

[Posted to my blogs byroniac.blogspot.com and byroniac.wordpress.com]

I did not realize that Steve Hays of the Triablogue blog had posted a point-by-point response to my own post, "Why I Doubt Christianity" on February 10, 2011. The Triablogue post "When In Doubt" can be found at <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2011/02/when-in-doubt.html> for reference's sake. And this is my counter-reply to the Triablogue post.

Steve, I appreciate the friendly tone in your blog post and want to respond in kind. I do want to defend myself, of course, but I will do my best to respond to your points without being rude. And though I cannot rule out the possibility of returning of faith, I do not want to encourage any false hopes in that direction either, if I can help it, for anyone who happens to read this.

First, I want to clear up a misconception brought up by some commenter on your blog post. I have not been in active ministry for several years, and I resigned voluntarily for personal reasons. I am thankful that I am not in the difficult position of being an active, paid minister without the religious faith necessary for serving in that position to a congregation. I am especially grateful to not have become agnostic while being financially dependent on a ministerial position. I have just been a church-goer with a secular job, so nothing really had to change professionally.

The original post and its quotations of my post are indented, while my current responses are not indented.

Steve:

Here's a copy of a letter I sent to a Baptist pastor recently who's suffered a lapse of faith. Not having heard back from him, I'll post it here:

Hi Byron,

I read the letter you posted at your blog. A few impressions:

Me:

I think it probably began with a serious spiritual dissatisfaction with God and my life under His providential care (so I believed then). I started getting less and less out of church, so I wondered what I was doing wrong.

Steve:

Why assume you were doing something wrong? If we are fallen creatures in a fallen world, then we can expect life to pall over time. The aging process alone can have that effect. The loss of vital energy. The sense of diminishing opportunities. Cumulative regrets and disappointments. The sameness of it all.

It varies from person-to-person, but there's nothing evidently "wrong" about getting less out of something you used to do.

This is a good point. Of course, I would now say “imperfect” as opposed to “fallen” in my view. Perhaps these reasons are why we seek new experiences and personal growth while seeking to retain emotional and psychological stability, and maybe this is why you mention it?

I had not really thought of it quite this way, but I hope that the reasons for not doing so will soon become apparent. It is difficult at times to try to put into words exactly the thoughts that occur in the mind, especially when one is undergoing an emotionally stressful and intellectually challenging series of experiences. So it is difficult to explain exactly why I would sense something wrong and seek to remedy it, and why my primary concern would be in self-correction over trying to correct or change my environment.

Looking back on this in hindsight, I can see a little more clearly that it was not my self that was in error, or my environment, but that I was changing inside (hardly an overnight change as you seem to indicate later and perhaps I mistakenly implied somewhere in my writing). I will have to give that some thought and if I am interested enough, I may blog about it in a future post, but I do not have anything intelligible to write about it for now, and for now, it is less relevant to your entire post overall.

I do want to say this, however. If, instead of an “ex-testimony” if you will, or a “testimony” about leaving the faith, if instead it was a testimony of an individual coming to the faith of Christianity, I strongly suspect that what I wrote would be interpreted far differently, if not by you, then by others. Most likely it would be seen as a case of divinely-inspired discontent eventually leading to Christian faith by the unseen ministerial workings of the always invisible Holy Spirit. But because it is a “deconversion” testimony, the natural subjective personal account can be and probably is interpreted differently, but in order to defend Christianity. I suppose that is understandable, but it is hardly justified in and of itself.

Me:

I tried to justify my feelings by saying, God just didn't move today.

Steve:

Once again, I think this labors under the false assumption that you had to justify your feelings. You mistakenly identify something as a problem. You then go in search of solutions. If the solutions fail, you give up.

But if you misdiagnose the situation, then the solution is bound to fail. You need to go back and question your operating assumption.

Every deconversion account of leaving the Christian faith is a general threat to the religion, so Christianity must be defended at all costs by apologists, by seeking to find some fault or unjustified reasoning in the one defecting. Most of these threats are easily dealt with by believers and explained to their own satisfaction so that the Christian faith itself is justified defensibly and the person defecting is understood to be in error. This is what you basically do here, in questioning the accuracy of my perception of events and by gently asserting the possibility of error in my judgment, though in a friendly manner I do appreciate, in order to defend Christianity. However, your advice is otherwise sound and you make good points here.

Me:

Then I started wondering if I was praying enough. I prayed more. Then I started wondering, is there unconfessed sin in my life? None that I could think of.

Steve:

This is all predicated on the initial assumption that something must be wrong, something you must justify, if you get less and less out of church.

Consider it this way: how much did ancient Jews get out of attending synagogue? Don't you suppose that was a fairly humdrum affair?

I am not sure how exciting attending synagogue was for the ancient Jews, though animal sacrifices and burnt offerings offered a lot more sensory excitement than what is found in modern day churches, to be sure. Getting stoned for Sabbath-breaking or being cut off from fellowship in a religious culture ruled over by a theocracy controlling all aspects of personal lives and professional careers had to make life interesting. Or short, possibly, for some. Thankfully I did not undergo any of that, but I did feel (subjective I know) some sort of mental dissonance that I currently find difficult to explain verbally. I would honestly have preferred whatever you are referring to as "fairly humdrum" over the mental discomfort and difficulty in participating in worship that I experienced in private and tried to keep unseen in public.

Me:

I had (and this is deeply personal but probably not surprising at all to you) problems of lust and covetousness (not of money, but of social success and friendships and relationships and such), but these were ongoing confessions in my prayer life, with associated ups and downs but no real deliverance.

Steve:

Why would you expect to be delivered? Don't people in the Bible suffer from the same problems? Isn't that part of what it means to be a sinner? Part of what it means to inhabit a fallen world?

I do not want to get into personal specifics here, but I was looking for real, genuine spiritual victory over problems faithfully and persistently expressed in prayer. Any detectable answer would have been better than what I received, which was nothing at all. Even the Apostle Paul received some sort of divine reply after praying very earnestly three different times. If the answer is simply that I gave up too soon, then my question is how long is long enough, since we are not guaranteed tomorrow? And if the answer is that I failed to detect the answer, then my question becomes why would not an omniscient God respond in a manner I could sense and with which I could then interact in further prayer, perhaps? And, if the answer is the worn-out assurance of "God works in mysterious ways" then my question becomes, how exactly is that an answer to a thinking, sentient being? I would suppose that God has a right to respond how He wishes if at all, but not receiving any detectable response to this (and more earnest and desperate prayers over other spiritual matters) was certainly not faith-building, to say the least. This is what I had in mind when I wrote what you quote next.

Me:

I was desperately lonely and could not understand the providence of God in my life to allow not only crushing loneliness, unanswered prayers (forgot to mention, a rather big omission that) in various and numerous requests to God, but also the apostasy of near and dear friends who held devoutly to the same religion of Christianity that I held to, and the absence of saving faith in so many family members (again, more unanswered prayers) who were variously Catholic, or nominally religious at best, some not hostile but completely apathetic to religion (something I just for the life of me could not understand, especially with all the wonderful experiences in the Christian faith I had, wonderful relationships inside the church at least, at one-time a very growing and healthy spiritual life, and the like, and how could anyone not want more than the daily grind of a never-ending rat race offered by the world?).

Steve:

i) If you were desperately lonely, then isn't that a reason (maybe the main one) you got less and less out of church? So your experience with church doesn't require any special explanation, over and above your mundane circumstances.

Perhaps the limited content of what I wrote needs no more explanation than what you give above, true, but I am not sure I would say that "emptiness of feeling in church services" was my core issue in leaving the faith. In fact, I am certain it is not. I will just point out that the explanation you give is hardly the only possible one, even if it seems to be the best in someone's opinion. This is one of those things that is hard to argue, due to its intensely personal and subjective nature. However, if I cannot properly express it, then I suppose I cannot adequately defend it either.

I will just say that I felt dissatisfied with church, and did not derive the apparent satisfaction I sensed in those around me, rightly or wrongly. I confess I did not seek to place the blame on myself at first for my feelings, but I could not determine that anything outside of myself was really in error, at least not in any way that I felt I could not correct or tolerate. It just seemed like a dry spiritual season of the soul, so to speak. So I began trying to discern error in my self, trying to correct myself first in God's sight if possible, and also in the sight of others. If I could have confidently excused myself of some error unknown to me at that point of time, and have begun studying my environment and seeking information, I possibly would have arrived where I am now sooner. But again, because this is a deconversion testimony, and not a conversion testimony, I suppose the interpretation must be different, with the assumption of errors in the defector (me) and their absence (my reasons) in the religious faith of Christianity.

Steve (continued):

It's hard to be lonely. Of course, that's a common condition. Emotional and social isolation is part of what it means to be fallen creatures. But it's harder to be lonely without God, than to be lonely with God.

I am sorry, but I have to respond to the last sentence here. The first part I agree with, up to the last sentence and the use of “fallen” where I would again substitute “imperfect” or even “in the human condition” for “fallen creatures.” I think I am mostly with you there.

But, let us suppose the religion under discussion was one with which we both disagree, say Hinduism (ignoring its polytheism for the moment). The statement then could be interpreted to mean in our understanding that “it’s harder to be lonely without a false concept of deity, than to be lonely with a false concept of deity.” And, of course, that would make little sense to either of us.

By “God” I take it that you are assuming Christianity and its God specifically. If I grant that assumption in my reply, then how could I escape agreement? This is the sort of statement only a fellow believer would likely understand the way you intend. If you are correct in your assertion of the truth of Christianity, then your statement is unquestionably true, but if I doubt the truth of Christianity, such a statement offers me no comfort at least until my doubts are resolved favorably towards Christianity. And if such a statement is intended towards me in my current state of skepticism, then I am unsure what your purpose for it is.

Steve (continued):

ii) I can understand how you’d find it painful to see loved ones leave the faith. But how is that a reason for *you* to leave the faith? Isn’t that circular?

If a recovering drug addict falls off the wagon, is that a reason for *you* to fall off the wagon?

Yes, it would be circular, if that was what I intended. I did not word that very well. It is not like I watched friends apostatize and thought to myself, “that looks like fun, so I think I will try it.” Rather it is more like a question of how could a loving, sovereign God who controls all things, possibly have a reason for allowing this to happen to me? That and failing to receive answers to prayer or reasons for my suffering certainly tested my faith. I either failed to persevere, or realized absence of worth in the religious practice. Take your pick, I guess.

Steve (continued):

If anything, shouldn’t you be strong for them when they are weak? Persevere for them? Continue to pray for them? Aren’t backsliders counting on the faithful to pray for them, to stick it out, and then go back for them—like a good shepherd who circles back to rescue stray sheep?

Here is where I also must have apparently forgotten to clarify that this was not an overnight problem and that I had my own severe spiritual struggles. I was not in any “spiritual” shape to rescue anyone, as I could not even help myself. So, all I could do is squeeze out another prayer or two for them to add to the desperation of my own. Which is exactly what I did, to no avail. I guess ultimately I had to answer my own prayers, since the wait for answers would have proven spiritually fatal or never-ending.

Incidentally, in my Calvinism, I held to New Covenant theology of a sort, and probably did not understand it fully, but I was taught that “backsliding” was reserved to the Old Testament

saints who did not have the indwelling Holy Spirit to guide them. In my memory, the New Testament never speaks of backsliding in this way. As a Calvinist, New Covenant Christian, I would have simply stated that such Christians, if genuine, were in a state of rebellion and sin (like backsliding in that sense I guess) but without the excuse of not possessing the guiding Holy Spirit within. For whatever that is worth. Do you hold to Covenant Theology? Do you see this differently? I ask mainly out of curiosity, but I am not sure exactly how you understand how it applies here, and you have more theological training than I do.

Steve (continued):

If a hiker is lost, he doesn't need another hiker to lose his way. Rather, he needs another hiker who knows the way to search for him and find him and lead him back onto the trail.

This is another good point. However, this is exactly what I and my friends needed, something that God by prayer or other means failed to provide. And I realize that believers are supposed to care for each other and offer spiritual and moral support as needed, so I cannot entirely excuse myself. So you will just have to take me at my word, if you will, that I did what I could. Believing strongly in the sovereignty of God, I resorted mainly to prayer in addition to my discussion with them, which is reasonable, I believe.

Steve (continued):

iii) I'm not clear on what you expect prayer to accomplish, and why. Surely you don't expect God to answer all your prayers, do you? We are shortsighted creatures who pray, based on what little we know or mistakenly believe. Given the law of unintended consequences, it would be unreasonable to expect God to answer all our prayers, or answer them on our own fallible, often misguided (if well-meaning) terms.

I am not familiar with the law of unintended consequences, so I do not know why it would be unreasonable to expect the possibility of God answering all prayers, or, given the belief He actually exists and is capable of revealing Himself and His wishes, of at least expecting some kind of response to the prayers offered up to Him, beyond mere coincidence or random, impersonal "acts of God."

I also believed that the Holy Spirit inspires genuine prayer so that prayer in effect becomes simply praying God's will back to Him for our own spiritual enrichment. I also understand that much prayer might simply be "of the flesh" and not answered for that reason. But here is part of the problem with the answers Christianity provides, especially in the area of prayer. The answers for why prayer is "answered" or "unanswered" cover every conceivable possibility without actually requiring any unambiguous or visible activity on the part of the deity. Isn't that a trifle bit convenient?

Steve (continued):

Likewise, I'm not clear on how you view the timing of answered prayer. I had a devout grandmother who prayed for all her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great grandchildren.

Did she expect to see her prayers answered in her lifetime? How could that be? Many whom she prayed for would outlive her by decades. She was old and they were young.

I view prayer like a family farm. Something we pass on from one generation to another. One generation may sow, while another generation may reap the harvest. My grandmother planted seed which blossomed at different times, in many cases long after she departed.

But she could reasonably expect some answers to prayer in her lifetime, such as a conversion to the religion, or a “miracle” of deliverance or divine help, which she probably interpreted to be the case in some of her circumstances.

I am somewhat sensitive to the criticism of undue expectation in the timing of answered prayer. I cannot escape the charge that I did not persevere any longer than I did in prayer, and that perhaps further patience would have yielded sufficient answers to all the prayers I offered. But to me this is another one of those convenient explanations for how prayer works (or doesn't), and seems contrary to the idea of receiving real and unambiguous answers to prayer in the New Testament. I can only say that I personally reached my personal limit, and that an omniscient, omnipotent God should not be defeated by such. Or, of course, my Calvinism would simply explain my possible status as non-elect here, which is another convenient explanation for a concept (election) that ultimately cannot be proven but must be taken on faith.

Steve (continued):

Perhaps you'll say this is special pleading. That explanations like this can reconcile prayer with any outcome. But I'm not trying to prove prayer. I'm merely pointing out how the theology prayer is fully consistent with what you describe.

And this is not an ad hoc explanation. This follows from the nature of prayer if Scripture is true. Your disappointment is fostered by false expectations. Things you'd like to be the case (don't we all?), but for which there's no good reason.

So, in other words, you probably saw my criticisms coming from a mile away, but please do not ignore them.

One of my favorite questions goes along the lines of this: why do we not pray for amputees? Why do certain medical miracles occur in Scripture (the restoring of an ear, the healing of the blind, healing a withered hand, straightening a spine or fixing some skeletal problem that caused a crippling condition) and not others (restoring amputations of limbs, healing heart conditions, reverting brain injuries, undoing severe burns, or even removing scar tissue)? And why is it that we have such a difficult time using supposedly “answered prayers” in modern times as apologetic evidence? Must a sovereign, omnipotent deity's activity really be so difficult for non-believers to detect?

These are not flippant questions, and I am not trying to be hostile or unreasonable. These are legitimate questions which need answers (even if only theological ones) in order for Christianity to be valid. It is possible that there are such answers, which would sufficiently answer these and other problems I have. If so, I very much appreciate references to such

material, but I highly doubt that such answers actually exist that could accomplish much more than theological reasoning based on religious belief.

Me:

I even began doubting my election in the sovereign grace of Christ, having no real proof for it with which I could satisfy myself...

Steve:

I don't know what proof you're looking for. The evidence of election is no different from the evidence of saving faith.

It sounds to me like you were just depressed. (Maybe still are.) That's understandable. But that's not a spiritual condition, per se.

Then that evidence of election is insufficient, and there is no satisfactory way to ultimately know the status of one's election. At best one can only have an educated guess. Sincerity and fervency of belief is then no guarantee of God's election.

Some would assert that unless I eventually and truly return to the faith, that I never truly believed in the first place. Nonsense. This cannot be the case unless "truly believed" means something different than I have ever understood. The only explanation I have ever seen along these lines which I would accept is the explanation I have seen hinted at by others, that "genuine belief" is qualified not by the sincerity of the individual or fervency of belief, but by the regeneration and presence of the Holy Spirit. And of course this is invisible, even to the believer himself or herself (best guess, again).

So every Calvinist should ask my question: How do I know that I am elect?

Me:

Finally (and I wish I could pin it on the calendar, for reference's sake if for nothing else) one day came the fatal thought: what if it is all bogus?

Steve:

Well, since God has endowed us with a faculty for abstract reason, we have the capacity to imagine self-delusive scenarios. But the capacity to imagine a self-delusive scenario is hardly a good reason to think you really are deluded. And if you really were deluded, then your doubts are deeply untrustworthy.

I sense in this an implied mistrust in the possession and use of reason, and an implied superiority of God-given faith. Very well, I would not disagree on former religious grounds at least. But now I must disagree with the construction of your verbal scenario.

I am not simply taking advantage of the capacity of imagining a self-delusional scenario. The way you have constructed it, I am trapped by either possibility. But it is possible instead that I acquired new and contradictory information that opposed the belief system I held. And this

new information began conforming me irresistibly to the requirements the new knowledge system presented.

This is not simply about questioning my own capacity or likelihood of falling into deception, or even the worthy reminder that serious deception can erode confidence in my capacity to detect and respond to such. Rather this is about acquiring and interacting with information dangerous for the belief system I held. It is possible that I am making an error of judgment now, or acting upon false information and departing from the correct system of belief, and I have to confess that possibility.

If I am wrong, I want to know.

Me:

I bought and began reading atheist books. I learned to doubt the Scriptures, and see real contradictions (sorry, this is my personal view) that I could not resolve intellectually.

Steve:

i) Sorry, but I don't understand how an ordained Southern Baptist pastor could suddenly discover a host of hitherto unsuspected contradictions in the Bible. It's not like this is the first time you ever read the Bible. The very fact that you have this overnight revelation should be reason to doubt your doubt.

I cannot answer for all Southern Baptist pastors, and perhaps the pastors with whom you are familiar are not the same as the ones I have generally observed, but most Southern Baptist pastors I know of concentrate on strictly a devotional study of the Bible, and comparing Scripture with Scripture from a believer's standpoint which automatically grants authority to the text considered. Studying the Bible from a critical perspective, on the other hand, in trying to explain contradictions (or, if you will at least allow, difficulties) in the Biblical text or harmonizing context between differing passages does not seem to be the primary focus. I know pastors receive seminary training in this, but I did not finish seminary so my exposure to this was limited, and I have had to gain most of my limited knowledge on the topic through private study.

As I hope I explained earlier, this was hardly an overnight revelation, though it seems so in some ways. What actually happened is that it felt like I began studying the Bible with my devotional blinders off. Even if I eventually return to faith, I have gained a lasting appreciation for the difficulty of explaining the post-Resurrection appearances, the conflict between the implied family geographical histories of the birth narratives, apparent lack of textual preservation, generally ignored verses that seem to contradict general eschatology concerning the return of Christ, the unexplained use of an omniscient narrator's perspective of events which are not credited to divine revelation and could not have been personally observed by the author (who are often anonymous besides), the apparent creative hermeneutics of the inspired apostles (when dealing with Old Testament quotations, for example), and others. I am not the smartest skeptic, and not the equal of the smartest Christian theologians, but I have found problems in the Bible through the writings of others that I am personally unable to solve.

Steve (continued):

ii) I also find it ironic that at a time when we have secular Jewish literary critics like Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg who challenge the claim that many stock contradictions are, in fact contradictions; who, instead, explain the same phenomena in terms of studied rhetorical strategies, despite the fact that these critics have no prior commitment to the inspiration of Scripture, we still have folks who recycle the same dog-eared list of “contradictions.”

Well, I certainly thought they were just “dog-eared” lists of contradictions until I actually studied them for myself. I am not implying that you have not, by the way. I am just stating that I can no longer hold that opinion, or satisfactorily answer these questions in such a way to retain Christian faith, after studying these contradictions as objectively as I am able to do so. At least, I cannot currently justify Christianity in light of these problems.

Me:

I began to see other Biblical problems that made plenty of sense intellectually from a theological standpoint, but which I could no longer justify emotionally and ethically.

Steve:

That’s too vague to say much about, but again, the fact that you suddenly began to “see” a lot of things in the Bible which were there all along, which you’ve been reading and rereading for years on end, should give you reason to question the soundness of your newfound perception.

In Charles Spurgeon's “A Defense of Calvinism” (a great read, by the way) he stated the following:

I recollect an Arminian brother telling me that he had read the Scriptures through a score or more times, and could never find the doctrine of election in them. He added that he was sure he would have done so if it had been there, for he read the Word on his knees. I said to him, "I think you read the Bible in a very uncomfortable posture, and if you had read it in your easy chair, you would have been more likely to understand it. Pray, by all means, and the more, the better, but it is a piece of superstition to think there is anything in the posture in which a man puts himself for reading: and as to reading through the Bible twenty times without having found anything about the doctrine of election, the wonder is that you found anything at all: you must have galloped through it at such a rate that you were not likely to have any intelligible idea of the meaning of the Scriptures."

I hate to admit that I could have missed these problems in the Biblical text even after careful study, but I surely did, and most likely because I restricted myself to a devotional perspective.

Me:

I had for some time been secretly in heart doubting rather strongly anything in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. I could not make myself believe any longer in a global flood. Miracles or not, the operation of such seemed absolutely absurd and the reasons for which have made the Christian God in my view to be a moral monster worse than and less deserving of worship than Hitler. Christianity, according to Calvinism, is one of the most diabolically absurd and hateful systems of religion ever invented by man.

Steve:

i) I'm not clear how you link Calvinism to a global flood. Is Calvinism the only theological tradition which espouses a global flood? No.

ii) Of course, some scholars don't even think Genesis teaches a global flood (e.g. John Walton, Ronald Youngblood).

Well, I connected Calvinism to inerrancy, and inerrancy to a global flood. I suppose that Calvinism and inerrancy do not necessarily depend on each other, however. And I have to suppose that inerrancy does not require a global flood, because I found a website called Answers In Creation who basically defend Old Earth Creationism and inerrancy while denying a global flood. Theirs is the position I adopted shortly before losing my faith, but I felt uneasy with it, because I believed (and still do) that passage context requires a global flood, and that science, to the best of my understanding, denies its possibility. I was not in any sense trying to limit belief in a global flood to Calvinism, or orthodoxy to the belief in a global flood, though at one time I did believe the second position was justifiable. My main problem was trying to reconcile what I feel is the scriptural context with our available modern science (of which I have to admit, I know little).

Steve (continued):

iii) How is the operation "absolutely absurd," "miracles or not?" Surely the possibility of miracles make a difference in evaluating the possibility of the flood, global or otherwise.

After reading an article on Talk.Origins about the impossibility of a global flood (not a local one), I realized that the Scriptural account of the global flood, if true, would require more miracles of an even more extravagant nature than what the text itself provides. I can't say that my problem is with the idea of a miracle itself in this case. Miracles are like magic. Throw enough of them into a situation and you can explain anything. The problem here is, there simply are not enough to explain what the passage seems to assert. Oddly enough, only as many miracles as would satisfy an ancient knowledge concerning nature and its elements is provided in the text. So, in modern times, we have some very fanciful explanations from organizations like Answers in Genesis for how this could have occurred.

Steve (continued):

iv) How does the flood make God a moral monster? Here is the stated rationale for the flood:

“9These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. 10And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

11Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. 12And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. 13And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.”

How is it morally monstrous for God to bring judgment on the wicked? How is it morally monstrous for God to rescue the godly from a wicked world?

Why then is it not morally monstrous for God to drown untold multitudes of infants, children, and sinless animals? Why would an omniscient, omnipotent God ever have allowed it to get so bad in the first place as to require such a drastic action, when even we lowly mortals can envision better ways of fixing whatever the “corrupt...and...filled with violence” problem was involved here, without divine inspiration. And if God creates the souls of men and women He afterwards destroyed, why create them in the first place? The story has so many problems and raises so many questions in the modern mind (though apparently not the ancient one) that it ceases to be either plausible or defensible. So the best strategy is to focus on and emphasize the horrible and divinely intolerable (but conveniently ambiguous) evil which deserves eradication.

I had as a kid a motorized Honda three-wheeler (now outlawed everywhere as far as I know) with a nice rubber seat that heated up terribly in the summertime. I grew rather fond of abducting fire ants from nearby ant hives and dropping them onto the seat to watch them thrash about in agony and fry to a crisp. I am not sure how many victims I had, but eventually I grew out of it. It was a rather cruel form of cheap summertime entertainment that I imagine most readers cringe after reading about. But it pales in comparison to the flood episode in the Bible. And, by the way, my youthful animal cruelty was morally wrong. I do not deny it. But I wonder why we see the error of my actions so easily but sugarcoat the same atrocity in the Bible, which we very likely would not do if we did not share its religion.

Me:

To think that God who could save a billion worlds filled with billions of souls in a billion different galaxies decided to save only a small remnant on a single planet in an obscure part of a lesser galaxy, and predestined these elect before time to salvation and them alone, is a horrible decree beyond my personal ability to describe.

Steve:

Honestly, I don’t even know what that’s supposed to mean.

i) Are you saying God is blameworthy because there are actually billions of worlds filled with billions of hellbound souls? If that’s what you mean, how do you know there are actually billions of worlds? And even if there were, how would you be in any position to know that most of their inhabitants are damned?

ii) Or are you saying God is blameworthy because there are billions of merely possible worlds containing hellbound souls which God never created? But that doesn't make much sense. Presumably you don't fault God for failing to create more hellbound souls.

iii) So what are you saying? Are you saying God is to blame because there are billions of possible worlds containing billions possible souls whom God could have saved, had he made them? Is so, how does that follow? How can God wrong nonentities? How can he wrong them by not creating them? Where's the argument?

Does a couple have a duty to conceive as many children as physically possible? Did they wrong a nonexistence child by failing to bring him into existence?

iv) Assuming that there are actually billions of worlds containing billions of souls, why assume they are fallen or damned? Why assume they even need to be saved? What about unfallen worlds?

v) And for all you know, there are alternate worlds in which everyone is heavenbound. As far as speculation goes, you can speculate either way.

However I try to interpret your objection, it comes out nonsense. Seems to me you have some inchoate emotional repulsion which you've attempted to articulate, but you clearly haven't thought through the implications of your objection.

No, what I meant was that God had the power to create a billion galaxies each with a billion worlds and each of those with billions of souls, but somehow His creative power in creating intelligent creatures was self-restricted to one lonely world in the lesser part of one particular galaxy among an unknown number of galaxies in an unimaginably vast universe. Then He limited Himself further in predestining an elect remnant to salvation of all of those souls He purposed to create. Since then He has restricted Himself to that divine plan of election, forever excluding without hope those He has purposed to create but never redeem. I cannot argue with the freedom in God's sovereignty of creation and salvation, but I feel I can certainly argue with its morality in creating those He purposed for an eternal hell. It is just something I can no longer accept, and it makes God appear to be a monster beyond comparison even to Hitler. This is Calvinism's God. And according to Calvinism, this is part of God's glory. And according to Christianity, this is part of God's purpose for man.

Steve (continued):

vi) What makes you think the remnant is "small"? Does Calvinism have an official position on the size of the remnant? Not that I'm aware of.

Perhaps my Scriptural interpretation is faulty, but such terms as the narrow gate, the narrow way, and et cetera are where I derive this interpretation. Spurgeon believed the elect in heaven would outnumber the non-elect in hell, which seems virtuous and optimistic to me, but I do not see how he was able to justify this belief using Scripture alone. The problem for me is not the number of elect, no matter how large or small, but rather that God makes an apparently capricious distinction in the first place without any understandable reason. Even now I can hear the rebuttal of the "God works in mysterious ways" response but this just seems like

rather convenient theology to me to justify the sovereignty of God and attempt to explain the stubborn non-belief of some.

Steve (continued):

vii) Finally, assuming the remnant is “small,” how is that “monstrous” or “Hitlerian”? This is not like a capsized vessel where we have an obligation to save as many innocent drowning passengers as the lifeboat will accommodate.

Rather, a basic presupposition of salvation is that the lost are evil. There is no duty to save the evil (including you and me).

Yes, believe me, as an ex-Calvinist I understand that and used to sympathize with it. The only problems with it are that it is ultimately absurd and horrific in its implications. Why does God create the elect for salvation? For His glory. Why does He create the non-elect for perdition? For His glory. Why does God purpose to do anything? For His glory. What is the highest purpose of God? To glorify Himself. It is all beautifully coherent in theology and logical precision. But I am beginning to hate this theological system with a passion. I used to mock and ridicule Dave Hunt's question, “What Love Is This?” Now I wonder why I never stopped and considered it before. I could write another whole paragraph tying together my personal illustration of frying live ants on a hot summertime surface with the concept of an endless, burning hell, but instead I will just casually mention the connection and go on.

Me:

That hell is an inescapable death camp for the eternal torture of souls created by God solely for His glory in their judgment and damnation, and according to some Calvinistic perspectives, for the enjoyment or at least spiritual enrichment of the saved elect who can perpetually view such a monstrosity of injustice and evil, and glorify God for the same, is absolutely abhorrent to me. If such a God does exist, I would never worship Him, and would gladly rebel and suffer eternally than offer so much as a hint of praise to such a monster.

Steve:

i) Is your objection to hell, or to Calvinism? It's not as if hell is unique to Calvinism.

My objection is to both.

Steve (continued):

ii) What makes you think the damned are “tortured.”

If I somehow created those fire ants in the first place, predestined their bitter end of agony on a hot summertime seat, then proceeded to see this purpose to fruition, only this time I also was able to purpose this agony for eternity, would that not consist of torture? As for whether it is torture itself or not, Princeton's Wordnet at <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=torture> gives a definition of, “intense feelings of suffering; acute mental or physical pain” and a phrase, “torments of the damned.”

Are you suggesting that because your religion suggests this is divine justice for the immoral by an all-powerful God, that somehow it is not torture? Even as a Calvinist, I would not have fully agreed with you, though I would have preferred “torment” to “torture” as the second word seems to imply something unjust in its occurrence.

Steve (continued):

iii) Why is punishing the wicked a “monstrosity of justice?” Isn’t allowing the wicked to go unpunished a monstrosity of justice?

Why then use an eternal hell? Why not simply annihilate these evil souls if they cannot or should not be redeemed? Why should finite sins by finite beings be punished with a sentence of infinite length, and therefore of infinite pain (according to the Scriptures in the words of Jesus who described torment and so forth). Even if these sins are against an infinite being, does that justify an infinite punishment? Christian theology certainly requires that, but I think its justification is simply the invention of the religious mind.

iv) What, exactly, is wrong with the saints taking moral satisfaction in the fact that innocent victims will finally see justice exacted on their assailants?

Would you derive moral satisfaction from watching an unbeliever or an immoral person being in “torments” in Hell (Luke 16:23 KJV) for an 24 hours a day for an entire month, let's say, in the afterlife? How about nonstop after a whole year? A whole decade? A century perhaps? A millennium? A billion years? Ten billion? A million billion? And eternity would just start getting warmed up, if you'll excuse the pun.

Steve (continued):

Do you find it equally abhorrent when Bernie Madoff was convicted and sentenced for defrauding his clients?

I would if part of that sentence somehow included being burned in agony perpetually around the clock for even, let's say, a mere billion years or so, which is less than a drop in the bucket compared to eternity. Wouldn't you? Again, your best bet is to concentrate on the idea that some moral evil has occurred and requires justice, not try to defend the absurdity of an eternal hell and consequent infinite punishment for finite sins of limited number.

Me:

My morality such as it is, imperfect as it is, wrongly exceeds that of the Biblical God, which leads me to believe either He does not exist, or is not correctly identified by the Bible.

Steve:

What’s the basis of your morality?

This is a good and worthwhile question, but not alone by itself. If someone belonged to the wrong religion, such as Islam or Mormonism or the like, then the basis of morality upon that

religion is no less faulty than me basing morality on something else equally untrue, except for the parts in which their false religion shares truth with the correct, true religion. But, if agnosticism or atheism is indeed true, then basing morality on any religion would be placing that morality on a faulty foundation. So the real question is a deeper one, and that is, what is the truth upon which to base morality? If the truth is not religion but agnosticism or atheism, then morality can be based upon the social structures we have developed due to the capacity of our minds thanks to evolution, and that is sufficient, at least for practical matters if not to answer ultimate philosophical questions. Just because there may not be an “ultimate” answer does not itself invalidate a moral foundation that works pragmatically, I think. But I could be mistaken, and I admit that Christianity (but not Christianity alone among the religions) seems to be stronger in this area than alternatives to religion, but I think may be for emotional reasons on my part.

Steve (continued):

If atheism is true, you have nothing to gain and everything to lose by being an atheist.

If Christianity is true, you have nothing to lose and everything to gain by being a Christian.

There's no parity between these two alternatives.

I have to love Pascal's Wager. But I fail to agree here with your words. If atheism is true, I do indeed gain from a correct understanding of the world and the origin and true nature of the human race, and I lose all of the false hopes and empty threats of religion. But of course, if Christianity is true, and I am not a Christian, then I stand to lose a good deal of positive things and gain many negative things. The same is true for any religion, however.

I could say the following.

If non-belief in Religion X is true, you have nothing to gain (somehow?) and everything to lose (somehow?) by being a non-believer in Religion X.

If Religion X is true, you have nothing to lose (somehow?) and everything to gain (somehow?) by being a believer in Religion X.

There is no parity between these two alternatives (non-belief versus belief in Religion X).

And this is why I fail to find Pascal's Wager persuasive.

Steve (continued):

When in doubt, don't doubt God—doubt yourself.

Steve

Do you mean, when in doubt of Religion X, don't doubt the deity of Religion X, doubt my doubt in Religion X? I hardly see how that is helpful advice, sorry. This presupposes the deity of Religion X to be the God of Christianity it seems to me. And that is fine, if I was already a

believer. I am no longer so. And I need some divine help and answers to my questions in order to return to the specific faith of Christianity, which is not impossible.

Thank you for your time and friendly tone, and I wish you the best.

Byron