

Book Reviews

God is Great, God is Good: Why Believing in God is Reasonable and Responsible

Edited by William Lane Craig and Chad V. Meister, IVP, 2009.
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Despite the ever-increasing stridency of New Atheists like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennet, and Sam Harris, the twenty-first century has brought with it a worldwide resurgence in belief. Alongside this stunning growth in the number of people who believe in God—especially those who confess Christ as Lord—there has been an equally stunning growth in the field of apologetics. Thanks to developments in such academic disciplines as physics, cellular-molecular biology, philosophy, textual criticism, and the history of the first century, the case for theism and for Christianity is stronger today than it has been for a century.

In *God is Great, God is Good*, William Lane Craig and Chad Meister bring together over a dozen essays that attest powerfully to the massive and growing weight of evidence in favor of theism in general and Christianity in particular. In one way or another, all of the essays respond to the charges laid down by the New Atheists (especially Dawkins), but this is by no means a defensive or polemical book. The writers are both genial and unapologetic in their apologies for faith and never sink to the kind of personal attacks, circular reasoning, and special pleading engaged in by Dawkins, et al. They set a high bar for reasonable and responsible discourse, and they live up to it.

One of the most unique and helpful aspect of the collection is that Craig and Meister have brought under one cover apologists who work in academia but have also written more popular works (Michael Behe, Alister McGrath, J. P. Moreland, Gary Habermas, Jerry Walls, Mark Mittelberg, Paul Copan, and John Polkinghorne) with apologists who are less known outside of academia but who should be better known (Scot McKnight, Paul Moser, Michael Murray, Charles Taliaferro, and Alvin Plantinga). Perhaps even more unique, the editors place side-by-side essays by Behe (one of the major Intelligent Design theorists),

Polkinghorne (who, like Frances Collins, sees ID in physics but is more reticent about seeing it in biology), and Murray (who finds much to commend in Dawkins's theories of the evolution of religion).

Craig himself writes the lead essay and effectively rebuts all of Dawkins's rebuttals of the major arguments for the existence of God: cosmological, moral, teleological, and ontological. As Craig, Research Professor of Philosophy at Talbot School of Theology, was responsible for reviving the Kalam cosmological argument and putting it at the center of apologetics ("Everything that begins to exist has a cause; the universe began to exist; therefore, the universe has a cause."), it should come as no surprise that his essay is at its strongest in working through the implications of the cosmological argument. Since science has shown that the Big Bang created time and space, Craig argues, then the cause of the Big Bang must itself transcend both time and space. And if that is the case, then that cause must be both changeless and immaterial. So far so good, but Craig goes further. If this Cause is timeless, changeless, and immaterial, then it is highly likely that it is also personal. "The only entities which can possess such properties," Craig reasons, "are either minds or abstracts objects, like numbers. But abstract objects don't stand in causal relations. The number 7, for example, can't cause anything. Therefore the transcendent cause of the origin of the universe must be an unembodied mind." (16-17)

Craig then buttresses his argument for the personal nature of the Cause of the Big Bang by noting something odd about that Cause: although the Cause is timeless and changeless, the effect (the Big Bang and the universe it gave birth to) began at a specific point in time. How can this riddle be solved? Craig suggests that there is "only one way out of this dilemma, and that is to say that the cause of the universe's beginning is a personal agent who freely chooses to create a universe in time. Philosophers call this type of causation 'agent causation,' and because the agent is free, he can initiate new effects by freely bringing about conditions which were not previously present. Thus, a finite time ago a Creator endowed with free will could have freely brought the world into being at that moment. In this way, the Creator could exist changelessly and eternally but freely create the world in time." (17)

Craig's essay is followed by an even more aggressive essay by J. P. Moreland, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Biola University. In a confident but non-belligerent tone, Moreland argues that the at once purposeless and deterministic "Grand Story" of scientific naturalism simply cannot account for what he calls the "five recalcitrant features of the image of God." (37) Since human consciousness could not reasonably have evolved out of brute, unconscious matter—and since one of the central laws of philosophy, logic, and science states that something cannot come out of nothing—the cause of human beings must itself possess consciousness. Of course, naturalists will "claim that consciousness simply emerged from matter when it reached a certain level of complexity," (39) but such a claim proves nothing. "Emergence' is not an explanation of the phenomena to be explained. It's merely a label." (39) And just as naturalism cannot explain the existence of consciousness apart from God, so it cannot explain how it is that man possesses free will, rationality, unified selfhood, and intrinsic value and worth. None of these things are to be encountered in brute matter or even in the more complex animal world. They all demand a non-material, supra-natural source.

Essay three, by Paul Moser, professor and chair of philosophy at Loyola University of Chicago, takes the argument for God's existence to an even higher and more subtle level—one that threatens to lose the average reader but which will richly reward those who persist in their attempt to grapple with his provocative and original thesis. Essentially, Moser argues that most critics of theism, and even some Christians seeking a firm rational basis for the God of the Bible, are "looking for God in all the wrong places." (54) Too often we seek a "morally indefinite" God who is simply there to be discovered by inquisitive minds. But the Bible suggests something very different about God.

When Jesus praises God for hiding things "from the wise and learned" and revealing them instead to "little children" (Matthew 11:25), he suggests that God is often "intentionally elusive" to those who seek him with wrong motives—to those who oppose his moral authority and refuse to incline their hearts toward him in humble surrender. "If we take Jesus and the Hebrew prophetic tradition seriously, we should expect God to be morally righteous, perfectly loving and thus at times elusive toward wayward humans. . . . we

should expect God to be a moving target, and not an object for casual or convenient human inspection or speculation. . . . We must be wary, then, of morally neutralizing or otherwise domesticating God in our inquiry about God's existence." (55) God often hides himself from human inspection, not because he is aloof or removed (as the deists and stoics would have it), but because he hides himself from the proud.

Moser suggests that we need to ask not where God is hiding, but "what *kind* of person is inquiring about divine reality—a person willing or unwilling to yield to a perfectly loving God." (56) Perhaps the reason we lack evidence for God's existence is that we, the inquirers, are not right toward God. If we actively resist God's love, then how can we expect to be able to receive divine revelation? God's love is not coercive; therefore, unreceptive hearts that neither desire nor value God's love should not be surprised when they fail to receive direct evidence of God's existence.

Craig, Moreland, and Moser's fine attempts to prove, from a philosophical point of view, the existence of God are followed in turn by three equally fine attempts (by Polkinghorne, Behe, and Murray) to prove God's existence on the basis of recent scientific discoveries. While Polkinghorne demonstrates, in his typically supple prose, that science has "found that the universe is profoundly rationally transparent and beautiful," that the "laws of physics seem to point beyond themselves," and that the cosmos possesses a "deep intelligibility," Behe argues, on the basis of cutting edge science, that life is incredibly complex all the way down to the subatomic level and that random mutation—despite the exalted claims of neo-Darwinism—is incoherent, does not build structures, does not lead anywhere, and (thus) cannot account for life's complexity. Murray, meanwhile, takes a very different approach: he concedes many of the scientific theories proposed by naturalists to account for the origin of religion, and then argues that none of those theories need be linked to a materialistic universe.

Part Three of *God is Great, God is Good* moves from defending, on philosophical and scientific grounds, the existence of God ("God is Great") to defending the moral purity of that God in the face of pain, suffering, and evil ("God is Good"). All four of the essays that make up this section are powerful and convincing—with Meister arguing

that theism alone can account for human morality, McGrath defending religion from the neo-atheist claim that it is at the root of all evil in the world, and Walls reconciling the love of God with the existence of hell—but the one that I found most original and thought-provoking was Copan’s apologia for the Old Testament. Some of the strongest attacks of the New Atheists are leveled against the so-called immorality of the Mosaic Law and the Conquest of Canaan. Paul Copan, Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University, answers these attacks in a straightforward and honest fashion that sheds considerable light on the historical setting of the Pentateuch, Joshua, and Judges.

Copan begins his apologia by insisting that “Israel’s holiness code” was not meant by God to be an “ultimate, universal ethic.” When God led Israel out of slavery in Egypt, he took her where she was at. “God begins,” Copan reminds us, “with an ancient people who have imbibed dehumanizing customs and social structures from their ancient Near Eastern context. Yet Yahweh desires to treat them as morally responsible agents who, it is hoped, *gradually* come to discover a better way.” (138) He uses the Law to lead them slowly toward a higher moral calling, even building into the Law what Copan terms an “inherent planned obsolescence.” (151)

Through a comparative analysis of the Mosaic Code with other Near Eastern codes, Copan shows that the Code that God gave to Israel was far more restrained, humanistic, and equitable than any other competing code. For example, “in Babylonian or Hittite law, status or social rank determined the kind of sanctions for a particular crime, whereas biblical law holds kings and priests and those of social rank to the same standards as the common person.” (143) The Mosaic Law, Copan concludes, is not the harsh and illiberal code that the New Atheists condemn it for being; rather, it embodies “an *accommodation* to a morally undeveloped ancient Near Eastern cultural mindset—with significant ethical improvements—as well as a response to the rebellious, covenant-breaking propensity of the Israelites.” (144)

Having placed the Mosaic Law in its proper cultural setting, Copan does the same for the Conquest—an event that Dawkins and company compares to the ethnic cleansings of the twentieth century. As before, Copan begins with an important reminder: “Israel (whose history

as God's Old Testament people, by the way, is unique, unrepeatable and not to be idealized or universalized for other nations) would *not* have been justified to attack the Canaanites without Yahweh's explicit command. Yahweh issued his command in light of a morally sufficient reason—the intractable wickedness of Canaanite culture.” (145) And Yahweh, Copan also reminds us, has divine prerogatives over life and death, human goodness and wickedness that surpass those of any human king or philosopher or New Atheist.

But Copan's apologia is not only theoretical. He references recent archeological findings that suggest that Jericho and Ai, two cities that God had Joshua put under the ban and destroy utterly, were not centers of civilian population but military forts or garrisons. Further, a close reading of the Old Testament and a study of the time period reveals that Israel's war on Canaan was limited in its goals, allowed some Canaanites (like Rahab) to enter into covenant with God, and cleared away the land without necessarily killing whole populations. Finally, Copan argues that the Conquest, like Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, can only be understood within “the clear context of Yahweh's loving intentions and faithful promises.” (147)

Part Four of *God is Great, God is Good* (subtitled “Why it Matters”) is more eclectic in content. Taliaferro, professor of philosophy at St. Olaf College, begins with a lucid and carefully-argued defense of the Bible as divinely revealed. While critics dismiss the central Christian claim that the Bible is uniquely inspired because they consider it unfair (why should God speak only to people living in the Middle East and ignore Asia, Africa, and the Americas), Taliaferro counters that such a claim is built on the faulty notion that a good and loving God would be rigidly egalitarian in his interactions with the world. “Insisting on some strictly equal distribution of goods makes sense if the framework is an elected official distributing a surplus, but the framework of creation does not seem to require equality or homogeneity.” (178) Besides, the Bible itself teaches that God wishes to bless all people through his covenant with the Jews and through the death and resurrection of his Son.

In tandem with the charge of unfairness, New Atheists like Dennet and Dawkins have also accused the God of the Bible of being

vain and jealous. But, Taliaferro asks, should jealousy always be considered a vice? Surely a man (like Hosea) whose wife cheats on him should feel jealous! Furthermore, charges against God of jealousy don't take into account the essential goodness of God. Worship, Taliaferro explains, does not involve "paying compliments to a massive ego but reverencing the goodness that makes created goods possible." (180)

So many of the attacks leveled against the God of the Old Testament arise from a refusal to read the Bible carefully and to wrestle with it on its own terms. And the same goes for the New Testament, where critics continue to ignore or twist Jesus' messianic claims to equality with God. In an essay well titled "The Messiah You Never Expected," McKnight, Karl A. Olsson Professor in Religious Studies at North Park University, lists a number of Jesus' traits and actions that clearly point to his divinity. Most memorably, McKnight highlights Jesus' "*chutzpah*," a trait that placed him in continual enmity with the religious leaders of his day. His freedom, his compassion, his activism, and his preaching style set him apart from all other contemporary leaders and rabbis. Perhaps most importantly, McKnight brings into sharp focus one of the most unique aspects of Jesus: he "*was both at home in Judaism and at the same time not completely comfortable with the Judaism of his day.*" (199)

Gary Habermas, Distinguished Research Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Theology at Liberty University and (to my mind at least) the greatest living defender of the historicity of the Resurrection, follows next. Even those who have read Habermas's numerous books on the subject will learn new things from his excellent essay. Here Habermas adds further evidence to substantiate that when Paul describes the Resurrection and lists its witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, he is recording eyewitness testimony from just a few years after the event itself. From the very birth of the Church, Habermas demonstrates, the Resurrection was preached as a literal, historical event on which the entire gospel rested. And this, Habermas shows, is a position that is accepted by the majority of scholars, whether they be orthodox believers, theological liberals, or strong skeptics.

Further, despite the charges of the New Atheists, the vast consensus of scholarship rejects the argument that the Resurrection was based on mythic stories borrowed from other religions. Indeed,

Habermas argues, the “real oddity about this charge [by the New Atheists] is the very real disconnect between *popular* skeptical critiques and treatments by equally skeptical *specialists* in the relevant fields. Seemingly a large percentage of the former adopt these complaints about parallel religions as if they are simply accepted by everyone except Christians, who apparently have their heads stuck in the sand. However, while the scholarly skeptics may occasionally note this or that minor similarity, they very rarely charge that early Christianity derived its resurrection teachings from prior religions.” (213) Habermas does not make this vital claim in an offhanded or tentative manner; he has read and studied all the relevant scholarship, and his claim is based on hard evidence rather than wishful thinking.

God is Great, God is Good concludes with a rousing essay by Mittelberg that presents the gospel message in a fresh new way, a postscript, and an appendix. The former provides a transcript of a dialogue between Habermas and Antony Flew, an Oxford philosopher who, until his conversion to theism at the age of 81, was long considered one of the most influential atheists of the twentieth century. The latter offers a critique of the faulty logic and arguments of Dawkins by Alvin Plantinga, a University of Notre Dame philosopher who is considered by many to be “the most important philosopher of religion now writing.”

As I hope this review has made clear, *God is Great, God is Good* is one of the finest apologetical collections to appear in the new millennium. Christians who work alongside academics and other professionals need no longer feel “embarrassed” by the truth claims of their faith, for behind those claims lies a growing mountain of evidence, both historical and theoretical. No, we cannot reason ourselves into faith, but that “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3; RSV) is itself supremely reasonable.

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The Making of an Atheist: How Immorality Leads to Unbelief

James S. Spiegel. Chicago: Moody Press, 2010.

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The so-called New Atheists get a lot of rhetorical mileage in the popular culture with their frequent charge that religious belief is inherently irrational, without evidence, and motivated by psychological needs. How refreshing, then, to read Jim Spiegel's new book, *The Making of an Atheist*, in which he turns the tables on all the speculative psycho-analyses of believers, and exposes the nonrational, psychological and (im)moral foundations of atheism. In this work, Spiegel shows that, contrary to the pretensions of contemporary atheists, their unbelief is not based on evidence (or a lack of evidence for theism), but is ultimately the result of sin and rebellion as indicated by the apostle Paul in Romans 1.

In chapter one, Spiegel briefly reviews two of the major lines of argument utilized by the New Atheists in their critique of theism: "the problem of evil and the scientific irrelevancy of God" (p. 24). Concerning the former, Spiegel mentions the major theodicies employed by theists in response, but notes that the evidence of evil can never really count for atheism because (1) it doesn't nullify all of the abundant positive evidence for the existence of God, and (2) the whole idea of evil is incoherent unless God exists (since values like good and evil presuppose God). As for the scientific irrelevancy of God, Spiegel rehearses the well-known problems with positivism and scientism, and points out that naturalism can account neither for the existence and design of the cosmos nor for the value and meaning of human life.

Interestingly, Spiegel ends chapter one with a discussion of the positive *insights* of atheism. For instance, atheists are right to point out that numerous evils have been done in the name of religion. Also, the moral complacency often displayed by professing believers as well as their tendency to engage in God-of-the-gaps reasoning in science are places where unbelievers are correct to raise concerns. These and other

problems Spiegel call “theistic malpractice.” Yet he notes that while these problems do call Christians to greater consistency in Christian living, they actually confirm the Christian doctrine of sin, being what we would expect to be the case if Christianity were *true*.

Chapter two demonstrates the irrationality of atheism in two ways. First, by outlining the abundant evidence for the existence of God found in the laws of nature, the incredible fine-tuning of the universe for life, and the origin of life. Second, by describing Alvin Plantinga’s argument to the effect that naturalism, coupled with Darwinism, proves to be self-defeating by undermining the very possibility of knowledge. But if atheism is so clearly false, why are there atheists at all? Spiegel offers a biblical diagnosis, namely, that atheists are morally deficient (Ps. 14:1; Prov. 18:2; Eph. 4:17-19; Rom 1:18-23, etc.). The problem is not a lack of intelligence or of evidence, but “the ‘wickedness’ of the unbeliever works to ‘suppress’ what is manifest in nature. Consequently, the unbelievers’s capacity for rational thought is compromised” (p. 53). This diagnosis finds some anecdotal confirmation in the bitterness and rage displayed toward God by some of the New Atheists as well as in Spiegel’s personal observation of atheists who fell into unbelief after some episode of personal rebellion. These observations seem symptomatic of nonrational factors at work in producing atheism.

The heart of the book is chapter three. Here Spiegel provides empirical evidence to support the biblical diagnosis of atheism that he offered in chapter two. First, he sketches the research of psychologist and former atheist Paul Vitz who has shown that atheists typically suffer from what he calls “the defective father syndrome.” Surveying the lives of many renowned atheists, Vitz revealed that in each case they had either a father who died when they were very young, a father who deserted the family when they were young, or a father who was abusive or ineffectual, or otherwise unworthy of respect. Spiegel extends Vitz’s research to show that those New Atheists who we have enough information about (Dennett and Hitchens) also suffer from the defective father syndrome. A person with a poor relationship with his earthly father is disposed to project the bitterness and resentment he has toward him onto his “heavenly Father” as well.

Combined with the defective father syndrome, Spiegel points out, there is also “a persistent immoral response of some sort, such as

resentment, hatred, vanity, unforgiveness, or abject pride. And when that rebellion is deep or protracted enough, atheism results (p. 81). The most egregious of these moral defects that lead to atheism is “chronic sexual misbehavior.” To prove his point, Spiegel surveys the works of Paul Johnson and E. Michael Jones who demonstrate that prominent atheist and agnostic intellectuals lived egotistical, callous, sexually promiscuous lifestyles. And it seems evident not only to Spiegel, but to many of these intellectuals themselves, that there was a direct connection between their lifestyles and their unbelief. For example, P.B. Shelley remarked that “the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation.” And Aldous Huxley admits, “Those who detect no meaning in the world generally do so because, for one reason or another, it suits their books that the world should be meaningless.”

Spiegel closes chapter three by discussing the role of the will in the production of atheism. Appealing to William James’s concept of the “will to believe,” Spiegel argues that atheists, though traumatized by defective fathers and motivated by perverse sinful desires, ultimately *choose* to disbelieve in God. The arguments and “evidences” offered by atheists for unbelief are simply smokescreens and facades. The real reason for atheism is *rebellion*.

In chapter four, Spiegel deals with the “obstinacy of atheism.” Atheists can be deeply and dogmatically entrenched in their unbelief (in the same way that believers can be entrenched in religious belief). He helpfully explains this entrenchment in terms of worldviews and Thomas Kuhn’s scientific “paradigms.” Appealing to Kuhn’s notions of the incommensurability of paradigms, the near-impossibility of falsifying them, and the nonrational factors that play a role in paradigm shifts, Spiegel shows why believers and unbelievers seem to live in different “worlds,” and why atheists cannot seem to see what appears so obvious to believers, namely, the overwhelming evidence for God. Atheist can’t see that evidence because the worldview paradigms in which they have entrenched themselves (materialistic naturalism and relativism) prevent them from seeing it—Spiegel calls this “paradigm-induced blindness.”

Spiegel takes the reader at this point to Calvin’s notion of the *sensus divinitatis*. All human beings are born with an innate capacity

for direct and personal awareness of God. This “sense of the divine” is primarily what explains the pervasiveness of theistic belief. What is it, then, that leads to the paradigm-induced blindness that the atheist suffers from? Following Plantinga, Spiegel answers that it is the cognitive malfunction of the *sensus divinitatis*. With this, Spiegel’s analysis of the psychology of atheism is complete. He summarizes it thus:

The descent into atheism is caused by a complex of moral-psychological factors. . . . The atheist willfully rejects God, though this is precipitated by immoral indulgences and typically a broken relationship with his or her father. . . . The *hardening* of the atheistic mind-set occurs through cognitive malfunction due to two principle causes. First, atheists suffer from paradigm induced blindness. . . . Second, atheists suffer from damage to the *sensus divinitatis*, so their natural awareness of God is severely impeded. (pp. 113-14).

The fifth and final chapter, Spiegel calls “The Blessings of Theism.” Perhaps a better title would be “The Blessings of Virtue.” He begins by pointing out that the life of virtue lived by Christian theists is a powerful apologetic tool, especially for atheists who, because of their paradigm-induced blindness, may be incapable of appreciating the merit of our apologetic arguments. Moreover, living the virtuous life helps to maintain faith and theistic belief because it helps avoid those vices that can give one a motive for unbelief. Also, given the truth of theism and the connection between virtue and truth acquisition, “the more virtuously one lives, the more truths one is able to access, including truths about God and how to obey him” (p. 117). Spiegel goes on to show that theistic belief has some special emotional benefits unavailable to the atheist, such as the right to complain in the face of injustice and the privilege of thanksgiving. He concludes with an admonition to Christians to live virtuously for the sake of reaching atheists with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Making of an Atheist is a welcome addition to the growing literature responding to the New Atheism. Its unique contribution lies in its head-on attack on the root causes of atheism, turning the

tables by showing that it is not the theist who suffers from an irrational psychological wish-fulfillment, but the atheist who is in fact in the grip of a powerful, self-induced delusion. The book is written in a popular style and at a level for the lay reader. It will no doubt be criticized for its lack of philosophical rigor in places (places where Spiegel summarizes the more detailed work of others), but Spiegel effectively throws down the gauntlet before the atheist and challenges him to respond to the charge that his unbelief is unjustified and motivated by sin. It will not do for him to simply reply that Spiegel's attack is an *ad hominem* one. Spiegel has provided ample evidence that not only are atheists guilty of sinful, rebellious behavior, but that this sinfulness affects their arguments. Christians need to read this book for the encouragement it gives them and the insight it provides into the psychology of unbelief. Atheists need to read it because of the serious challenge that it makes to their unbelief, a challenge that confirms Paul's assertion that unbelievers "are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

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