The title of this book, *The End of Christianity*, requires some explanation. It can be interpreted in several ways. For those hostile to Christianity and religious belief, the phrase “end of Christianity” signifies Christianity’s demise as an institutional religion and system of belief. To them, Christianity is an organism that no longer fills an ecological niche and is ready to go extinct. This view of Christianity’s demise, however, displays wishful thinking. The best estimates indicate that among religious faiths worldwide, Christianity has the most adherents. Christianity shows no signs of going extinct. Quite the contrary, by some accounts it is thriving as never before. Hence, far from signifying its demise, the phrase “end of Christianity” could as well signify its ultimate triumph. Christians have many images to symbolize their faith’s ultimate triumph. At the center of them all is Christ and the Cross.

In this book, I want to interpret the phrase “end of Christianity” in a third way. To be sure, as a Christian, I reject that Christianity is doomed (first interpretation) and accept that it will ultimately triumph (second interpretation). Nevertheless, Christianity’s ultimate triumph remains for now unfulfilled. The question I therefore want to pose—and help answer—in this book is how we, as Christians, are to help bring about the ultimate triumph of Christ. According to 1 John 5:4, the victory that overcomes the world is our faith. Christian faith—a living faith whose author and finisher is Christ (Hebrews 12:2)—is thus described as the essential element for bringing about Christ’s ultimate triumph. I want, therefore, to interpret the phrase “end of Christianity” as what our faith must become—in the here and now—to bring about that ultimate triumph.

What, then, must our faith become? The key mark of a faith that overcomes the world is the ability to discern God’s goodness in the face of evil. Indeed, faith’s role in bringing about Christ’s ultimate triumph presupposes faith’s ability to discern God’s goodness. Just as humanity’s fall and the consequent rise of evil resulted from the *faulty belief* that divine goodness is imperfect (witness Eve in the Garden of Eden, where she rejects God’s will and asserts her own), so humanity’s restoration and

is what I’ve been calling “personal evil”; “physical evil” here is what I’ve been calling “natural evil.”

Christ's ultimate triumph over evil results from the *sound belief* that divine goodness is perfect (witness Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he surrenders his will to God's).

The end of Christianity, as envisioned in this book, is the radical realignment of our thinking so that we see God's goodness in creation despite the distorting effects of sin in our hearts and evil in the world.

PART I: DEALING WITH EVIL

1 The Reach of the Cross

God's goodness in creation begins and ends with the Cross of Christ. So Christians have always believed. In 1 Corinthians, Paul underscores the centrality of the Cross:

I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:1-2)

Why did Paul, in his ministry to the Corinthians, focus so exclusively on the Cross? Why has the Cross played such a preeminent role in Christian theology? Why, in the iconography of the Church, is the Cross absolutely central? Why did George Bernard Shaw, himself a religious skeptic, think that Christians ought to rename themselves "Crosstians"?¹

In the Cross, the eternal Son of God enters fully into the human condition, takes on himself the totality of human sin and pain, and once and for all extinguishes the power of evil over our lives. To accomplish so great a salvation, Christ paid the ultimate cost, undergoing rejection, humiliation, physical torture, psychic torment, and death. Out of love for humanity, he laid down his life for ours, thereby securing our redemption. And then, through his Resurrection, he defeated death and gave us eternal life. As the ancient Easter hymn exults,

Christ is risen from the dead,
trampling down death by death,
and upon those in the tombs
bestowing life!²

Truly, there is no greater suffering or triumph of love than Christ's sacrifice for us on the Cross.

¹See Shaw's preface to his play *Major Barbara*, where he recommends renaming Christianity "Crosstianity." George Bernard Shaw, *Major Barbara* (1905; reprinted Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, 2004).

²Catherine Aslanoff, Paul Meyendorff, and Andrew Tregubov, *The Incarnate God: The Feasts of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary*, 2 vol. (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 152.

The last paragraph is traditional orthodoxy. We've heard it before. Sermons repeat it endlessly. But do we really believe it? And if we do believe it, should we? Consider James Carroll, a former Catholic priest, who sees the Cross not as God's means of redemption but as an excuse for Christians to persecute Jews (for their complicity in Christ's crucifixion).³ Granted, the history of anti-Semitism includes the persecution of Jews by persons claiming to represent Christianity. But persons claiming to represent Christianity have committed all manner of heinous crimes. The question, therefore, is not what people do in the name of Christianity, but what Christianity is essentially. Jesus himself was a Jew, as were the first Christians who spread the good news of God's redemptive work at the Cross. To fault the Cross because it has been misrepresented is therefore itself to misrepresent the Cross.

A more troubling worry about the Cross comes from a diary entry by Anna Williams, a medical researcher active in the early part of the twentieth century. The Cross gave her no comfort. As she saw it, Jesus knew that his anguish would be momentary and that in exchange he would save the world. As she wrote in her diary, "This knowledge ... if we were sure, oh! what would we not be willing to undergo."⁴ Williams implies that anybody would willingly endure the Cross once the costs and benefits are properly weighed—the costs being minimal compared to the huge benefits.

How should we respond to Williams? Is it relevant that Christ was sinless and thus, unlike all other persons in history, utterly undeserving of any punishment he received (cf. Hebrews 4:15)? Does it help to note that crucifixion was the ultimate form of torture in the ancient world? Was Anna Williams therefore taking the sufferings of our Lord too lightly? As a cosseted ivory-tower intellectual, what did she know about suffering anyway? Didn't Christ on the Cross suffer more than she ever did in her little bourgeois world? Instead of complaining about the Cross not being enough, shouldn't she have gratefully accepted the redemption that could be hers only through the Cross?

³James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews—A History* (New York: Mariner Books, 2001).

⁴Quoted in John Barry, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 273.

Such questions miss the point. Williams wasn't comparing her personal sufferings to those of Christ. Rather, she was asking about the *reach* of the Cross. Specifically, she was asking whether Christ's suffering on the Cross could adequately encompass the full extent of human suffering. Williams suggests that Christ got off cheap. Christ's passion, after all, lasted only a matter of hours. By the standards of the day, his time on the Cross was short, beginning in the morning and ending in the afternoon. Yes, his scourging must be factored in as well. But crucifixion was common in the Roman empire, and most crucifixions lasted days rather than hours before the victim expired. The physical suffering of our Lord was no more than that of many others brutalized by Rome. Thus, for Williams, Christ's Cross seemed like a small price to pay in exchange for the redemption of the whole world.

I don't mean to make light of our Lord's physical suffering, but it seems that Williams has a point. She underscores why a movie like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* does not convey the full measure of what Christ, in securing our redemption, endured on the Cross. Mel Gibson, a master of movie violence (going back to his early *Mad Max* days), was clearly in his element in portraying the cruelty that Jesus experienced at the hands of the Romans. But by focusing so one-sidedly on the physical violence surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, Gibson missed the far deeper suffering of our Lord, for which the Cross was but an outward expression.

Let's be frank. If the entirety of Christ's suffering was the physical pain he endured on the Cross, then Anna Williams is right: Christ's suffering on behalf of humanity has limited reach. Perhaps it can reach well-fed, heavily sedated, incessantly entertained Westerners whose main afflictions are stress and disillusionment. But can it reach the whole of humanity and the worst of its afflictions? Many forms of death, degradation, and torment seem far worse than the few hours that Christ suffered at the hands of the Romans. Off the top of my head, here are three:

- Locked-in syndrome, in which the body is completely without ability to move or respond but the mind remains fully conscious. Imagine your body being in this state, a living coffin, for decades.
- Being a long-term subject of Josef Mengele's medical experiments at the Nazi extermination camp of Auschwitz.

- Being raped and tortured over a period of months by one of Saddam Hussein's sons for refusing his advances, and then finally being torn apart by his Doberman Pinschers.

Ask yourself, if faced with such horrors, what comfort you would find in the Cross if it meant only that Jesus suffered a few hours of scourging and crucifixion. What comfort would you find in his words “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20) if, for all you could tell, his suffering was markedly less than yours? The Church father Gregory of Nazianzus stressed that Christ cannot redeem what he has not taken on himself. The usual theological formula for stating this is “That which is not assumed is not redeemed.”⁵ How can Christ overcome the sin of the world if his experience of the consequences of that sin are at best partial—if he has not fully drunk the cup of God's wrath against sin?

The brief time into which Christ's Passion was compressed is not the only problem we must consider. In anticipating the Passion, Jesus gives every impression of knowing exactly what is to happen and when it is to happen. Everything seems scripted. Everything seems to happen on cue. In John's Gospel we are told that Jesus knew that Judas would betray him from the start (John 6:64). On the Cross, Jesus exclaims that God has abandoned him (Matthew 27:46). The terror of that abandonment, however, ends no more than six hours later when Jesus utters “It is finished” and gives up the ghost (John 19:30). Moreover, leading up to the Cross, Jesus has been continually assuring his disciples that he would rise again from the dead on the third day (Mark 9:31)—a prophecy he fulfills, once again, right on cue (Mark 16:2–6).

Most of us, when in the throes of suffering, however, don't have the luxury of having our tribulation so neatly choreographed. We don't know exactly what to expect when, and when the suffering will be over, if at all. Often, we see no end to the suffering, and we don't know how things will turn out. Uncertainty about the course of suffering makes suffering doubly hard. And yet, by his knowledge of the future, our Lord seems to have avoided this aspect of suffering. Statistician David Bartholomew even goes so far as to ask whether “Jesus was truly human” since he seems to

⁵See Gregory of Nazianzus, Letter on Apollinarianism, ca. 380, in Alister McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 269–270.

have escaped the experience of uncertainty and risk that “is part of what it means to be human.”⁶

What, then, is the reach of the Cross? Is it enough to embrace the totality of the human condition? I submit that it is. But to see this, we need to look beyond the physical agony of the Cross. The Cross points to a deeper reality of divine suffering that gets largely lost in films like *The Passion of the Christ*. How can we see that the reach of the Cross encompasses the full consequences of the Fall, including the full extent of human suffering? I’m not sure that our finite minds can fully comprehend the reach of the Cross. Nonetheless, we can catch glimpses of it.

Certain biblical images indicate that the suffering of the Cross cannot be confined merely to the few hours of Christ’s earthly passion. After Jesus is resurrected, he appears to his doubting disciple Thomas and has him place his fingers in the wounds that were inflicted on the Cross. Ask yourself, Why would a resurrection body show marks of crucifixion? And why, in the book of Revelation, is Christ portrayed as a lamb that was slain? There’s no indication in Scripture that in eternity the redeemed of Christ will exhibit any marks of suffering from their life on earth. And yet our Lord bears these marks in eternity, and is referred to, in Revelation 13:8, as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”⁷ Clearly, then, the sufferings of Christ transcend his torture by the Romans.

⁶David J. Bartholomew, *God, Chance and Purpose: Can God Have It Both Ways?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 229.

⁷The full verse (in the King James Version) reads, “And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him [i.e., the beast], whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” The Greek, which is not as sensitive to word-order as English, puts “from the foundation of the world” right after “the Lamb slain.” Some translations (e.g., the New Revised Standard Version), however, associate “from the foundation of the world” with those “whose names are not written in the book of life.” Here is the NRSV translation of this verse: “And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it [i.e., the beast], everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.” The KJV provides the more natural translation. Translators who follow the other word-order are probably trying to maintain consistency with Revelation 17:8, which does, in the Greek, juxtapose “from the foundation of the world” with those whose names were “not written in the book of life.” But doesn’t this parallel passage raise at least a doubt about the reading and translation of Revelation 13:8 that I am advocating? No, because the idea of Christ as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world is found unequivocally elsewhere in Scripture. For instance, 1 Peter 1:19 – 20 describes Christian believers as redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without

Another factor to consider in probing the reach of the Cross is Christ's complete willingness to embrace it. Most of us, when in pain and sorrow, look for a way of escape. Indeed, if there were a button we could press to make our troubles disappear, most of us would press it. But seldom is such a button available. Yet, when Jesus gave himself up to be crucified, he could at any time have halted the proceedings. He makes that clear in the Scriptures. Thus, he informs the disciples that no one takes his life from him but that he lays it down freely (John 10:17–18). He adds that at any time he could call on more than twelve legions of angels to rescue him (Matthew 26:53). According to a hymn sung on Good Friday, "He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the Cross."⁸ Instead of the Cross holding Jesus, in reality Jesus upheld the Cross. What does it say about our Lord that he chose, on our behalf, to experience the utmost agony even though at any time he could have called it off?

Still another way to see how the reach of the Cross exceeds our first impressions comes, perhaps surprisingly, from the doctrine of divine omniscience. God knows all things. But if God knows all things, does God know—really know from the inside out—the full conscious experience of human suffering? In particular, does he know what it feels like to experience the uncertainty of not knowing the outcome of suffering?

The philosopher Bertrand Russell, atheist though he was, offered a useful distinction when he differentiated two forms of knowledge: *knowledge by description* versus *knowledge by acquaintance*.⁹ I have knowledge by description of what it is like to climb Mount Everest. I have that knowledge because the climb up Mount Everest has been described to me. But I have no knowledge by acquaintance of climbing Mount Everest. I've never actually climbed a mountain and have no plans to do so.

Now consider God and his knowledge of human experience. Does he know human experience simply by description? Or does he also know it by acquaintance? And if by acquaintance, how deep is his acquaintance? If God only knew human experience by description, he would be like a

spot, who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you."

⁸*The Living God: A Catechism*, trans. (from French) Olga Dunlop, in 2 vols. (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), I:187.

⁹Bertrand Russell, *Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), ch. 5.

fabulously wealthy king gazing serenely on emaciated subjects who are dying of starvation. Even if this king eased the plight of his subjects and even if he assured them of how bad he felt on account of their pain, his role as comforter would be hopelessly compromised because he himself had never felt hunger.

That's why missionaries who live in mansions when the bulk of the local population lives in hovels are never very impressive. As human beings, we have a fundamental need to be known, and being known means being known by acquaintance and not merely by description. Knowledge by description is available from books. But knowledge by acquaintance means getting your hands dirty in the nitty-gritty of human experience. On the Cross, Christ has done exactly that. He has fully embraced the human condition. He knows it by acquaintance.

As a consequence, the doctrine of divine omniscience entails a paradox: to know everything, God must know by acquaintance the full measure of human experience and thus must know what it is not to know since not knowing (what we call "ignorance") is a basic feature of human finiteness. We know that Jesus himself experienced this limitation since the Scriptures teach that the boy Jesus grew not only physically but also mentally (Luke 2:52). Moreover, we find the mature Jesus telling his disciples that there are things the Father knows that he doesn't (Matthew 13:32).

Note that I am not here advocating openness theology, or open theism. On that view, the future is taken to be indefinite and therefore not knowable even by God. Openness theology flies in the face of Christian orthodoxy. Christianity's clear teaching throughout the ages has been that God fully knows the future.¹⁰ Yes, this teaching is under dispute, and a growing literature disputes it. But the incompatibility of openness theology with Christian orthodoxy becomes evident on reflection. In particular, strict uncertainty about the future means that God cannot guarantee his promises because the autonomy of the world can always overrule God. Of course, we could try to get around this by saying that God can step in when things get out of hand, but that defeats the point of openness theology, which is to limit God and thereby absolve him of evil.

¹⁰In *The City of God* (v, 9) Augustine even goes to far as to state that any being that does not know the future is not God. The relevant passage is available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120105.htm> (last accessed November 27, 2008).

God's knowledge includes knowledge of the future. When God becomes man in Jesus Christ, however, he sets aside divine omniscience. The point of God becoming man is for God to identify with the whole of human experience, and this is not possible if Christ retains all his divine privileges. Christ does not set aside every divine privilege. Quite the contrary, he retains the ability to heal people at command, raise the dead, expel demons, and calm storms. He refuses only those privileges that would prevent his subjection to our misfortunes. In particular, Christ on the Cross identifies with the whole of human suffering, and this includes the ignorance and uncertainty that intensify human suffering.

But how can this be? How can God in Christ so fully identify with humanity that he fully knows the full extent of human suffering (albeit without himself sinning)? Can Christ look each of us in the eye and honestly tell us that because of what he endured on the Cross, he knows what each of us is going through *even better than we do ourselves*? As Christians we want this to be true and, in our heart of hearts, we know it to be true. But how can it be true? A mystery exists here that our finite minds will never fully comprehend. Nonetheless, let me offer two considerations that may help.

First, we need to see the Cross as a window into a much deeper reality of divine suffering. For instance, the Scriptures teach that with God a day is as a thousand years. But if a day is as a thousand years, then each day in a thousand years is itself a thousand years. Thus, if you run the numbers, a day with God is also as 365 million years. Follow the math to its logical conclusion, and with God an instant is an eternity. For this reason, the mere six hours that Jesus hung on the Cross is no obstacle for God taking upon himself the full sufferings of humanity.

Second, in the Incarnation, and especially on the Cross, Jesus identifies with humanity at the deepest level. In Colossians 3:4, Paul teaches that Christ is our life. In Galatians 2:20, Paul describes the believer as being crucified with Christ. In Philippians 3, Paul rejoices to share in the sufferings of Christ, so much so that our suffering becomes an expression of Christ's suffering. It's not that Christ vainly tries to imagine what we are suffering; when we suffer, it *is* Christ suffering.

We see this in Matthew 25, where Jesus describes the final judgment as a separation of goats and sheep. The goats' crime is that they did not show mercy to Christ as he suffered hunger, sickness, and imprisonment. But when the goats ask how they could have missed ministering to his

needs, Jesus replies that what they failed to do for others, they failed to do for him (Matthew 25:45). Their failure is a failure to follow Jesus' command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22:39). This commandment does not mean that as one looks in the mirror, one should think about all the warm feelings one feels toward oneself and then consciously determine to project those warm feelings onto others (small comfort since warm feelings do not come easily to many of us). Rather, Jesus is talking about the bond that, as descendants of Adam and now of the second Adam, ought to hold humanity together.

We need to love our neighbor as our self because our neighbor *is* our self. In saying this, I'm not advocating an all-is-one pantheism of the sort popularized by the Beatles in their song "I Am the Walrus." There's a simple reason why our self and the self of others constitute a unity: our life and their life are Christ's life (Colossians 3:4). Christ on the Cross sacrificed himself for the life of the world and thereby became the life of the world (John 6:51). In loving one another, we love Christ. In refusing to love one another, we refuse to love Christ.

Christ's identification with us in our limitation and weakness makes it possible for God to love us and to call us friends (John 15:13–15). In fact, it's not clear that any other religion or system of thought can account for God's love for humanity. Aristotle, for instance, saw friendship as something possible only among equals. Consequently, his God, an "unmoved mover," was so far above and distant from humanity that he could never be our friend: "If the interval is great, as between a man and God, there can be no friendship at all."¹¹ Indeed, Aristotle's God thought only about himself since thinking about anything else would be degrading and therefore unworthy of God.¹²

But in the Incarnation and then upon the Cross, God in Christ did degrade himself. The word "degrade" comes from the Latin and means to "step down." God stepped down to save us. God's ultimate act of love is

¹¹*Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell, Iowa: Peripatetic Press, 1984), VIII.9, 1159a 6–7, page 149.

¹²"Evidently, then [divine thought] thinks of that which is most divine and precious, and it does not change; for change would be change for the worse, and this would be already a movement.... Therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking." Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 1074b 26 – 33, page 885.

therefore the ultimate act of humility. Not only did the exalted God who fills the heavens and whom the heavens cannot contain step down to our level, but he went as low as it is possible to go. As Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 5:21, God made Christ “to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” The suffering servant passage in Isaiah 53 makes the same point.

Aristotle’s ethics is therefore radically incomplete. Among the vast catalogue of virtues that adorn Aristotle’s ethics, humility is nowhere to be found. Yet humility is the only virtue that captures the love of God for humanity, a love fully expressed in the Cross. Only by humility do Christ, and those who share his life, defeat the sin of pride that led to the Fall. Without humility, as Martin Luther noted, all the other virtues become merely occasions for pride (as in, “See how well I’m doing”).¹³

By the Cross, an infinite God forms a relationship of love and friendship with finite creatures. In mathematics there are two ways to go to infinity. One is to grow large without measure. The other is to form a fraction in which the denominator goes to zero. The Cross is a path of humility in which the infinite God becomes finite and then contracts to zero, only to resurrect and thereby unite a finite humanity within a newfound infinity.

This is why the Scriptures teach that God’s strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). In contrast to Aristotle’s God, the Christian God does not meditate exclusively on himself. Rather, “the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show himself strong in the behalf of those whose hearts are perfect toward him.” (2 Chronicles 16:9) Far from finding human finiteness boring, God delights in it, finding creative possibilities that an unchangeable infinity cannot match.

At the Cross, divine infinity and human finiteness intersect. Hence “the death of Jesus,” writes Timothy Keller, “was qualitatively different from any other death.”¹⁴ We see this difference underscored in the gospel narratives, which “all show that Jesus did not face his approaching death with anything like the aplomb and fearlessness that was widely expected

¹³On humility, pride, and virtue in Luther’s thought, see Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. R. C. Schultz (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1966), 148.

¹⁴Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 30.

in a spiritual hero. The well-known Maccabean martyrs, who suffered under the Syrian rule of Antiochus Epiphanes, were the paradigms for spiritual courage in the face of persecution. They were famous for speaking defiantly and confidently of God even as they were having limbs cut off.”¹⁵

By contrast, Jesus, when confronted with his impending death in the Garden of Gethsemane, was deeply troubled (Mark 14:33–36 and Luke 22:42–44). Why? Not because of the physical pain. Keller explains:

The physical pain was nothing compared to the spiritual experience of cosmic abandonment. Christianity alone among the world religions claims that God became uniquely and fully human in Jesus Christ and therefore knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture, and imprisonment. On the Cross he went beyond even the worst human suffering and experienced cosmic rejection and pain that exceeds ours as infinitely as his knowledge and power exceeds ours.¹⁶

But why was the Cross necessary at all? If there was a rift between God and humanity, why was suffering—Christ’s suffering on the Cross—the key to healing it? *In a fallen world, the only currency of love is suffering.* Indeed, the only way to tell how much one person loves another is by what that person is willing to endure for the other. Without the cost incurred by suffering, love among fallen creatures becomes cheap and self-indulgent. Suffering removes the suspicion that the good we do for one another is for ulterior motives, with strings attached, a quid pro quo. Christ, by going to the Cross and there taking on himself the sin of the whole world, fully demonstrates the love of God. Moreover, only such a full demonstration of God’s love enables us to love God with all our heart. The extent to which we can love God depends on the extent to which God has demonstrated his love for us, and that depends on the extent of evil that God has had to absorb, suffer, and overcome on our behalf.

But note, for us to love God also depends on us seeing the magnitude of our offense against God and gratefully receiving the forgiveness that God’s suffering, in Christ on the Cross, has made possible. The principle at issue here is stated in Luke 7:47: those who realize that they have been forgiven of much love much; those who think that they have only been

¹⁵Ibid., 28.

¹⁶Ibid., 30.

forgiven of little love little. It would seem that God has demonstrated a lot of love for celebrity atheists such as Oliver Sacks, Ted Turner, and Richard Dawkins.¹⁷ In an interview with Dawkins for the movie *Expelled*, Ben Stein even noted that if God exists, he's been awfully good to Dawkins, giving him lucrative book contracts, a cush professorship, etc. Because Stein's criteria for what constitutes a divine blessing may be a bit off (lucrative book contracts are fine and well, but no biblical prophet would have regarded such monetary rewards as a sure sign of divine favor), let me restate his point as follows: God, in Christ, has given us ample reason to love him, so our failure to respond to God in love is just that—our failure.

To say that love in a fallen world is demonstrated through suffering raises the question of what love would look like in a nonfallen world. In a world untouched by sin, love is expressed through the gift of sacrifice. To see this, consider that the very existence of the world depends on such a gift. A common challenge to the Christian doctrine of creation is to ask whether, in creating the world, God augmented himself since it would appear that God plus the world is greater than God alone. This is supposed to raise an insuperable difficulty for Christian orthodoxy, which regards God as perfect and thus as not improvable through the addition of anything external to God, such as the world.

But, in fact, God plus the world is less than God alone. To see this, consider that God could have created any world whatsoever. All were possibilities before him. Yet, in the very act of creating this world, he gave up creating others. Creation gives existence to one possibility by withholding existence from the other possibilities that exclude it. In creating the world, God jealously gives himself to it and expects the same loyalty from it, a fact to which all the covenants in the Old and New Testaments testify. Creation is inherently covenantal. Thus, in creating this world, God, far from expanding himself, contracted himself by limiting his possibilities. G. K. Chesterton put it this way:

Every act of will [and that includes divine creation] is an act of self-limitation. To desire action is to desire limitation. In that sense every act is an act of self-sacrifice. When you choose anything, you reject everything else.... Every act is an irrevocable selection

¹⁷For an extensive list of celebrity atheists, see <http://www.celebatheists.com> (last accessed January 13, 2009).

and exclusion. Just as when you marry one woman you give up all the others, so when you take one course of action you give up all the other courses.¹⁸

The lesson here is that even apart from evil and sin, it is possible for intelligences (whether created or uncreated) to give irrevocably so that they deny and thereby sacrifice other options. Christian theology has always regarded God's creation of the world as an act of love. In the act of creation, God gives himself irrevocably to this world to the exclusion of all others.¹⁹ Creation is a gift of sacrifice—the giving of what holds ultimate value by giving up everything of lesser value. As beings created in God's image, we are likewise able, and indeed called, to offer such gifts of sacrifice. Moreover, such acts of love would be ours to perform even if we had never sinned.

In a fallen world, however, sacrifice by itself is not enough to assure love. The problem is that fallen creatures like us know very well about delayed gratification of rewards, that is, we sacrifice an immediate good for a foreseeable greater benefit down the road. There is nothing wrong, in principle, with delayed gratification or sacrifice in this sense. But sacrifice ceases to be a gauge for love when it becomes an instrument of exchange, part of a system of reciprocity in which persons are duly compensated for costs incurred. This is why Jesus states, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13) In laying down his life at the Cross, Jesus offered himself in a sacrifice of suffering that cannot be compensated (certainly not by us). Only the sacrifice of a suffering that cannot be compensated and does not ask to be compensated is a true gauge of love in a fallen world.

¹⁸G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, in *Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 243.

¹⁹The physics community is much taken these days with the idea of a multiverse—an ensemble of universes that makes real anything that's physically possible. The known universe that we inhabit is therefore just one of a gazillion other universes that constitute the multiverse. In the multiverse, universes with physical laws like ours but wildly different histories are just as real as ours. Thus, the multiverse contains a universe exactly like ours except that in it, after years of devotion and charity, Mother Teresa on her eightieth birthday suddenly becomes an ax-murderer. The multiverse is not a creation—it involves no self-limitation or inclusion/exclusion in Chesterton's sense (see the previous note). For a helpful critique of the multiverse, see Stephen M. Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), ch. 17.

It is vital here to form a correct picture of Christ's redemption and our role in it. In allowing evil and then redeeming us from it, God is not an arsonist who starts a fire, lets things heat up for us, and then, at the last moment, steps in so that he can be the big hero. Nor is God a casual bystander, who sees a fire start spontaneously and then lets it get out of control so that he can be the big hero to rescue us.

We are the arsonists. We started the fire. God wants to rescue us not only from the fire we started but also, and more importantly, from our disposition to start fires, that is, from our life of arson. But to be rescued from a life of arson requires that we know how destructive arson is.²⁰ Fires always start out small. If God always instantly put out the fires we start, we would never appreciate the damage fires can do.

We started a fire in consenting to evil. God permits this fire to rage. He grants this permission not so that he can be a big hero when he rescues us but so that we can rightly understand the human condition and thus come to our senses. In rescuing us by suffering on the Cross, God does end up being a hero. But that is not the point of his suffering. The point is to fix a broken relationship between God and humanity.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus beseeched the Father to let this cup pass from him if it were possible. But there was no other way. Our sin demanded the ultimate cost. It is a cost our Lord willingly paid. He paid it at the Cross. He bears the marks of the Cross to this day.

²⁰The arson metaphor has scriptural precedent: "Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue *is* a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell." (James 3:5–6)