



## How can you believe in a God who allows evil and suffering?

The traditional understanding is of a God who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and good. This is often taken to imply that if God exists, then God knows how, wants, and is able to prevent all suffering and evil evident in the world. The problem arises from the evidence of suffering and evil that we see around us, and which may lead us to conclude that God must be ignorant, powerless or not completely good. This conclusion may lead us to the view that God, as envisaged by Christians, does not exist. But this is not the only conclusion open to us.

The fact that we have the argument at all shows us something about the way people think. We assume that there must be both evil and good within the world, and a standard of right and wrong. Where do these assumptions come from? Suffering encompasses the results of natural events such as earthquakes and tsunamis, evil perpetrated by others and sickness. If we did not have the idea of God, suffering might be attributed to chance and evil could be categorised as merely the survival of the strong at the expense of the weak. Our perception of the existence of evil constitutes evidence for the existence of God, as well as presenting a challenge to God's existence.

Christian teaching recognises that we have free will within the framework of God's sovereignty. An important new insight is that the processes at work in the physical universe also have a degree of freedom. Cambridge scholar John Polkinghorne argues that suffering is the price that has to be paid for a universe which has been given its own freedom as well as the free will that is God's gift to us. God does not cause suffering even though God permits it.

This matter is extremely complex, and the problem of a loving God who allows suffering is a significant challenge to the Christian faith. Christians respond to this challenge in the light of their belief that God loved this world so much that God sent his Son in order that humans might have life in abundance. Christians believe that when the Kingdom of God breaks into the world all suffering will cease and Christ will establish his rule of love.



The New Atheists have recently gained a good deal of publicity around the world. Rather than lose heart, Christians can welcome this development as a wake-up call to be better prepared to engage in conversation and debate. Many Christians are uncertain how to respond to the arguments of New Atheists and so this brochure offers some suggested responses to seven frequently-asked questions.



The aim of those involved in the preparation of this brochure is to assist Christians in preparing to engage in conversation with atheists that is courteous, informed and mindful of the fact that we are all women and men made in the image of God. As Christians, we need to be prepared to listen to the views of those with whom we disagree with grace, humility and love, and to respond with the best arguments we can muster. However, we must also be mindful that our faith is in Jesus Christ, not in a set of propositions.

## The message of Christianity

The essence of Christianity can be found in the following Bible verse:

*'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.'*

John 3:16



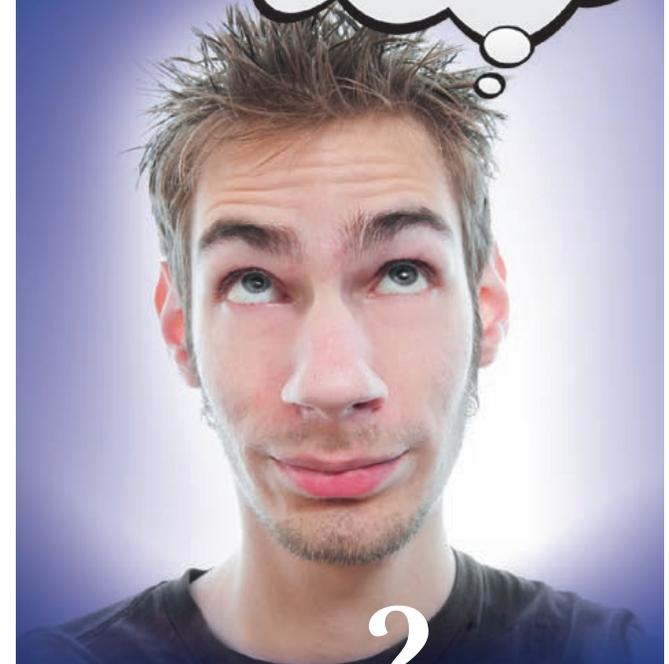
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This brochure is produced by the Reverend Phillip Brown in collaboration with the Anglican Diocese of Melbourne Christianity and Atheism Committee.

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The answers presented here are just a starting point. The Christianity and Atheism Committee has prepared other material, including a suite of short book reviews that will be made available on the Diocesan website [www.melbourne.anglican.com.au](http://www.melbourne.anglican.com.au)

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CHRISTIANS  
ANSWERING  
ATHEISTS

7 possible answers to

7 common questions posed by Atheists

## Can you prove God exists?

The most common objection raised by the 'New Atheists' is that **there is no sufficient proof that God exists and therefore no need to believe in Him.** Behind this objection lies a problem relating to the nature of proof. The problem concerns the kind of proof that 'New Atheists' are looking to find. For example, the Bible describes Jesus as the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). What form of proof might Christians offer in support of this claim? Asking a Christian to provide proof of this would be like asking a person in the street to provide empirical evidence that yesterday exists. Even though both parties to the conversation would accept that yesterday exists, neither could prove it because it is the wrong type of proof that has been requested. The type of proof that a person might be willing to accept may not necessarily be the type that is available, because this will necessarily depend upon the nature of the thing being investigated. Excellent grounds for believing the truth of Christianity's claims can be found in history, morality and its rich cultural heritage. None of these things amount to proof in a scientific sense, but science is inadequate to establish the claim of the truth of the claim of Jesus Christ to be God.

## Was the world created or did it evolve?

**The evidence for evolution is far more compelling today than when Darwin published 'On the Origin of Species' in 1859.**

The fossil record reveals a long evolutionary history and provides much evidence of transitional forms. The growing sophistication of our knowledge about our world, including what we know of the relative simplicity of the chemical structure of DNA, the genetic code that gave birth to molecular genetics, and the age of our universe, should act as a caution against reading Genesis Chapters 1 to 3 as either science or history. Rather, the primary message of these chapters is theological. They tell us that without God our universe would not exist and nor would we.

Evolution is understood theologically as the process by which God has endowed the universe to bring about increased complexity, novelty and, ultimately, intelligent life.

A dominant view in modern biology is that evolution is a mindless chance process, without direction. However, distinguished Cambridge palaeontologist, Simon

Conway Morris, who is also a Christian, argues that evolution is not totally random

but convergent. **Creation is to be understood as involving evolution.** Creation and evolution are

not mutually exclusive. Thus it does not follow that science in general, or evolution in particular, leads to atheism as claimed by Richard Dawkins and others.



## Doesn't Christianity cause violence and wars?

**There can be no doubt that throughout history people have justified going to war under the banner of Christianity.**

There have been occasions in the past when the church has not only failed to stop injustice, but has also been the cause of it. However, the same can be said of almost any human ideology. For example, it is claimed by Associate Professor Gracelyn Smallwood, the Indigenous Advisor to the Vice Chancellor at James Cook University, in her article 'The Unrelenting Struggle Of Indigenous Australians' that there have been occasions in Australian history when scientists have capitalized on the killing of Aboriginal people, raiding graves for human remains to be used for the purposes of scientific research. Surely no-one would argue that we should abandon science because it was used to justify grave desecration?

Prominent atheist Richard Dawkins has been quoted as saying that he is 'not aware of anyone going to war in the name of atheism.' While Dawkins' assessment may be accurate, it is also true that people don't go to stop wars in the name of atheism. However, Christians are known for actively resisting war in the name of God. Take, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a pastor in the German Lutheran Church. He left Germany in 1939, but soon returned. He knew that war was imminent, and thought that he could not take part in the reconstruction of post-war Germany unless he endured the war there. He joined the German resistance, and worked on a peace plan with England planned to come into place when Hitler was assassinated. He was imprisoned in 1943, and was killed by the Nazis on 9 April 1945, just as the Americans arrived, and three weeks before Hitler's suicide, as WW2 ended in Europe.

## Isn't science the only reliable knowledge?

**You've probably heard it asked, 'How can we trust the Bible? It opens with a completely unscientific account of the origins of this planet. Where are the dinosaurs, evolution, things of that sort?'** When one looks at Genesis (the first book of the Bible) from a theological, literary and cultural point of view, it becomes apparent that Genesis is not attempting to present a scientific account of the beginnings of life. Perhaps surprisingly, something similar is true of science. Eminent scientist and author Paul Davies has written:

*Clearly then, both religion and science are founded on faith – namely, on belief in the existence of something outside the universe, like an unexplained God or an unexplained set of physical laws, maybe even a huge ensemble of unseen universes, too. For that reason, both monotheistic religion and orthodox science fail to provide a complete account of physical existence.*

First published as an Op-Ed piece by *The New York Times*, November 24, 2007.

## Didn't Christianity endorse slavery?

**Slavery was a fact of life in the Biblical world, and Biblical texts often assume a system of slavery.** Many passages in the Old and New Testaments, however, advocate the restriction of the slavery system and improvements in the treatment and living standards of slaves. Yet, Christians from the earliest times have worked for the abolition of slavery. Rodney Stark, in his work *For the Glory of God* (Princeton: University Press, 2004), writes ...

*Although it has been fashionable to deny it, antislavery doctrines began to appear in Christian theology soon after the decline of Rome, and were actually accompanied by eventual disappearance of slavery in all but the fringes of Christian Europe. When Europeans subsequently instituted slavery in 'The New World', [America] they did so over strenuous papal opposition, a fact that has been conveniently 'lost' from history until recently. (p. 291)*

Similarly, it was from Christian convictions that British MP William Wilberforce was eventually successful in having slavery abolished. In his pamphlet 'An Appeal To The Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, on behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies'. (London: for J. Hatchard and Son, 18T, Piccadilly. 1823), he condemned black slavery in the British Colonies as 'a system of the grossest injustice, of the most heathenish irreligion and immorality, of the most unprecedented degradation, and unrelenting cruelty.'

So although some Biblical texts suggest support for slavery, from the earliest times Christian principles have stood in stark contrast to the abuses of slavery, denouncing the ownership of human beings by human beings, and promoting instead the principles of love, liberty and equality.

## Is the God of the Bible a monster?

**On the surface it seems that some of the things in the Bible cast God in a pretty negative light.** However, it can help to bear in mind that many of the things we read in the Bible come to us with a very specific historic and cultural context. One example is Psalm 137, which ends with these surprising words: 'Happy is the one who takes your babies and smashes them against the rocks!' An understanding of the historical context of the psalm, reflected in 2 Kings 24-25, helps us to see that the theology undergirding this cry is concerned with 'just retribution' rather than vengeance. Here the psalmist cries out to God for justice in response to the abuses of the Babylonians. We can understand the psalm as a prayer that takes the place of military vengeance. Through psalms of this sort the Israelites were able to express the great pain of forced exile and captivity. In pouring out vivid laments to God they were able to avoid knee-jerk reactions of retaliatory violence. Psalm 137 actually appeals to justice rather than violence, calling upon the judge of all the earth, who will surely do justice when his people have been made the victims of persecution. (See Genesis 18:25)

So before concluding that the God of the Bible is a monster, we should consider carefully the possibility that we have not completely grasped the implications of the cultural or historical context of the text. It may also be possible that we are projecting our own cultural understanding onto the text.