

I want to thank you for putting so much time and effort into replying to my thoughts and concerns about God and Christianity. I had no idea you were going to be that thorough. I also didn't know it was going to be of a formal nature, complete with Table of Contents, footnotes, and appendices.

I want to address one issue from the start. You seemed to be taken aback by the colloquial and sarcastic manner in which I referred to fundamentalists. Unlike you, I'm a big fan of John Stewart because he has a knack for putting the day's events into a crucible and grinding out all the BS. He does use sarcasm, but more importantly, he takes snippets of videos of politicians (from both parties) and uses them to expose idiocy or hypocrisy. He is a genius at exposing hypocrisy. But enough about Stewart. My point is, I was being very informal in expressing my views and so I sunk to sarcasm. I'll try to keep that at a minimum in this reply.

You said, "My point in listing the fundamentals of the faith was to provide a definition of a fundamentalist that is based upon the origin of the term in the early 20th century. I still don't know your definition. As I have said, I **may** not agree with your definition, but at least I'll know what you mean when you use the word."

One thread that runs through your reply that seems to elicit some confusion is that you don't seem to know what I mean by "fundamentalist." You picked up that I was angry at them and since you claim to be a fundamentalist, you therefore seem to believe I am angry at you (or your friends/family). I'm not at all angry at you, nor do I have negative feelings toward you. I don't know you personally. I meant no offense. I have a feeling that how you view yourself as a fundamentalist Christian is somewhat different from what my definition of a fundamentalist is. So let me start off by defining some terms.

To me, a fundamentalist is a religious person who takes his religious beliefs so seriously that there is absolutely no room for a change of opinion, even a small change. A fundamentalist is also a person who believes that the bible is literally true and was dictated to the ancients by God himself. A fundamentalist is a person who denies or ignores confirmed facts of science or history if, in their interpretation, these facts run contrary to their interpretation of the bible. And, most importantly, a fundamentalist is one who not only holds these strict constructionist views of the bible and the morality derived from it but uses these beliefs to inform his or her actions with regard to society in general. In other words, they know what they know and they want you to comply with their morals. Fundamentalists tend to be conservative, politically. They support the passage of laws that are restrictive of personal liberties by people who may not agree with their views on morality. They are staunchly anti-abortion and anti-choice when it comes to abortion. They are against homosexual marriage and even against homosexuality, period. They don't accept evolution as valid, but instead believe the earth was created in six literal days. They also want that view taught in science classrooms, even in public schools. They want control of the government at all levels, or at least they want significant influence. Fundamentalists believe that the United States is a Christian

nation and always has been because they hold a revisionist view of history. Fundamentalists also try to keep their children compliant with their views by home schooling them and sending them to conservative bible camps. They tend to be judgmental, intolerant, and in some cases, bigoted.

The fundamentalists who are most likely to support infiltrating government and schools with their kind can be called dominionists, a somewhat more restrictive label. But while dominionists (such as Sarah Palin, Michelle Bachman, and Rick Perry) are actively involved in politics at some level, all fundamentalists encourage or at least support the dominionist viewpoint in general.

From your reply, you do not fit into my definition of what a Christian fundamentalist is. Rather, you would more closely fit with the term “evangelical.” Like fundamentalists, evangelicals tend to be conservative (though not always). They believe the bible is inerrant, though not necessarily literally the word of God (You termed this infallible.). And you generally still hold to the bible’s morality set. But, unlike fundamentalists, you are more open to other viewpoints, you tend not to want to force your morality on the population in general (even when you share the same morality with fundamentalists), and you are willing at least to consider all scientific viewpoints and theories without dismissing them out of hand.

I strongly disagree with the religious views of evangelical Christians, but I am not against them and I’m not against their rights to believe those views. My mother is an evangelical Christian. She didn’t even attend high school and doesn’t know much at all about science, but even she is open to the possibility of evolution being true. She wishes I were still a Christian and she worries that I’m not, and although she occasionally tries to convince me to re-enter the fold, she is tolerant of my beliefs. And she is not a political conservative, but tends to be middle of the road. She is even tolerant of gays, even though she believes they are probably sinning.

So when I say that Christian fundamentalists anger me, I am using the above definition of fundamentalist. And it’s not only Christians that can be fundamentalists. Muslims and Jews can hold fundamentalist views as well, and I’m angered at them, too.

Fundamentalism angers me because it affects me and my family, even though our views on morality are diametrically opposed to their views. I am a firm believer in a woman’s right to choose abortion. It’s her choice, and not the government’s, and certainly not the choice of some self-appointed, self-righteous defender of public morality. When my wife (who was a devout Christian) and I were expecting our first baby, we both agreed that if the doctors found out that the baby would be seriously deformed, retarded, or otherwise not likely to have a normal life, we would have it aborted. It was not even debated. We informed our families ahead of time, just in case. They supported us as far as I know. So I’m not only pro-choice, in some cases I’m pro abortion.

It took me awhile, but I’m totally accepting of gays and their right to marry. At one time I held the view that homosexuals should be helped, not because I thought it was immoral,

but because, as a biologist, I thought it was unnatural. I wanted them to be “normal.” Over the years, though, I have come to realize that homosexuals are no threat to me or my species and if they are happy the way they are, who am I to try to change them.

And, of course, as a man of science, I accept the scientific methods and if those methods yield results that run contrary to ancient scripture, then it’s the scripture that must be wrong. So, even though I was raised in a church that warned me not to listen to my science teachers when I got to high school because man did not come from a monkey, I actually did listen enough to know that I had been misled by the church.

In general, then, I’m angry at fundamentalists not for what they believe, but for how they use that belief to try to restrict my freedoms. I teach biology and I have to fight fundamentalist brainwashing every year. Evolution is the fundamental theory of biology. It’s not possible to teach modern biology without it. And yet I have to spend much of my time that could be spent teaching the science trying to convince my students that I’m not the devil in disguise for pushing some atheistic worldview on them. Only about 20 percent of Americans are fundamentalists, according to most polls I’ve read, yet anywhere between 35 and 40 percent of Americans do not accept evolution as true, and even most of the ones who do accept it believe that God guided it in some way. That means one thing to me: Fundamentalists are good at persuading those who don’t hold any firm conviction one way or other. They are very vocal and good at converting the gullible to their ideas and morality. And I blame them, at least partially, for why America is running behind most other modern nations in science education.

If fundamentalists (especially dominionists) had their way, I would live in a country where science would be shunned, the environment would be even more polluted (because since the end of time is coming soon, we don’t need to worry too much about pollution), gays would be second-class citizens by official decree, women’s reproductive rights would be non-existent, kids would start each class with a Christian prayer (too bad for any Muslims, Hindus, or Jews in the classroom), and biology teachers would be forced to teach young-earth creationism. Every state would have a Ken Ham creationist museum and field trips to them would be mandatory.

Am I being hyperbolic? Maybe a little. But a dominionist-led America would be much closer to that than to the much more open society we have today, even though we are still crippled with blue laws and other restrictions based on nothing more than a fundamentalist view of morality.

To me, if someone has a compunction against abortion, then she shouldn’t have one. If someone believes that being in a homosexual relationship is a sin, then he should try to avoid such relationships. If someone believes that evolutionary science was sent from the devil then she is free to hold that view for herself only. If someone believes it’s sinful to have sex before marriage or to show a bare midriff in public, then maybe she should avoid those activities. But in no way and at no time should those beliefs and compunctions limit or attempt to limit what anyone else can do just because they hold a different view of morality.

I'll discuss some of these points on my beliefs in more detail as I respond to your reply below.

On Atheistic Evolution

You asked, "You use the illustration of the traits that are passed on (presumably by genes¹) so an individual entity can fit in. My question is why doesn't it determine behavior?"

I don't believe I ever claimed that genes could not determine behavior. Indeed, for lower animals, behavior is determined only by genes. In higher animals, behavior is at least guided by genes. An infant, for example, doesn't have to be taught to suckle. The behavior is innate. In the same way, behaviors that tend to protect the clan are selected for. However, as I'll address in another section, behavior in humans is mostly controlled by our higher brain functions. A large brain was important for our early survival, but it also yielded several bonuses that guide our behavior but yet were not necessarily important for early survival. Call them a side-effect of an advanced brain.

You said, "If I look at a drone honey bee, a societal animal, its future can be predicted. Why can't morality be predicted?"

Somewhere between 2 million and 3.5 million years ago, the human species (or rather its immediate predecessors) were met with a change in the environment so drastic that it was slowly destroying their forested habitat. Like any organism, human ancestors were faced with two options: evolve or become extinct. Fortunately, the environmental change was slow enough that it forced us to change. We became upright, slowly. So we didn't need trees to live in but that presented us with another problem: How do we survive predators on the ground?

Natural Selection, as you pointed out, has been anthropomorphized so that it is easier to talk about, and I will continue that behavior here. So I'll just say that natural selection does not care how we survive, or even if we survive. But it can provide us a means to survive by weeding out all the traits that prevent us from surviving in a particular environment and keeping the traits that are better suited for survival. There are a number of traits that could have been evolved to help us cope with our new environment, but the trait that won out was a larger brain, which means we were able to outsmart our predators. Intelligence was also invaluable in helping us find food and shelter.

A larger cerebral cortex, however, also meant that we were able to figure out a lot more things than simple survival skills. It also helped us to get along in groups in a way that, unlike bees, doesn't rely on sheer instinct. We still have instincts, but we also now have

the ability to reason. We have developed that ability to the point where it overshadows (though it doesn't suppress) our instincts. Humans developed what we call morals to help them get along in society without having to rely on instincts. This is a crude way of putting it, but I don't want this reply to turn into a dissertation on animal behavior. Suffice it to say, bees and humans, although they are both social creatures, are driven by different coping mechanisms. With bees, it's purely instinct. With humans, most of it is rational thought coupled with a little survival instinct.

You said, "This is precisely where the problem of the mind occurs for me. Either it is an extension or function of the brain, or mind is distinct from the brain. If the mind is fully explainable by evolution, then there appears to be insurmountable difficulties."

The "insurmountable difficulties" seems to be that you can't conceive of such a situation and still maintain sanity. Believe me; I've pondered the same question. I'm perfectly fine, though not really happy, with the mind being simply a very complex evolved entity within the brain and part of the physical brain. And even if that is the case, it does not necessarily present all the conundrums you laid out in the passages that followed the quote above.

To list one example, you said, "If a dog mates with every female in the neighborhood, creating a terrible parcel of puppies, no one is going to demand that the dog provide puppy support."

We are humans and we humans have developed morals (as I described above) to help us interact with each other in society. Dogs are guided more by instinct. They have no morality. You seem to be doing a cross-species comparison. You say "no one" as in human; you didn't say "no other dog." Dogs do not hold each other morally accountable. It's not in their nature. They have not evolved that trait. Humans have, so we get to hold each other morally accountable. But we don't hold dogs or cats or bees morally accountable because they are not expected to be moral. That's a human characteristic.

But this human behavior of holding each other accountable does not depend on whether the mind is part of the physical brain or if it transcends the brain. It's still human behavior, and recognized as such by almost all humans. What difference does it make to me if my mind is simply matter or if is a transcendental entity if the behaviors, the desires, the emotions are all the same? The only thing that differs is that in one case (the transcendental mind) it gets to live on after the physical body dies and in the other case, (the physical mind) it presumably does not. But does knowing which it is in advance of death make any difference? Again, I don't think so. The only way it would is if you believed in one particular philosophy (or religion in this case) that made you think the transcendent mind would wind up in a different place if you believed one way as opposed to believing another.

But let me ask you this: Are you quite sure that a physical mind is completely dead when the body dies? I've spent many hours, days, years contemplating on what consciousness

really is. Let's just call it the mind for short. If the mind really is simply an emergent phenomenon based solely on physical matter/energy interactions then, at some point in the future, assuming science progresses as in the past, we will be able to re-create a mind that is just as self-aware as any human. We will also be able to build a mechanism for storing a biologically-created mind. So, ponder this: When that day comes, will we be able to transfer the mind of a human into a machine so that the individual can live forever by simply getting a new android body every time the old one wears out? Or is that transfer of mind actually just a copy? In other words, what happens to the original? Will we produce an identical twin copy of a mind, complete with all the thoughts, memories, and morals of the original, or will we really be able to transfer the one and only mind of the individual into the machine?

I certainly don't know the answer to it. The mind is the most ineffable quality we possess. But does that prove it is a creation of God? Of course not. And it's not only because we just can't understand how it works yet. What we might call God might actually be part of the matter/energy of the universe interacting with us in a peculiar and unknown manner. For example, I don't know how much you know about quantum physics, but it is one of the most strange and beautiful theories in all of science. It also happens to be one that has an enormous amount of supporting evidence to back it up. One of the phenomena of quantum physics is that, on the scale of subatomic particles at least, matter and energy behave quite unpredictably. It is also possible to cause a transfer of a physical object at speeds beyond the speed of light. Einstein called it, "spooky action at a distance." It's actually called quantum entanglement and if you're interested in such things I suggest looking it up on an Internet search. One hypothesis of the mind is that consciousness is, at least in part, caused by the quantum entanglement of subatomic particles within the neurons inside the brain. The evidence is that, in response to a certain type of stimulus to one part of the brain, neurons in the opposite hemisphere that are not directly wired to the stimulated part begin firing as well.

It is hypothesized that this "spooky action at a distance" might also be responsible for some of the out-of-body experiences or near-death experiences reported by those who have been resuscitated. I conjecture that quantum entanglement might make it possible for our mind, if indeed our mind is the result of such physics, to live on after our bodies die as part of a collective consciousness of the cosmos. Keep in mind that this is mere speculation at this point, but nothing outside the realm of quantum possibility.

My bottom line is that your assumptions that God must exist because of the existence of the mind and that one must believe in God in order to allow the mind to live on in God's presence after a physical death is based only on your inability to grasp the notion that the mind (or the "I") might not exist, because if it doesn't we're mere machines that only have the illusion of free will. I counter with the argument that your inability to process the lack of an "I" is in no way evidence that there really is an "I." And your belief that the mind must be God is not the only belief system out there that will allow for the existence of a transcendental mind. The quantum physics scenario I suggested is a plausible alternative to both the mind and to some sort of existence beyond death. Neither one of us has physical evidence to back up either scenario, but at least mine is based on real

physics. I don't mean to sound patronizing, but your conclusion seems to be based more on wishful thinking because of an inability to accept that the mind might indeed simply be a trick of natural selection. I can't conceive of having a billion dollars. But I do know there are billionaires out there.

You said, "Nature is comprised of what is concrete. Only mind can conceive abstracts ... and to what purpose? If physical necessity were the issue only, all the brain was needed for was how to maintain enough control of particulars to maximize the lifespan. Art is not needed to live longer. Staring or thinking about art will not fill a single physical need. Musing about the meaning of life does not fill an empty stomach or create shelter."

Although I've already touched on this above, let me reiterate. The evolution of a large brain was the method through which humans got to come down out of the trees and start walking upright. But sometimes when you cast a net to catch a fish you end up catching other things. Usually those other things are weeds or snails. But occasionally, you might snag a buried treasure, or at least a tastier fish. The original purpose of the large brain was for survival on the plains of Africa. But because we had them, we used them for other things, too. We were able to learn easier and faster than our small-brained cousins. We were able to develop critical thinking skills (which, by the way, even chimps have to a degree that we used to think was not so). But somewhere during the development of our cerebral cortex, the quantum fluctuations began to manifest in a way that caused us to be able to ponder our own thoughts. We became self-aware. We became cognizant of the fact that we will all die at some point. We developed defense mechanisms against the inevitable. That had survival value, too.

Sometimes when I'm dozing off at night or maybe when I wake up in the middle of the night and I'm in that state where I'm half asleep I get a strangely eerie thought sensation. I become acutely aware of my own mortality. At those fleeting moments, I get very scared, because I am more aware of the fact that I'm going to die than I am even now as I write this. It becomes very real to me. I don't know if anyone else ever experiences these sensations or not, but I've always had them. I believe that once humans became self-aware and aware of their own impending death, the constant nagging fear would be so great that they would be almost unable to function on a daily basis. I believe our brains have developed a defense mechanism that suppresses, if not the knowledge, at least the keen presence, of our impending demise. I also believe that on those rare occasions when I'm half asleep, those thoughts get through.

The upshot is that every thought or every decision the brain is capable of making does not necessarily need survival value. The brain was developed for our survival in the plains, but the side benefits of having such a large brain is that we get to enjoy such things as art, literature, and philosophy with no increase in evolutionary baggage. It costs us no more to enjoy art and music than it does to simply have a brain big enough to outsmart our enemies or to figure out a way to harness fire.

A Deistic God

You said, "I'm puzzled why a deistic god is of any interest to you. No one would claim revelation from it; so, what does it add that you don't already believe?"

I'm not advocating for a deistic god and I don't believe I claimed to believe in one. All I said, or at least meant to say, was that if God does exist at all he is more like the deistic god than the Christian God. And I said that I'm 100 percent certain that the biblical God cannot and does not exist, but I didn't say I could prove it empirically. Of course I cannot. The 100 percent surety figure is rounded off from, say 99.999... percent. So how did I come up with that figure? Well, throughout history people have believed in literally thousands of gods. These gods are mythical figures to us, looking at them with hindsight. But the ancients really believed in them. Today, there are hundreds of different religions and each one has its own god, or at least its own version of God. Jews, Muslims, and Christians all believe in the god of Abraham, but they can't agree at all on his character or characteristics. Hindus believe in lots of deities. Native Americans had and have their deities. Every religion has its adherents that believe whole-heartedly in their own version of God. Do you think the 9/11 terrorists would have happily crashed their planes into the WTC if they were not 100 percent certain that their god would reward them in the afterlife? People don't gladly destroy themselves out of nothing but wishful thinking. They were certain. They were deluded, misled, and criminal, but they still had more faith in their god than most American Christians have in theirs. I can say that because I am fairly certain that most people who check Christian on surveys would not voluntarily kill themselves and others in the name of God even if they were taught they had to. There would be some, and there have been some that did (abortion doctor murderers for example, or cult followers), but few Christians are really that deluded.

Add to all those gods that people believe in or have believed in all the different characteristics that each denomination and sect assigns to the Christian God. Pentecostals, for example, believe that no Christians are really Christian unless they are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and then speak in tongues. That, to them, is necessary for being saved. I know this because my wife was, at one time, a Pentecostal. Seventh Day Adventists believe you have to observe the Jewish Sabbath. So there are literally millions of possibilities for God or for the character of God. You believe your own doctrinal beliefs about God and I bet you're pretty sure of yourself about those beliefs. Maybe some Christians are more ecumenical minded than others, but the reason so many denominations exist is because there are so many different views about what God is like or what he wants from us. That's why Pascal's Wager is not really a problem for atheists. We know that it's not a choice of believing in God or not. It's also a choice of which one of the millions of God variants you believe in. And if you choose the wrong one, you lose. The odds that you picked the right one are staggering. In a world with thousands of religions, when viewed from a perspective outside any of them, they all are equal. And they all are equally wrong.

John Loftus is a former evangelical minister (I know; it seems I read a lot of former ministers.) who, after attending seminary and doing a lot of research, decided he had been deluding himself. He is now an atheist. He wrote a compelling book that challenges anyone who is religious to take the Outsider Test of Faith (OTF). Coincidentally, I wrote a column for the Daily Journal in 2001 in which I describe what I call the Bubble Theory of Religion. It is very similar to the OTF, which was developed later by Loftus. I sent him the column and he posted a link on his blog. He was a guest speaker for the Center for Inquiry here in Indy a couple of months ago and I got to meet him. When I introduced myself, he said, "Aw, the bubble man." I was happy he remembered.

Anyway, the OTF (and my Bubble Theory) says in short that you reject all religions on Earth except your own. You believe adherents to other religions must have been misled, or are deluded, or haven't been "saved" yet, or something. The real challenge is to step outside your own religion (your own bubble) long enough to judge your religion with the same degree of skepticism that you judge all others, and that adherents to other religions are using to judge yours. Only when you can really do that can you see that your own religion is just as spurious as all the others. (By the way, I've been using the rhetorical "you," not necessarily referring to you personally.)

So, bottom line, I don't know if a god exists or not with 100 percent certainty. But with all the possibilities for a god out there, I can pretty much be close to 100 percent certain that whatever god you or anyone else might believe in, odds are you're wrong. And since no god has made himself known to us in the same way that, say, a bear in the woods might make himself known to a camper, then if a god does exist, chances are good that our belief in him and our worship of him is not really important to him.

Characteristics of God

You said, "If my above statements are correct, then the accusation that all theists do not agree on the characteristics of God, which is, supposedly, a fatal weakness, is an arbitrary argument. In other words, this argument may be used against theist explanation of God, but the identical may not be used against scientists' explanation of the evolution of the species."

But it's GOD! Knowing what god wants from us would appear to be of the utmost importance if our salvation depends on doing or believing or knowing what God wants us to do, believe, or know. I agree with you that characteristics of God are abstract knowledge. But that's part of my point. If the Christian God exists, he should be concrete. If he wants us to live with him in heaven for eternity, he ought to make his existence and his desires for us 100 percent certain to us. He can still give us free will to accept him or not, but at least we would know for sure what we're choosing and that if we reject him we are actually rejecting a real entity. And, although evolution might be an abstract concept, it is based on empirical facts and evidence. The theory of the existence of God is based on nothing but the bible. And I'm sure you'll agree, the bible offers no

empirical evidence. I will say more about evolution and the variations in the scientific opinion about it under the topic "Evolution" later.

On a side note, the reason that I do not believe in God is because I CAN'T believe in God. Do you really think for one second that if I thought I could get an everlasting life of bliss that I wouldn't do anything to get it? If I thought there was any possibility at all, however remote, that there might actually be a loving, personal god that would bring me into his loving bosom forever then I would acquiesce to his every wish if I could. I would be first in line to pray and to worship him if that is what I knew he required of me.

I've heard lots of atheists say that they wouldn't want to live forever with the god of the bible, because such a god is petty, unjust, misogynistic, genocidal, and totally unfair. Well, although I might agree with those characteristics for the biblical god, if I thought that he really existed I would still go along with everything he wanted of me, because in my mind, living forever with a spiteful, mercurial, and capricious god who might love me is far better than living forever in hell (If we're assuming the biblical god exists we have to assume hell exists, too.). It's even better than the other alternative, just being dead.

So I would gladly accept God if I thought there was any hope he might actually exist. But I can't believe in him, because I know his existence is simply impossible, or at least so highly unlikely that it might as well be impossible. Believing in God or not believing is not a decision I can make. I don't see how it can truly be a decision anyone can make. Believing is something that comes automatically to those who have a good reason to believe. If you really wanted to, could you force yourself to believe in Santa Claus? Could you even come close to being convinced of his existence by the anecdotal stories of children? That's really all we have for a belief in God, anecdotal stories told by a handful of very superstitious nomads and country folk that lived in ancient times.

Those who say they believe in God were probably brought up in that belief and did not develop it on their own, so they really haven't spent time thinking it through. They haven't considered all the options equally. They haven't applied the Outsider Test of Faith. Alternatively, they may believe because they have misinterpreted a "religious experience." Maybe they attended a religious service in which people began speaking in tongues and running into walls. I went to see a presentation by Dan Barker this week. You probably know that he is a former evangelical minister (Yes, another one) who came to his senses when he was about 30 and became not only an atheist but the head of the Freedom from Religion Foundation. He related to us how he used to speak in tongues and, in fact, he can still do it. He insists he's not just mimicking or pretending, but that it's a real phenomenon that makes him feel all warm and fuzzy inside. He used to attribute it to the Holy Spirit. He now attributes it to natural causes. Lots of religions have similar states of the mind and all attribute it to their own god, so it's no surprise that Christians have a version they attribute to a segment of their deity. Anyway, if you are open to believing the supernatural, then it's not too hard to find something you can attribute to the supernatural. And it's not a huge stretch to believe in a god. We, as humans, are very good agent detectors: We are programmed by evolution to look for

enemies when things go bump in the night, so anytime something happens that we can't explain, we automatically look for some intelligent agent that caused it.

But I now know too much to believe in God. And trust me; that's not a put down of anyone else's intelligence. I'm no smarter than most people, but most people just don't consider why they believe something or why they don't. I used to believe and I used to call myself a Christian. But I believed because I hadn't really thought much about it, or because I just wanted to because I knew I had to if I ever wanted to get into heaven, which I hoped existed but never really considered an actual possibility now that I look back. Even as a kid, I had a childlike belief in God and in heaven, but down really deep, when I prayed, I didn't really expect anything to happen. I prayed because I was expected to, as a Christian. I wished at the time that I could believe whole-heartedly. But there were always those doubts. I've heard ministers say that everyone has doubts, that they are normal and even positive, because they force us to consider why we believe, which in turn strengthens our faith. I never really understood that. It always tended to weaken my faith. Having doubts caused me to start thinking about what I claimed to believe. When I started thinking, I started researching what others were saying. Then I discovered that Christianity, like all other religions, is a false belief. There is no justification for it at all. I'm not talking about proof or even empirical evidence. I'm talking only about what you have called coherence. I don't see how you can claim there is any coherence to Christianity at all. The only thing you have is the bible and the bible is the poster child for incoherence.

Even though my faith was never all that strong, the faith I did have was based on what I was told about how the bible was filled with prophecies that predicted the coming of Jesus and his death. I bought into it. In fact, I was taken aback by the idea that Jews rejected Christ. Hadn't they even read Scripture? How could they reject out of hand what the bible said about Jesus when it was right there in their own Old Testament?

It didn't occur to me until years later that maybe the Jews had a good reason for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, both then and now. I won't go into any long discussion here about how the bible is filled with errors, and not just errors in minor details, but doctrinal errors. I know you have already heard that the only reason the New Testament seems to be a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies is because the authors of the NT knew about the prophecies in Jewish Scripture. Most of them, after all, were Jews. The author of Matthew, for example, had Jesus be born in Bethlehem to a virgin because that is what the OT prophecies stated. He made up a way to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, a tax or census. But there was no census in any year that Jesus could have been born. The closest general census occurred in 4 CE which was after King Herod had died and 8 years after the presumed date of Jesus' birth. And even if there had been a general census, it was not standard procedure for everyone to go back to the place of birth of their ancestors. The Romans were nothing if not efficient administrators, and it would have been a fiasco if thousands of adults had to travel for days or weeks back to their home villages to be counted. And even if that had taken place, it would only have been the men. Women were not counted. And a highly-pregnant woman would never have made the trip anyway. There are layers upon layers of highly unlikely events that the author of

Matthew had to invent to even get Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. He also made up the genealogy that links Jesus to King David. There is another genealogy in Luke that disagrees with the one in Matthew, but Luke wasn't trying to make the same linkage. And these things are just the tip of the iceberg. There is so much incoherence in the bible that one wonders how it can be so easily overlooked by the devout, except that recognizing the incoherence would spoil the delusion.

I'm sure you've heard and probably read Bart Ehrman. He is another former evangelical minister who discovered he had also been deluding himself. He has degrees in several major seminaries. He learned Greek, Hebrew, and Coptic in order to better understand the bible. He is now one of the foremost experts in biblical history and textual criticism, and an atheist. If you haven't already read any of his books I suggest you do so. I've read most of his works and find his views very intriguing. His latest book is about how many (about half) of the books of the New Testament are either forgeries or have been falsely attributed. For example, at least seven of Paul's letters were forged. (Scholars call them pseudepigraphs because forgery connotes something that is illegal in modern times.) And all of the Gospels have been falsely attributed, since the authors were anonymous. So it's hard for me to take anything the bible has to say too seriously. It's a collection of anonymous or forged works, many of which have been contrived so as to fit with OT prophecies, which as it turns out, were misinterpreted anyway, because very few of the messianic prophecies used to prove that Jesus was the Messiah even mention the word messiah. Add that to the fact that the OT authors were Jews writing for the Jews of their day, not for hundreds or thousands of years into the future. Just like Nostradamus sounds good when looking at some of his quatrains with hindsight, the OT prophecies sound compelling until you consider that the people who wrote the NT had access to those prophecies and when you consider that most of them were seriously misinterpreted in order to fit the events.

You said, "What kind (of evidence) could there possibly be that would convince you?" and, "If you do not believe a personal God exists (and you have said such), then there is no evidence anywhere that can overturn that."

Empirical evidence, interpreted by scientists, and published in peer-reviewed journals would get my attention. If, later, that evidence was verified and corroborated by other scientists, then I would accept God as a legitimate scientific theory. I would then most likely believe in his existence. And I might add, I would welcome that evidence, because as I have already said, I would love to be able to believe in God. But I can't do it arbitrarily. I do not, as you contend, have a predisposition for not believing in God. As I said previously, I did believe to a point, and I wanted to believe fully. I tried; I really did. I got baptized. I said the sinner's prayer, more than once. I prayed. I read the bible. I went to church weekly for ten years straight. I opened my heart. But my mind kept telling me that it was probably a futile effort. If God wanted to come into my heart, though, he had every opportunity. I invited him. This was during the time that I was open to a belief in God. So either God doesn't exist or he has rejected me. In hindsight, and as a man of

science, I should have known better. I should have realized much earlier in my life that the god of the bible is a hoax. There's just no way his existence makes any sense. But, I was hopeful, so it took awhile.

Suffering

You said, "Suffering is the only issue that makes sense to me as an objection to God. You even called it a major one. This one IS the biggie."

I'm glad we can agree on that. But as you mentioned, Plantinga has his critics, too. There is really no way around it that I can see. The problem of suffering has been a problem ever since at least the time of Epicurus. And it will continue to be a big problem for God. In fact, another good book by Ehrman is one called *God's Problem*. It is devoted to the disjunction between a loving god and the fact of suffering.

This might be the time to point out, too, that it was God who originally began our suffering. Adam and Eve were (supposedly) very happy in the Garden of Eden and could have lived forever without suffering. But Eve was set up by God. God created everything. He, therefore, created the serpent. The serpent tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, although technically, Eve did nothing wrong. She did not know what evil was until she ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. So if she knew no evil, how could she do evil? If she didn't know that eating from the tree was evil, how can God hold her accountable? One might say, "Yes but she knew she was disobeying God." Well, maybe she did, but if she could not have known evil until after she had eaten the fruit, she didn't realize that disobeying God was evil. To her, at that moment, God and the serpent were simply two beings saying different things, and the serpent spoke to her last. So, for her supposed evil ways, all of humanity is now doomed unless we believe in Jesus, which as I've already explained, is impossible to do for me and many others. If the bible is true, then people are doomed to eternal torment for no other reason than because God set Eve up for failure in the beginning.

It really staggers my imagination to understand how the creator of all the universe is so petty as to care what we humans believe. There are billions upon billions of stars in the universe. If God is eternal, then he existed for eternity before he created us. We then exist for a blink of God's eye in an enormous cosmos that itself has existed for billions of years. If God is real he could easily have placed us all in heaven with him from the beginning of his creation. He could have made us perfect. He could have resisted creating Satan. He could have made suffering non-existent from the beginning. We could all be living in heaven with him right now. And don't give me the argument that he wanted us all to choose him so he gave us free will. Well, what about the ones who get to heaven? Do they still have free will? If they do, won't they screw things up there? What if, in heaven, they make the same mistake as Eve and disobey God? Will heaven become as chaotic and evil as the earth did? And if you say that, no, in heaven we will have perfect

minds that would not choose evil, then why couldn't God have given us those perfect minds to begin with? This purgatory on Earth makes no sense. And it's a cop-out to tell me that God works in mysterious ways and maybe we're not meant to understand. He gave us all minds and the intelligence to ask questions. We, as humans, need to understand. And if he has set us up not to understand, then he, again, has set us up for failure.

You said, "The second alternative is materialistic. There is no God. There is no hereafter. Everyone will die, consciousness and mind forever gone, and everything material of the body will eventually disintegrate, its atoms busily joining other atoms. Eventually all matter will end either in fire or in ice. Any comfort is momentary. Any meaning is momentary. The universe has no meaning, no purpose, no goal ... and as an extension of it, neither do carbon units."

For a Christian, this alternative is, indeed, a terrifying concept to accept. Everything is momentary and there is no reason for existing. But think of a butterfly (or any animal for that matter). What is the purpose of that butterfly? It is to find a mate and produce caterpillars which will then become more butterflies. There is no purpose. It's a cycle of life. If butterflies never existed they would not be missed. The only difference between a human and a butterfly is that humans are self aware. We know we exist and we look for reasons we exist. But maybe there are no reasons we exist. Maybe we exist for the same reason a butterfly does, to reproduce and carry on the species. And maybe we do that because we are simply following the laws of physics that prescribe how atoms and energy interact. Maybe when we look for a transcendental reason for existence it's only because we can't conceive of the alternative. Maybe that's only a deficiency in our brains. Except that some people can conceive of the existential alternative. That doesn't mean we have no meaning. It just means we make our own meaning. It means that this life is probably all we get so we should make the most of it. Maybe it means we should stop trying to find comfort in the supernatural and instead just love each other. Maybe it means we should stop looking for meaning where none exists and create our own meaning that will get us through the only life we have. Maybe you will think it is useless, a waste, or a terrible twist of fate that we even exist at all, since we have no eternal meaning. But we can also consider ourselves lucky. We are the lucky ones, because we were actually born and have life. If there is no God who created us individually, how lucky are we that out of all the trillions of atoms in the universe, the right number got together at the right time to make us. That's not an argument for the existence of God, because in a universe as vast as ours (and in an infinite and eternal multiverse that is predicted by quantum theory) it was inevitable that life developed somewhere. We're lucky because we're the ones that get to witness it. (If it wasn't me it would be somebody or something else witnessing it and they may have thought the same thing, but I'm still glad it's me.)

What I'm saying is that I'm willing, reluctantly, to accept that which you say you can't accept, that we are here by accident, that the mind is just a phenomenon of physics, and that the only meaning we have is the meaning we make. Your contention that we would also have no free will does not, however, follow. Because we are guided by quantum

principals and in a quantum world, uncertainty rules; our futures are not set in stone. There is a degree of randomness that we can, by our will, control. At least that is a possibility. But even if we are mere automatons, the fact that we have the appearance of a free will is really just as good, since we are not able to tell the difference, are we?

Evolution

You said, "There are two key reasons that evolution seems probable to me...."

And this is why I would not call you a fundamentalist, despite what you might want to call yourself. A fundamentalist would never consider that evolution seems probable. Some evangelicals would, though.

You said, "Why is this metaphor or illusion even needed for survival? Why do we screw around with art and beauty? Why are you and I spending hours of our personal time discussing issues and searching for meaning as if they are really important, when the mind doesn't even exist independently of natural processes?"

I've already addressed this question so I won't go into further detail. But I'll try to answer your questions within the context of my earlier explanation that the mind is simply a bonus for needing a large brain for our early survival. I don't know about you, but I'm spending hours of my weekend replying to your essay for several reasons. I guess mostly it's because discussing issues of religion, science, and philosophy engages my mind. It is something I enjoy doing. In addition, I am hoping that some of my points are valid enough to cause you (and others who might read this) to consider alternatives. I'm hoping that, maybe, I've made one or two points that you haven't yet considered and so I may have provided something new for you to ponder. This is important to me because since I'm fairly sure the life I'm living now is the only life I'll get, I would like to leave something of it behind, to have some kind of an effect. That is why I care about these things. If I'm going to be nothing but worm food then the only thing that matters is what I do now. It matters to me because it brings me satisfaction. And momentary satisfaction, over and over again, is all anyone should be striving for in their own lives.

You said, "As I reflect on this I'm forced to one of two conclusions: 1) the mind truly exists distinct of natural processes and "I" does exist or 2) the mind is a result of physical processes and there was never a choice to think or do anything independently of said processes."

I don't know if you are a Star Trek fan or not. I always loved watching those TV shows and movies, though I never really considered myself a "Trekie." In the Star Trek: The

Next Generation series, there was an episode in which a character that was created in an earlier episode on their “holodeck” developed sentience. In case you’re not familiar with the concept, the holodeck used laser and computer technology to simulate reality in a room. Created characters and scenery looked and behaved absolutely real and they were solid, so you could interact with them physically. But they were just part of a very complex computer program. But in this episode, one of the holodeck characters who had somehow developed sentience (due to a computer glitch) was reactivated. He, like all sentient beings, didn’t want to be terminated at the end of his program. So he found a way to take control of the ship’s computer and held the crew hostage until they could find a way for him to maintain his existence outside the holodeck. The crew devised a plan to trick this character into believing he had exited the holodeck by forcing him into a small, electronic cubical that simulated the holodeck program but with no physicality of the characters. Yet the program would still run as long as the batteries held out (probably a century or more). The sentient character believed he had exited the holodeck and the program allowed him to create whatever reality he wanted within the bounds of actual reality. So, although he was running inside a harmless cube sitting on a desk, the character thought he was exploring the universe with his holographic girlfriend.

Now would I want to be this sentient holographic character or would I rather be a real, live person? I choose the real thing, but if I were this holographic entity I, like the one on Star Trek, would not know it. I would think that I was real.

There are some philosophies that contend that reality is only an illusion, that we exist only within our own minds. That’s intriguing to me because that means I would have invented everything myself. I would have thought of the theory of relativity and quantum physics all by myself. And even though I have no idea how single sideband suppressed carrier radio transmission works, I must have invented it!

There is one scientist who is at least half-way convinced that our entire universe is merely a computer game operated by someone “out there” – maybe God. So all we know is a simulation, like the Star Trek holodeck.

The bottom line here is that it doesn’t really matter. Either we are real or we’re simulated. To us, we can’t tell. And if we can’t tell, what difference does it make? Even if we have an afterlife, that might also be simulated. Maybe it’s all part of the cosmic computer game someone is playing. The only reality that truly matters is the reality that we believe exists and that others agree with us about (so that we can interact appropriately). Whether it’s really, really true or not makes no difference.

While I’m in the section on evolution, I want to answer your earlier query about the variation of scientific opinion on evolution and whether it has changed over time. Like all good scientific theories, the theory of evolution has become more mature over time. That’s because in the beginning, all Darwin really had were some fossils and a very large journal of his trip around the world as a naturalist aboard the *HMS Beagle*. He also had his specimens that he examined. Over the past 150 years, we have added the evidence of genetics. We have added the DNA evidence. We have accumulated vastly more fossil

evidence. We have accumulated a great deal more evidence on embryology, anatomy, and population dynamics. And we now have computer simulations. Scientists still debate the fine points of evolution. Punctuated equilibrium is one of those fine points. But there is no debate in the scientific community over whether or not evolution has occurred. There is no debate in the scientific community over whether all life on earth shares a common ancestor. Those large questions have been settled. That's what I meant when I said that evolution is like gravity, a settled matter. Evolution and common ancestry is a testable fact. Gravity produces observable effects. Evolution produces observable effects, though not as obvious to the casual observer. The only people who debate evolution are lay people who do not know or understand the theory in its entirety but who get their information from media sources or word of mouth. If you are really interested in the topic of evolution, I suggest visiting the Web site, talkorigins.org. It hasn't been updated for awhile, but it is still a treasure trove of useful information.

Miracles

You said, "I guess what is not clear to me is "his Miracles became more miraculous." I have tried to understand the meaning and significance of this statement, and it eludes me."

I must apologize here. I didn't mean that Jesus' miracles, the ones he performed such as healing the sick and bringing people back from the dead, became more miraculous as time went by or as reported by the Gospels in chronological order. I must have been sleepy when I was writing that. What I did mean to say, however, is that if you read the Gospels in chronological order and observe certain claims made about Jesus, they do seem to become more "miraculous" in the sense that Jesus' divinity grows at each retelling.

Here is one example. In Mark, the first of the Gospels in chronological order, Jesus does not become divine until he is baptized, when the dove descends. Mark mentions nothing about Jesus until then. In Matthew and Luke, which were written at about the same time but after Mark, Jesus is divine from birth. Only those Gospels tell the story of the Nativity. Then, in John, the last one to be written, Jesus was divine from the beginning of time, long before he was actually born. And if you look at Paul's letters, he makes claims to Jesus' divinity, but it occurred at the Resurrection. Paul makes no mention of Jesus' supposed miracles while he was alive. And Paul's epistles were written prior to Mark's Gospel. So as time goes by, and authors retell the story over and over, Jesus seems to gain in legendary status, much as one would expect if he were actually a legend. The oral tradition was not really all that standardized when you consider the different ways the stories are related from Paul to John.

You said, "The absence of quantities of **corroboratory** text is not particularly astounding after 2,000 years. What would be much more critical would be **contradictory** text. The explosion of Christianity in

Jerusalem and Judea after the resurrection was significant. Why aren't there contemporary testimonies **denying** the Christian ones?"

There are lots of contradictory texts to the stories of Jesus, some even within the bible itself. The author of Acts (and Luke) weaves a story that seems to put Paul and Peter in perfect harmony with each other on doctrine. But Paul, in his epistles, seems to bristle at what Peter has to say about the salvation of Gentiles. Peter, according to Paul, thought that the Gentiles had to first convert to Judaism before they could be Christians. Paul believed that it was not only unnecessary for Gentiles to convert, but that it was even inappropriate for them to observe Jewish Law. Paul preached that the one and only means of Salvation was a belief in the Resurrection of Jesus. Following Jewish Law just meant you didn't quite believe that but you also needed to do works. So there is a disconnect between what the author of Acts has to say about Peter and Paul's relationship and what Paul has to say about it himself.

I might know more about evolution than you do, but you're the bible expert. I don't know if you are a biblical scholar or not. I study theology as a bit of a hobby, but in no way am I an expert. So I may have made some errors in detail here, but the basic force of the argument is legitimate.

Then, of course, there are the non-canonical gospels, apocalypses, and letters. And there were many sects of early Christianity that had a totally different view of what it meant to be a Christian. The Ebionites, for instance, did not claim that Jesus was divine. They believed to be Christian you had to be Jewish and that Jesus was merely a prophet sent with a message on how to live one's life.

There was Marcion and his followers who denied that the physical body had anything to do with Salvation. It was all spirit or soul and the body was not resurrected. And, of course, there were the Gnostics, who believed that Jesus was a messenger sent to bring them the knowledge of how their souls could escape their earthly bodies and be reunited with the deities in heaven.

All these early Christian sects had their own doctrines, backed up by their own Holy Scripture. Any one of them could have been the one that survived into the present. The one that did survive, the one that became known as Orthodox Christianity, was the one that was based in Rome, which also happened to be where the Roman emperor lived. Once Constantine was converted to Christianity, all the other sects were wiped out and most of their texts destroyed (though some survive). It was not doctrinal issues that led to our modern versions of Christianity, but political issues of the day. Had history played out differently, you could easily have been Gnostic.

Trinity

You said, "The early church fathers, who had a majority consensus on the subject, believed that all the definitions of God were contained with one

personality, called Father, and all the same definitions of God were also contained in another personality in the Son. As the role of the Son was recognized, so was the role of the Spirit. The Spirit was considered to be more than a general feeling or the felt presence; the Spirit was recognized as a personality that had the identical nature as the other two. One was not stronger or smarter or faster than another. Their nature was identical, but their personalities were distinct.”

So what you’re claiming is that God is afflicted with multiple personality disorder? (Sorry, I couldn’t resist that one barb.)

The problem with the Trinity for Christians, other than Catholics, is that it’s not biblical. It, as you pointed out, developed out of the Nicene Creed, which came out of the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. The Catholic Church, even to this day, believes that the authority for Christianity is divided equally between the bible and the Church itself, so that the pope and his minions have as much authority to make doctrine as the bible itself. Most Protestant denominations reject the Catholic Church’s authority, so one wonders why the Trinity is still accepted as a doctrine, since it is one of the most confusing aspects to grow out of the early church. I believe there are some sects within the Pentecostal denomination that reject the Trinity.

Resurrection

You said, “There is no evidence that would ever be acceptable. What evidence would prove to you beyond a doubt that Jesus rose from the dead? There is none. Whatever evidence is submitted will be subject to a different interpretation. You’re asking for proof like the natural sciences that have universally accepted methodologies. No abstract has that.”

I’m not asking for empirical evidence for Jesus’ Resurrection. Since, if it happened, it is part of history and can no longer be observed. But like all things we know about history, it should have been recorded by authority. There were plenty of Roman and Jewish historians living during the time of Jesus’ life. Even some of the Dead Seas Scrolls were scribed during his lifetime. Yet there is no mention at all of Jesus, his miracles, his life, his death, or his supposed resurrection by any authority figure that was alive when Jesus was alive. No contemporary of Jesus who knew him wrote about him (unless you accept that the two Apostles whose names appear on their Gospels actually wrote them personally. And textual criticism would seem to indicate that that is not likely). But even if they did, they were not authorities and not historians. They wrote (assuming they wrote at all) with an agenda.

I accept that Julius Caesar existed in history and that he headed up an empire. I believe that King Herod existed in history, because historians wrote about him and he appears in official documents. Jesus does not appear in official documents. He does not appear in literature at all until decades after his death. He doesn’t appear in any historical document

outside of the biblical manuscripts until the end of the first century when Josephus devoted one paragraph to him (which was later corrupted by Christians with a mission when they added their own phrases to it). You might not be able to fathom the absence of an “I” outside the physical brain, but I equally cannot fathom how it is possible that the son of the creator of the universe was so obscure during his lifetime that nobody remembers him outside his own inner circle of apostles. Then, when you add in the things such as the earthquake and the sun being darkened during his Crucifixion, it becomes obvious that those biblical accounts were highly exaggerated at best and most probably just false, because an eclipse and an earthquake would have been recorded outside the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem.

On a side note, another thing that can’t be reconciled is the tearing of the Temple curtain. There are two accounts of it that differ slightly. If it is to be taken literally, the differences don’t matter much, but if it is to be interpreted allegorically, there can be two different meanings for the curtain being ripped at the time of Jesus’ death or just before it. But in either case, how do the gospel writers know this? There were no chronometers back then. There is no possible way that an observation of the curtain being torn in the Temple could be synchronized to the exact time of Jesus’ death.

You said, “The number of sources is not the issue. Because Jesus is not believed to have been crucified and resurrection, then 50 accounts would not be enough.”

If his Crucifixion and Resurrection were documented by Roman authorities and historians and recorded in official records, if hundreds or thousands of eyewitnesses had made written records of the event, and if it were widely known, discussed, and written about by diverse groups of people, then there would be no question about it. There are history deniers, to be sure. There are those who don’t believe we ever went to the moon or that the Holocaust actually took place. But odds are that it would still be included in history books as a fact of history. One caveat, though, is that it would require more than one or two official witnesses to guarantee its place in history because extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. And a resurrection is an extraordinary claim. But there are ways that the Resurrection could have become part of accepted history, as I explained above. Since that didn’t happen, and since it is still an extraordinary claim, it is only natural and completely understandable why people choose not to believe it. It is more puzzling to me why some people do believe it.

You said, “The Bible was not written to convince people there is a God; it was written for those who do believe in God. From the first verse, “In the beginning God,” God is assumed.”

If that statement is true, it strikes me as strange that the one and only source of persuasion any Christian missionary has is the bible. How is one to become a believer if he has not been convinced to believe by the bible? “Only a fool sayeth in his heart, there is no God.” It sounds like someone’s trying to be convincing here. At least that’s a favorite verse of some of the people I meet in online forums who want to convince me that God is real. It

never ceases to amaze me how some Christians believe they can convince atheists to believe by quoting them the bible, but that's off topic.

Evidence for the Abstract

You said, "Your proof for your assertion is one "could have been," one "probably," one "maybe", and one "at least." In other words, it is loaded with "I don't know." Yet, an assertion is made."

I can make an assertion without proof or even concrete evidence, just as you can assert that God is real without evidence. But the assertions I make are at least plausible based on scientific principles. An assertion that God is real not only has no evidence to back it up, it runs contrary to scientific principles.

"A" God vs. "The" God

You said, "This is where you and I differ and can never reconcile. For a god to create mind, then he has to be something like it. When I think of me, my mind ... mercy, how great it is. I don't mean academics; phooey on that. I mean the ability to think, to feel, to interpret, to love, to rejoice, to understand, to wonder, to imagine, to dream, to hope, and on and on and on. All that happens with and within the mind."

Let's go ahead and put the fine point on this debate. I don't really care what people believe, if that's all it is – belief. What I continually wrestle against is what some people do with those beliefs that affect me and the rest of society. If they use a belief in a personal god, with personality traits that they somehow know, to restrict me or restrict others who do not share in that belief, or if they use that belief to inform their public actions in a way that is detrimental to society's progress by restricting scientific discovery or education, then I have a huge problem with that.

You have spent much of your reply arguing for the existence of God because of the incredible complexity of the mind as opposed to the relative simplicity of the brain. But even if I grant acceptance of your premise that a mind must evoke a god who created it because natural processes could not possibly create something transcendental, that still leaves me wondering why you or anyone else who is smart enough to figure that out and state it in such an eloquent fashion has to restrict that god to the characteristics of the petty, jealous, warmongering god of the bible.

If you say you believe in God because you have a mind, I have no problem with that. Maybe I could believe in such a god that could create a mind. Maybe I could even say he has a personality of his own. Maybe I could even say he loves us, because he gave us a mind. There's certainly no proof, and no evidence other than the rationality of how it sounds on the surface. But I could make that leap of faith, if only for the sake of

argument. And if everybody believed just that, I would not have a hobby of bashing fundamentalists, because there would be none. But when people start ascribing a personality to God based on the ramblings of some 2000 to 3000-year-old texts written by superstitious nomads, I throw up my hands in disbelief. It makes absolutely no sense to me. The evidence of the mind may lead one to the conclusion of a god, perhaps even a personal one. But since the mind itself, the only real evidence I can accept for God's existence, does not offer any finer detail of evidence than mere existence, it's a major leap for someone to be able to assign such specific characteristics to God based on the bible or the Koran or any other ancient text. The Old Testament begat the New Testament, so if the Old Testament is debunked due to lack of evidence then the New Testament must be at least equally spurious.

When the Twin Towers were destroyed, it didn't take very long for someone to find a quatrain in the repertoire of Nostradamus that seemed to fit the event. Does that mean that Nostradamus predicted it? The quatrain, like all his predictions, was obscure and poetic, with lots of symbolism, just like the Old Testament prophecies. And as I've stated, the authors of the New Testament were very familiar with the Old Testament. So when this guy named Jesus came along, charismatic and personable, preaching what people wanted to hear, claiming to be the Messiah, he attained a following of believers. When his story was told (and later written) those telling it and especially those who eventually wrote it needed desperately to authenticate it. So they looked through the Old Testament for clues or prophesy that would fit the known circumstances. They found some, but it's quite a stretch, because all the prophecies are taken out of context; few of them even mention the Messiah, and all of them are highly symbolic.

So even if we admit to the existence of a god that gave us a mind, it's a big jump to the particular god as described in the bible. And when we start trying to force millennia-old morals onto modern society, it doesn't fit. It causes friction with those who reject that ancient morality. And when the fundamentalists insist, by trying to legislate their morality, that's when people's rights are violated. And that's what I stand against.

You said, "For some reason I cannot figure out, atheistic scientists are given a waiver for abstracts. Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens (as well as you) were so troubled that theists personify God. How terrible. How do theists know this? Yet, Natural Selection is as endowed as God with properties of the mind and personality. In other words, atheists may personify, but theists may not. Candidly, it's cheating."

When Christians personify God, they go all out. God has human-like characteristics and emotions. Some visualize him as a person. Others claim he's spirit but with the characteristics of humans. He has a name, not just a label. He interacts personally with the humans in the OT. He has emotions. He acts the same way that one would expect a powerful human to behave 4000 years ago. He has taken on the personality of a pharaoh or a mighty king. And when people start believing that about God, then they can use his human characteristics that they believe he possesses to rule over the populace because they believe they are only enforcing what God wants.

If Christians personified God in the same way scientists personify evolution, they could get away with saying things like, “The damage was caused by an act of God” or “God will forgive you if you repent.” These are human actions ascribed to an abstract concept. But Christians go way beyond this. They say things like, “God is a jealous god,” or “God is a loving god,” or “God told Abraham to sacrifice his son.” When an abstract concept starts talking to people and ordering them to kill other people, that’s taking personification too far. As far as I know, no one has ever prayed to natural selection.

The real truth is, even assuming God is real and is personal, nobody knows what God wants. Nobody knows what God’s personality is, or if he has one. Nobody knows what kind of emotions or feelings God has, if any. In fact, nobody knows anything at all about God whatsoever, yet they claim they do and they make decisions and enforce restrictions based on what they think they know. Evangelists and missionaries travel the world hammering their ideas about God into everyone that will listen. And they don’t know any more about God’s character than I do. Do you believe it would be unethical for a doctor to purposely give you a disease just so he can cure you? That’s what evangelists do. Evangelists are not selling salvation; they are selling fear of hell. If you scare somebody enough about hell, they’ll buy your salvation.

Now I’m not willing to take the step of saying that I buy into even the kind of god I’ve allowed for here, for the sake of discussion. But I don’t find this sort of God offensive in any way. I just know that, because of what I know of science, such a god (or any god for that matter) is not needed. I can provide an explanation for the mind that does not rely on a god to create it. That doesn’t mean I’m right. But if one can offer a plausible scenario that is scientifically and mathematically valid that does not rely on a god, then why add a god as a factor. It’s an extra layer that is not needed. It violates Occam’s Razor. That doesn’t prove that God does not exist, but it sure makes him unnecessary. And to take an unnecessary god and assign him a very specific personality and then use those characteristics to control people is what I would call immoral.

You said, “The finely tuned universe along with the anthropic principle (adjusted, of course) moves from a WHAT to a WHY if mind is distinct from nature. A why will make sense if man has been created in the image of the eternal Mind. An eternal Mind answers a why. “We are” because “He is.””

You are making a giant assumption that might not be true. You have started with the premise that there must be a “why.” What if there isn’t? I’ve touched on this earlier, but what if there are only whats and no whys? If nature begets nature and if God does not exist, then there is no why. That’s what you said. But you’re using that as evidence that God exists, at least to your own satisfaction. But you can’t start with that premise and argue the point that God exists just because it makes you feel better if there is a why involved. I’m perfectly fine accepting the premise that there simply are no whys to be found. It doesn’t bother me. I don’t worry about the why. I’m perfectly content to know

the whats and the hows. Why worry about the whys anyway when they can never be known? They can only be assumed.

And, by the way, the anthropic principle is not needed to explain anything as long as the universe is infinite and eternal (in this case, the multiverse). In an infinite multiverse, filled with universes, every possible outcome will occur an infinite number of times. Therefore, our existence is not only possible, it is inevitable. And no god is required. You would have to posit an infinite and eternal god if he exists, so again, why produce that extra layer of complexity.

Conclusion

In summary, I do not hold a belief in any god simply because one is not necessary to explain things. And even if I did believe in a creator god, even one who loved me, I know he could not be the one described in the bible. The Judeo-Christian God does not exist, even if a creator god does. It's simply too unlikely. It's based on ancient writings of superstitious people who knew nothing about nature. And the bible is the only evidence that exists. The bible is almost completely incoherent when you consider how and why it was written. The OT was written by and for Jews and the prophecies were written in order to help downtrodden Jews to get by. They were not intended to predict a supernatural man-god hundreds of years in the future. They were interested only in their own lives and their own times.

The NT was written by authors who knew about the OT prophecies and who made the stories they were telling fit those prophecies. Although I didn't address it in the main text of this essay, it's also worth mentioning that one reason the Gospels agree more than they disagree is because one author copied another. Both the author of Luke and the author of Matthew borrowed heavily from Mark. Still, there are enough significant differences among the Gospels that one wonders why if it is the word of God that God would have allowed such discrepancies to enter. It's fine if someone wants to believe that the bible is the infallible word of God, but don't misrepresent what the bible is to support that belief. The bible is a completely human book, both OT and NT, written by those who knew only what any other human living in those times would know. There are no fulfilled prophecies when you look at the "prophecies" in context, both in context with the times they were written and in the context of the passages that contain them.

I would be totally fine with a belief in a creator god, even one who loves us, as long as people didn't insist on assigning him the personality characteristics of a very specific god, the one from the bible (or the Koran), and then using the morals that supposedly came from this god to control the lives of others. Laws should be used to restrict only the behavior that directly harms others, not on someone's version of what God wants us to do. And that is precisely what fundamentalists want to do.

Fundamentalists are those who believe that their religion is absolutely correct and so they feel the need to force compliance with their set of morals on everyone else. They believe that anything that contradicts Scripture must be false, and so they try to infiltrate science classes with their dogma. They believe their God, their prayers, and their way of worshipping is right, so they want to allow their prayers in public schools; they want to display their Ten Commandments in public parks, and so forth. Our national motto is In God We Trust. I don't have a problem with the word God in that phrase, but I do have a problem with the word "we," because in American, I'm part of "we," and I do not place any trust in God, because I don't believe he exists. But that is our motto because that is what religious fundamentalists want. The same is true for blue laws and laws based solely on morality, even when there's no victim.

That is why I continue to fight against religious fundamentalism. I don't really care what people believe. But when they use those beliefs to restrict what other people can do, I find that offensive.