

# ANSWERING ATHEISM

If you haven't felt pressured yet by atheism, you will soon. Atheism is one of the fastest-growing beliefs. The number of atheists and agnostics in America has quadrupled in the last two decades. Atheists have a tremendous influence, especially in the popular culture. From TV sitcoms and channels such as National Geographic and the History Channel to movies, music, and books and to classrooms across the country, the skeptical agenda is being pushed full force. It's causing more and more people to question things they've long taken for granted, such as their belief in God, the soul, and morality. Atheism is undoubtedly on the rise.

So, if it's not the case yet, you *will* soon have atheist friends or coworkers openly challenging your basic beliefs. You *will* soon have close family members who, despite being raised Christian, have started to doubt God's existence. And when that time comes, what are you going to do? What are you going to say? How are you going to bring *clarity* and show them that God is real?

If you don't have answers to those questions now, don't worry. Most Christians don't. But in this chapter, you'll discover the answers you need. You'll learn exactly what to say and how to say it. (Some of this chapter was adapted from

content in my book *Why I Am Catholic* [Ave Maria Press, 2017]. I recommend that book if you want even more reasons to reject atheism in favor of theism.)

## THE SHOCKING RISE OF ATHEISM

The first thing we need to do is get clear on our terms. Let's begin with a few definitions. Generally, people give three basic answers to the question "Does God exist?" If they say, "Yes, God exists," then we call those people theists. A theist is someone who believes in a personal God. Christians are theists, but so are Jews, Muslims, Mormons, and many others. By far, the overwhelming majority of people throughout history have been theists.

Second, if you asked someone, "Does God exist?" and they say, "No, God does not exist," then we would call that person an atheist. There's a lot of debate about how to define *atheist*, but for our purposes this definition will be fine: an atheist is someone who does not think God exists.

And if you asked someone, "Does God exist?" and they say, "I don't know," then we would call that person an agnostic. An agnostic is someone who just doesn't know either way—they can't make up their mind whether God exists or not.

As mentioned earlier, the number of atheists and agnostics in America has quadrupled in the last two decades. What's behind this rise? Why are so many people doubting God? There are a lot of reasons, but I will focus on just two major factors: the New Atheism and the internet.

## **The New Atheism**

The New Atheism is a movement of scientists and writers spearheaded by Richard Dawkins (author of *The God Delusion*), the late Christopher Hitchens (author of *God Is Not Great*), Daniel Dennett (author of *Breaking the Spell*), and Sam Harris (author of *Letter to a Christian Nation*), each of whom has written best-selling books denouncing God. Their books are typically angry and caustic. They're not out to disprove religion so much as to mock religious faith and make it look ridiculous. They depict Christianity as silly, irrational, and even dangerous.

Each of these authors has been on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Their books are not obscure, self-published titles reaching a few hundred people. They've reached millions of readers. This New Atheism has become especially attractive to young people. It has flourished on college campuses, spawning atheist and skeptic student groups and aggressive campaigns to squash religion. So, the New Atheism is hugely responsible for the surge of unbelief.

## **The Internet**

A second contributing factor is the internet. Thanks to the internet, atheists now have a place to spread their views without fear of social ostracism. Before the internet, people were generally uncomfortable criticizing religion, because they usually had to do it in person, and being recognized as a public atheist was troublesome. But with the internet, anyone can anonymously post antireligious YouTube videos or leave mean-spirited comments mocking religion. And

they're doing it in droves. When surveys ask young atheists about what contributed to their skepticism, the internet typically appears near the top of the list. They absorbed YouTube debates or read a prominent atheist's blog and soon stopped believing in God.

But what is it they find so compelling? Few Catholics have interacted with more atheists than I have. In 2011, I started StrangeNotions.com, a website designed to be the central place of dialogue between Catholics and atheists. I thought it would reach a small number of people, but it quickly exploded in popularity. More than three million people have now visited the site to chat about the big questions of life, making Strange Notions the largest outreach to atheists in the history of the Catholic Church.

Through the website, I've interacted with thousands of skeptics online, and they've given me a lot of insight into the general phenomenon of people abandoning their faith. They doubt God for various reasons: some philosophical, some emotional, some moral, and some personal. Yet in my experience, the one thing they all have in common is a desire for truth. They don't want to believe in God just because it makes them feel good, or just because their family has always believed in God. They only want to believe in God *if it's true* that God exists. And to affirm that, they say, they need evidence.

## IS THERE EVIDENCE FOR GOD?

Someone once asked the great atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell what he would say if he found himself standing before God on judgment day and God asked him, “Why didn’t you believe in me?” Russell replied, “I would say, ‘Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!’”<sup>1</sup> If you hang around skeptics or atheists long enough, you’ll hear the same demand. People are open to God, if only there were enough evidence!

Now whenever a friend or family member suggests there’s no evidence for God, don’t get uptight. This is a good thing. When someone wants proof or evidence before they accept a belief, that’s commendable. It means they aren’t willing to believe something without support.

But in this case, we need to ask for clarification: What do they mean by evidence? Oftentimes what they really want is scientific evidence. In the realm of science, evidence refers to data you can see, hear, taste, touch, or smell—things that directly confirm or undermine a hypothesis. And in the context of science, such evidence has led to remarkable results.

However, what we might call physical evidence, or sensory evidence, isn’t the *only* type of evidence in the world. There are many truths we cannot prove through physical evidence. For instance, we don’t have physical evidence that life is meaningful, or that murder is wrong, or that the world around us is real and not just a simulation cooked up as it was in *The Matrix*. Of course, we know all of those

things are true, but not because we've found physical evidence to support them.

The same holds for God. Whether you believe he exists or not, God is by definition immaterial and transcendent. He is immaterial because he is not composed of physical matter. He is not made of material stuff like you and me. God is transcendent because he exists beyond space and time. Since that's the case, when we're searching for God, we would not expect to find direct, physical, scientific evidence for his existence within space and time. It's not just that we haven't yet found such evidence, though it may exist. It's that such evidence is impossible, even in principle.

Here's a good example to illustrate this: Suppose you met a man who was an expert coin collector. He spent his days walking different beaches with his metal detector, hunting for rare coins, and he was very successful. He had found thousands of coins in his lifetime. Now suppose one day you told him about the greatest ancient artifact of all, the Holy Grail, the very cup used by Jesus Christ during the Last Supper. "What does it look like?" he might ask. "Well," you would say, "if *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* was any indication, it was not ornate or covered in gold. It was a simple wooden cup."

The collector, eager to find it, spends the next several years searching the deserts of the Middle East for the cup with his metal detector. Yet he comes up empty. He returns to you and says, "I've spent years looking for this wooden cup, but I can't find it! The metal detector picks up nothing. I can only conclude you were making the whole thing up.

The cup doesn't exist!" What would you then say? Your natural reply would be, "Well, of course you'd think that, since you're using the wrong tool for the job. A metal detector isn't going to find a wooden cup, whether the cup exists or not. You need a different way to seek the cup!"

There's a parallel here with God. We can have no direct, scientific evidence for God. We're not going to find one of God's hairs, or detect his footprint, or run a scientific experiment to see if he exists.

But does that mean it's impossible to demonstrate God exists? No. It simply means that science isn't the right tool, just as the metal detector isn't the right tool to find a wooden cup. We need other tools when exploring non-scientific questions.

What other tools are there, besides science? One such tool is philosophy. Philosophy is concerned with life's biggest topics, from morality to meaning to God. It allows us to probe realities that can't be detected through our senses, which makes it a really good way to explore the evidence for God.

And that brings us to the main question: Is there any evidence for God? Many people certainly think so. But again, it's a different kind of evidence. Much of it takes the form of arguments for God. In fact, thinkers have identified no less than twenty arguments for God, arguments that range from the clear and simple to the extremely complex. Some of the arguments appeal to emotion or history, others to reason and experience.

We can approach the God question from many angles, and there's no one best way, but some of the arguments are stronger than others. In this book we'll look at three of the best arguments for God.

However, before we explore them, I want to note that if terms like *arguments* or *evidence* rub you the wrong way, you might instead consider these three arguments as *clues* that converge and point to a common conclusion, much like road signs guide you to a specific destination. A sign doesn't prove that the destination exists, but it does point the way. That's exactly what these arguments are—signposts to God. So, let's look at each of them, beginning with one of the simplest yet most powerful arguments for God.

## THE KALAM ARGUMENT

The Kalam argument dates back to the Middle Ages but has been made popular today by William Lane Craig, an Evangelical Christian philosopher. It's one of the most famous arguments for God.

The argument is very simple. In fact, it's probably the easiest one to memorize. It has two premises and one conclusion. It runs like this:

Premise 1: Everything that begins to exist has a cause.

Premise 2: The universe began to exist.

Conclusion: The universe has a cause.

If you can memorize these three simple statements, you'll be well equipped when dialoguing with any skeptic.

Let's unpack each of those three statements.

### **The First Premise**

This statement says everything that begins to exist has a cause. It's very important that we get this right. Some atheists try to refute the Kalam argument by responding, "Ah! Well, if everything that exists has a cause, and God exists, then what caused God?" But the premise does not claim, "Everything that *exists* has a cause." It says, "Everything that *begins to exist* has a cause." Since God—by definition, and whether you believe in him or not—is eternal and never began to exist, this first premise wouldn't apply to him. Therefore, the rhetorical question "What caused God?" is like asking, "Whom is the bachelor married to?" or "What caused the uncaused being?" Those questions would be senseless even if no bachelors existed, or if there were no uncaused beings. It's just a confusion of terms.

Now that we've cleared away that misunderstanding, let's turn back to the first premise. Is it true? Does everything that begins to exist have a cause? For most people, the answer is yes, and it's common sense. Almost nobody denies it. The statement simply means that nothing just springs into existence, randomly and without a cause. For if things did come into being that way, then our world would be a wild spree of things popping into existence like magic. Only it would be worse than magic, since with magic you at least have a magician who pulls rabbits out of a hat. But in a world that violated this first premise, you'd get rabbits popping in and out of being even without magicians or hats or

any other causes. Few sane people believe the world works this way. So, through experience and reflection nearly all of us agree that everything that begins to exist has a cause.

### ***The Second Premise***

This premise says that the universe began to exist. This claim is slightly more controversial than the first one, or at least it used to be. For centuries, most scientists believed that the universe was eternal—that it had always existed in the past. This conveniently avoided ascribing a beginning to the universe, which would have implied a creation moment. But over the last hundred years, from the Big Bang theory to new discoveries in quantum cosmology, science has produced a stunning reversal. Today, the scientific consensus is that the universe did have a beginning roughly fourteen billion years ago.

Alexander Vilenkin, a leading non-Christian cosmologist, was invited to speak at a colloquium for Stephen Hawking's seventieth birthday. There, in front of the greatest scientists in the world, Vilenkin confirmed, "All the evidence we have says that the universe had a beginning."<sup>2</sup> It's rare for scientists to speak with this measure of conclusiveness, but Vilenkin affirms it's not just that *some* of the evidence points to a beginning of the universe, or even the *majority* of evidence, but that *all* of the evidence points that way today.

### ***The Third Premise***

So, the first two premises are widely accepted today: everything that begins to exist has a cause, and the universe