

Atheism or Christianity? Which makes best sense of who we are?

Bishop Robert Barron, Alex O'Connor
& Justin Brierley



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Bishop Robert Barron
(BRB)



Alex O'Connor
(AO)



Justin Brierley
(JB)

Atheism or Christianity

PART ONE

JB: Hello and welcome to the Big Conversation from Unbelievable, brought to you in partnership with the John Templeton Foundation. I'm Justin Brierley and the Big Conversation is all about exploring the biggest questions of science, faith and philosophy, with leading thinkers across the religious and nonreligious spectrum. And today we're asking: Christianity or Atheism? Which makes best sense of who we are? And this season is being recorded remotely of course, for obvious reasons, but the silver lining is that it does allow us to bring some fascinating voices together from around the world. And so my guests today are Bishop Robert Barron and Alex O'Connor. Bishop Robert Barron is auxiliary bishop in the archdiocese of Los Angeles and the founder of Word on Fire Catholic Ministries. He reaches millions via YouTube and social media and is seeking to proclaim Christ in the culture. Alex O'Connor is a student at Oxford University and his YouTube channel Cosmic Sceptic has grown to be one of the most successful atheist channels in the world. And on it, Alex also explores

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a variety of philosophical and ethical issues, including his passion for veganism. So Bishop Robert Barron and Alex O'Connor, welcome along to the programme – great to have you both with me today.

I've really been looking forward to this engagement, because in some ways I see both of you as leaders in your field, especially in the online world – YouTube, social media and so on – occupying of course a Christian and Atheist niche. But there's so much overlap in a way in terms of the things you're exploring; the philosophical ideas that you're opening up. Let's start with you Bishop Barron, I've been so looking forward to having you on the show, not had you on before, but your ministry has really started to reach so many people online – what's been the secret of that? Why so many people tuning in to hear you speak on subjects, hear your conversations with other people, and capturing a relatively young demographic as well in the process?

BRB: Well I mean people are naturally interested in God and the things of God. And I mean, both believers and non-believers. When I started I

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think the YouTube channel began in 2007 – so right after YouTube began. And that was the high-water mark of a lot of the new atheists – so that was Hitchens and Dawkins and Sam Harris, were really in vogue – so I was right away in dialogue with a lot of their disciples. And I refer to them kind of playfully as secret Herods, because you know, as Herod loved to listen to John the Baptist preach – even though he had him in prison – there were a lot of people I think who enjoyed the discussions of religious themes, even though they were nonbelievers. And I welcome that; I love that.

When I first started, I was so naïve I didn't know you could comment on YouTube videos – I would do these movie reviews, I'd try to find something in the culture that had religious resonance, and I discovered pretty quickly that people love to comment. And most of the comments were negative, you know, getting people that hated religion or hated me or God or whatever. But I learned to love those conversations and I learned too that a lot of people that you're not directly dialoguing with, you're indirectly dialoguing with, because they're reading these long dialogues. And I don't do as much anymore, I don't have time, but in the early years I did get on there a lot and engage people. But I think everyone is sort of naturally interested in the things of God. And when you provide a form for that conversation, they respond to it.

JB: I mean, this has led you into a really unique ministry where you are reaching so many people online. What fruits do you see from that? I mean, do you see people who have been antagonist to religion even going so far as to become Catholics themselves?

BRB: All the time. And I don't mean everyone that listens becomes a Catholic, but across the years, sure, we've had lots of examples. One thing

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that you never ever ever see is someone saying... I had a comment, 'that was a really convincing argument, thank you, I agree with you and I'm becoming a Catholic'. It's usually years later someone will say, you know, "a video of yours I watched in school or I watched when I was struggling with something, and years later it's led me by this path toward the church". So I'm always really gratified by that sort of thing and it's usually by way of indirection; you rarely have a direct pay off – you make an argument and someone goes, 'by God, you're right!' But it's a sowing of seeds, and the seeds – through the social media land; God knoweth where – but they take root in very interesting ways. So that's gratifying.

JB: Alex, you've been running your atheist YouTube channel Cosmic Sceptic for several years now. I mean, you started early in a way, I mean, you were still doing A-Levels, maybe even GCSEs when you started the channel. What made you start and what caused this massive growth you've had over the last few years?

AO: Well Justin I could ask you the same thing, I mean, it's recently come to my attention that you've been making some moves on TikTok and putting all of us to shame in terms of the amount of views that you seem to be getting!

JB: It's all down to my 16 year old son, I can tell you!

AO: It's definitely the place to be, although the comments have been nicer to you than they've been to me on the app so far I think. But it's one of those things about the Internet isn't it – it's so unpredictable. As I think I remember saying to you the first time I came on your show and you were asking how it was that this channel got off the ground, if I knew what it

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was – if I knew what I did that caused this surge in attention – then I'd be doing it every single day. I can't put my finger on it. I think I began making videos about anything that took my interest. I mean, for goodness sake I used to make skateboarding videos if you go back far enough! And I decided to respond to one video I saw which was somebody discussing I believe it was the video of someone discussing homosexuality – I think it was The Watchtower, the Jehovah's Witness organisation. And I responded to that in a fairly kind of snarky, sarcastic manner, and I think people just seemed to like it – it got shared on a few forums. And then I kind of had this period of a sort of what Bishop Barron describes, of religion being... Whilst an atheist isn't someone who thinks any of it is true, they can still recognise that if it were true, it would be the most important thing, right. In fact I remember talking about this in my interview for university, being asked why an atheist would want to study theology, and I remember saying that; I remember thinking like, "I don't believe any of this, but I want to be sure, because if it is true then it's the most important truth that there is".

But I became kind of invested in these debates that I was watching between the new atheists and popular Christian apologists and I began to really enjoy them, and that's what first sparked the interest. But I think that after long enough listening to those debates, you realise that they're philosophically quite shallow and tend to be more about impressive rhetoric and entertaining spectacles, which have their place – I really enjoy the entertainment – but then I kind of moved on to try and be a bit more philosophically engaged.

JB: I would say I've noticed a sort of progression in your content over the years and potentially I think you've probably just grown a lot in terms of your own understanding, your philosophical awareness and to some

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degree I would say even in the graciousness that you extend actually to other Christians. I've seen you even put videos up in the last year or so where you've said, "here's something I used to say and I wouldn't make this argument anymore" – a new appreciation for a Christian perspective. And I've really valued that, that you've been willing to hold your hands up and say, "I haven't always got it right in the past".

AO: Well I mean to be sure the bar is quite low in my opinion on the Internet, I mean, I've made a few videos where I've said, "hey listen, there's this video I put out a few years ago" – I mean, bear in mind I started making these videos when I was 17, 16, so of course my mind will have changed on certain things – and so I would make a video saying, "hey, I no longer believe this". And people in the comments would say, "wow, I can't believe how humble this is; how wonderful it is to see someone challenging their own beliefs". And I thought, "how low is the bar for online philosophical discussion if just saying, 'hey, what I've said before isn't right', gives you



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that kind of reaction” – it really astounded me.

JB: Yes, well I think it says something about the nature of sadly the online world where basically to admit any kind of failure or even learning something new is seen somehow as detrimental. But I'm really pleased to bring you both on for what I'm sure will be a really good discussion today. I think the place to start in some ways with both of you will be your stories. Perhaps Bishop Barron first of all, can you tell us a little bit about your growing up within the Catholic faith but why for you, you didn't abandon that faith but you felt that actually this was something that made sense – what was the process as you went on?

BRB: Yes, a quick version, I was born and raised a Catholic – so from a devout Catholic family. Went to mass every Sunday, was sent to Catholic schools from the time I was six years old and so I mean I took Catholicism pretty much for granted as a young man. I wasn't all that interested in religion as a kid; I was interested in sports. I liked to read, but I read books about baseball players and basketball players. And I wanted to be a baseball player; so much of my life as a kid was about sports. My Catholicism was sort of taken for granted as a background of my life.

But a major – I see it now as a grace in my life – occurred when I was about 14. So I was in my first year in high school – you say secondary school – and I went to a Catholic high school. And this young Dominican friar presented one of Aquinas' arguments for God's existence. Well I didn't doubt God's existence – I wasn't like a modern rationalist wondering whether God exists, and I'm sure that presentation bored every kid in the room. But I don't know why to this day – I think it's kind of a grace – it just fascinated me that you could think about God in a more serious way. Mind you too,

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I'm coming of age in the years right after Vatican II, which was to say the least not a high-water mark of Catholic education. So the schooling I got in Catholic school was what I call 'the banners and balloons Catholicism' – it was a lot of making collages, a lot of personal experience, very low-level doctrinal presentation. So I never thought of religion as a serious topic. There was English and History and Math and Science were the serious topics, and then religion was like gym class – something we did in school but it wasn't really intellectually serious.

Well that presentation at high school was the first time I came across something like an intellectually interesting presentation of the faith. Well it lit a fire in me, and I went to the local library – I'm 14 – and I don't know if you know Mortimer Adler's series of the great books? You know, it's very popular in our country, and it's all the great thinkers of Western civilisation. And there were two volumes on Aquinas. So I saw those, I grabbed one and I brought it home. And I didn't know what I was reading, I had no preparation whatsoever to read that sort of text, but it started a process in me that's never really stopped from that time. And it convinced me that it was worthwhile thinking about religion. And I think as Alex just said, I quite agree with that, that if this is right what this man is arguing, there is nothing more important. And that started me on a process. So I never really left the church or had questions about it, but this moment was a moment of deepening and heck, it followed me my whole life. I mean, I got into eventually the priesthood, but then more specifically into study, doctrinal work and then my own teaching and writings. So it set me on a trajectory away from baseball and toward the intellectual explorations of the faith. So that's kind of a quick version of my story.

JB: I mean, you say that doubt was never a major part of your story.

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Obviously it has nevertheless been an intellectual journey that you've been on in the process. I mean, have you found that that's been a problem when it comes to other Catholics you know, who do lose their faith – is that they haven't been given an intellectual grounding in their faith? So when a Richard Dawkins or a new atheist comes along, it can be all too easy for them to be persuaded by certain ones?

BRB: Yes, yes. And I'll say this, with the exception of – I'm thinking of William Lane Craig – the performance of Christian intellectuals when the new atheists emerged was pathetic. And there are many times I was just ringing my hands, because the new atheists weren't particularly new in my judgment – they were rehearsing a lot of Feuerbach and Marx and Sade and a lot of the standard atheist perspectives. And the rejoinders coming from the Christian community were, as I say, pathetic for the most part, and the people in the pews had very little intellectual formation. The generation before mine would have had a little more substantive formation intellectually. So that's one reason why the new atheists I think ran through especially the young people like crazy. In my early days doing the Internet work, I mean I heard the phraseology from Hitchens and Dawkins and Sam Harris all the time – from young or old – people on my site who had really bought into the arguments of the new atheists. So yes, that's a serious problem that we had abandoned a lot of our own.

I'll tell you a very quick story there. I was on a radio programme – it was in Canada – when Hitchens was really all the rage. So I was debating with this radio host. At the end he said, “well Father, at least could you admit that Christopher Hitchens got you Catholics thinking about these things for the first time”. I just paused to let my annoyance sink in and then I said, “look, I'm the very inadequate representative of the oldest intellectual tradition in

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the West. I mean, trust me, we've thought about these things before". But the fact that he could say that so blithely was a sign of the corruption of it.

JB: Alex tell us a little bit of your journey, because you also did grow up in a sort of Catholic setting didn't you, but it certainly didn't stick as it did obviously with Bishop Barron. Tell us your journey then?

AO: Well I mean it stuck for a while, as much as it perhaps would have of anybody of my age. I mean I remember being sat on the back of a bus on a school trip, praying my rosary and essentially being bullied for doing so; I was fairly devout as a child. A lot of people have a deconversion story, like my own dad had a deconversion story from when he was much younger, when his own dad died, and when that happened he just essentially immediately concluded there is no God. Interestingly some people do the exact opposite; when a loved one dies they cling to religion because that's one way that they kind of cope with the thing that they're facing. For me there was no kind of singular event that happened, that made me say, "I no longer believe this". It was more a realisation of the baselessness of what it was that I did believe.

Now that's not necessarily to say that the Catholicism to which I ostensibly subscribed is baseless, but that my reasons for subscribing to it were baseless. And I think that's a product of bad teaching, or at least in the same way that Bishop Barron describes, our religious education was similarly kind of like doing P.E or something – it was just one of these classes you did, nobody took it particularly seriously, and so it's very easy to brush it off. But the thought that I had was, "why is it that I believe this? Where does this come from?" And I suddenly realised that there was nothing there. So it wasn't a process of me saying, "I'm now going to say this is false", but

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a process of me saying, “ok, let me find out what it is that underlies this world view and let me see if I can work my way back to where I was”. And I’m still working to this day. You know, the climb has never stopped – I’m still happily weeding through the arguments and literature as best I can, to potentially one day regain the Catholicism that I once had, or another religion – because of course, while it is true that if Catholicism is true it’s the most important truth, it’s trivially also the case that this would apply to any other religion as well. So there’s a very live potentiality for me to regain that religious persuasion, but I just haven’t had any success thus far.

JB: Would it be fair to say that any of those new atheists – Christopher Hitchens and co – had an impact in your own journey as you started to investigate whether there was a foundation to the beliefs you held?

AO: Absolutely. I mean, reading *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins probably singlehandedly opened that conversation in my mind, you know. And I go back and read *The God Delusion* now, and I find it embarrassingly poor in many respects, but at the time it was the first time that I’d seen someone say, “hey, have you thought about this?” And the thing is, because Dawkins kind of has this old man in the sky type caricature of God, that’s one of the things that would trouble the Christians whom he was debating. But that was also the view that I had as a Catholic, right; I mean, it’s not like I’d been taught the minutia of Christian doctrine – I kind of had this childish image of some guy in the sky who’d give me a big hug after I die. And when Dawkins kind of said, “look, that doesn’t make sense”, well he was right – of course that doesn’t make sense, and so it kind of pulled me away.

I then migrated onto Christopher Hitchens, who probably had singularly

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the most influence over at least the way I present arguments and the way that I would kind of shape my discourse in the earlier years of my channel at the very least. But I think the influence there was more stylistic than actually substantive; or at least, as far as my content stands today, I think the stylistic influence is still very much apparent but the substantive influence has pretty much gone, ever since I made that video accusing Christopher Hitchens of being a sophist.

JB: Probably didn't go down all that well with his hardest fans! Bishop Barron, you wanted to come in...

BRB: Can I jump in, because I resonate very much with something Alex just said about Dawkins; you know your countryman – he died only about 20 years ago – Herbert McCabe, the great Dominican theologian. One of the great contemporary Thomists, I think. And McCabe often debated atheists publically in England, but he always made one stipulation, that the atheist

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would speak first and then he'd respond. And invariably he would listen to the atheist make the presentation, and he would say, "I completely agree with you". And what he meant simply was this, that atheists serve – and I mean this very seriously – a very important function, and that's to debunk forms of idolatry.

So there is a very good example of the crude presentation of God as a being; as some big being alongside of others, where the mainstream of our tradition has consistently denied that of God. And when you fall into that trap – now that was a very crude version of it – the big man with the white beard – but there are less crude versions of it that are still just as problematic. When God is construed as one competitive being among many, one of the problems that the atheists put their finger on emerged – and I mean now going back to Feuerbach and Marx and Jean-Paul Sade and company. When God is construed competitively, competing for us on the same ontological playing field, a lot of the typical atheist reactions occur. And they're right! They're right to put their finger on it and say, "that God doesn't exist". And so I'm with McCabe a lot of the time with atheists, I'll say, "yeah, good, I agree".

Feuerbach, you know, "if God is simply a projection of my idealised self-understanding"; Isaiah knew all about that – he called it idolatry; Ezekiel knew all about that. If God is just opium for the masses to assuage our suffering, well of course that's an idol. We've put our crucified criminal at the heart of our religious imagination, you know. Sade – "if God exists, I can't be free, but I am free, therefore God doesn't exist" – well he's right, if God is a great competitor to my freedom. So I say, "thank God for all those atheists who rid us of certain idols".

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JB: Yes, and as has been said before, many a Christian can say, “well I don’t believe in the God that you don’t believe in either” – in the sense that often it’s a God that neither side really wants to believe in. But why do you believe in God, and specifically the Christian God, Bishop Barron, because perhaps if you could make if you like the positive case and then we’ll hear Alex respond to it, and perhaps you can make the case for why he believes atheism makes more sense. This is our central question on the show today – Christianity or atheism, which makes best sense of who we are? How would you respond to that overall question then?

BRB: Well again we could look at some of the classic ‘ways’ – Aquinas called them ‘paths’; I like that much better than arguments or absolutely convincing rational demonstrations – I think ‘ways’ hits it much more accurately. I think you look at it both sort of protologically/ eschatologically. Where does a contingent world come from? Or more precisely, how do you explain contingent states of affairs – the endless appeal to other contingent states of affairs won’t work. You must come finally to some non-contingent ground. Now I’m summarising that famous argument in just a couple of lines, but something like the quest for a foundation for a world that is radically evanescent; that’s radically non self-explanatory; that exists but doesn’t have to exist – well that goes back to the beginnings of philosophy and the earliest philosophers were on that quest. And I think God is a very compelling answer to the question of how do we explain contingent states of affairs.

But I’ll do it the other way – I’ll call it eschatologically. There’s a drive within us – both intellectually and at the level of will – toward what I would call the unconditioned. So the mind is looking for truths all the time and it finds them, but it’s never satisfied. It’s one of the great marks of a real

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intellectual – you're never satisfied with... every question you answer opens up a hundred more questions. And the mind just goes out, out, out, and it's by an inner dynamism pressing toward what I call the unconditioned truth – or truth itself. The will seeks the good and finds it in great acts of justice and so on. But it's never satisfied; it keeps opening to wider horizons.

God, if you want, is not any of the things in the world that I might find – any of the truths my mind might discover. It's not some good that I might achieve, but a kind of luring horizon for the inner dynamism of the spirit. And I think God is a compelling answer to that, if you want, how to explain the contingency of the world and then how to explain the inner drive and dynamism of the human spirit. Those are two kinds of classical paths. I want to give Alex a chance to talk... I'd actually like to say a few words about the ontological argument, because it gets at something that the arguments classically aren't getting at, but I'll leave it there for a second.

JB: Ok well maybe we'll come back for the ontological argument – not one we do often on this show, but maybe we could open it up a little. Alex before we sort of hear your sort of case against God, if you like, what do you think of this particular case for God that Bishop Barron has spelled out?

AO: Well I agree with many of the implications of what Bishop Barron is saying. I mean, for instance I very much agree with the idea of an expansive in knowledge, essentially never being able to satisfy our curious minds. And there's that image of an expanding circle, as it gets bigger and bigger, so do the edges, you know. The edges – the frontiers of our knowledge – get bigger and bigger, such that there are more and more things we don't know. Now, that's one of the things that I find so incredible and beautiful about the scientific and philosophical endeavours that we partake in, because

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there are just endless things to discover. I find it quite strange how the Christian might be able to say that, “yes, our circle is getting bigger and bigger and frontiers of our knowledge are getting bigger and bigger, but once we get to that certain point – there it is, we’ve got it, we have the full circle, we know what it is, we’re now satisfied”.

The thing about atheism is that for most atheists that I know it’s more of a passive thing than an active thing; it’s more just saying, “listen, I’m not the one who has to do the explaining here, I’m perfectly content to say that our knowledge will continually expand and with it so will the frontiers”. If somebody else comes along and claims that they have the answer – that they have the thing that kind of cuts off that progress and says, “we’ve found the answer, we know what’s at the base of all reality” – then they better have some good evidence for it. And there are plenty of evidences to put forward and many arguments that are made, such as the contingency argument, which I’ve discussed on your show in more detail before Justin, with Cameron Bertuzzi of course.

The thing about it is that my job as an atheist is essentially to pick holes, rather than to necessarily present an argument to say why it’s false – it’s more of an undercutting approach than a rebutting approach, is what I like to use. With contingency, when I was on your show before, there’s an assumption for instance that contingent things exist, which is an assumption that often goes unanalysed. You know, the idea that actually I could have not been born or that this glass that I’ve got on the table here could have been a mug instead, or something like this – is how contingency is often described.

But as I spoke about before on your show Justin, that’s not entirely...

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it's not clear that that's necessarily true, if for instance we live in a deterministic universe where everything is following a causal chain whereby it actually couldn't have been different. So there are certain assumptions that I think often go unanalysed in these arguments. You can have an entire discussion about the nature of contingent objects and whether they exist, but you can also have an entire discussion if you just grant that they do, and say, "is it not the case" – as David Hume suggested – "that if you have each contingent object explained by another object, you've explained the hole?" And there's plenty of discussion to be had there. The problem is that these discussions are so large and so wide-ranging, that to say, "actually no, we've solved the problem, we've solved all of these holes that you can pick – we're going to plug them up with God, and not just as a God of the gaps; not just as a, 'we don't really know, let's just say that God did it', but as a kind of, 'no, this is the best explanation for all of these things". I just fail to see it.

JB: Response, Bishop Barron, and we'll go to a quick break. Firstly perhaps elaborate a little on that contingency argument but also this other issue Alex raises where he says he feels to him like Christians are saying, "we've got it covered; we've got the ultimate answer" – and sort of put a cap really on how far our quest for knowledge can go?

BRB: First of all contingency... I mean, the word itself is from *con tangere* – 'to touch with'. So this state of affairs obtaining right now – that I'm speaking to this machine which is conveying information to you across the ocean, a light's shining on me right now – this state of affairs is contingent in the measure that it depends upon a set of causes extrinsic to itself. So I put the question of determinism to the side, and we can discuss that separately, but the contingency of this state of affairs is simply the fact that it's being caused by another state of affairs. Now is that state of affairs itself

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contingent or non-contingent – if it is contingent, it's explained by some other set of causes. So I don't think... look, people in the religious sphere who believed in determinism also accepted the argument for contingency. So I don't think determinism really affects the meaning of contingency; that just means it's been touched upon by some kind of causal agency.

Now can that process proceed to infinity? See I quarrel with Hume there, because Aquinas distinguishes between... an infinite causal set subordinated what he calls *per accidens* and subordinated *per se*. *Per accidens* would be, you know, you had a father who had a father who had a father, back, back, back. In that kind of causal series that could be infinite, because the present existence of the first element is not dependant here and now upon the higher element. But once subordinated Aquinas' *per se*, is where there is a here and now causal dependence. So the fact that it's not a thousand degrees in this room right now; the fact that whatever is making those lights go is going; the fact that I have oxygen to breathe – all that's making this state of affairs real – it's actualising a potential. Well, how do you explain that? Well that has to be explained through another set of causes, etc. That kind of causal series – I'd say, "Parchay Hume" – cannot proceed to infinity, because then the suppression of the first element would indeed entail suppression of the subsequent causal element. So I think that's the kind of causal series that the argument for contingency is quarrelling with.

Now let me say a quick thing too because I loved your comment actually about God and the setting of limits. Because what came to my mind was Augustine's famous dictum, where he said: "si comprehendis, non est Deus" – "if you understand, that's not God". Which is why we purposely use language like, 'horizon' – the sort of ever retreating. Think of Ignatius of Loyola, God is "semper maior" – "always greater; always more". So

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you're right, if we were to say, "boom, end of it, got it, understand it, got it figured out" – that's not God we're talking about. The arguments are kind of gesturing in the direction of this ultimate horizon, but if we become very univocal in our language – "si comprehendis, non est Deus". Or Aquinas, he says, "whatever can be known or understood is less than God". So if you're tempted to say, you're quite right, "I got it, end of the argument" – that's not God you're talking about. So I would add that observation, which I think is a very valid one that you make.

JB: We're going to go to a quick break and we'll come back.

PART TWO

JB: Just in that last section Alex, Bishop Robert Barron was responding to that question about whether God is a sort of arbitrary stopping point, as an

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explanation, and he obviously believes that no, God is in that sense opens up the field rather than closes it down. I mean, I could imagine someone coming back you and saying, well, a naturalist, someone who is a materialist as an atheist, they've kind of got their stopping point which is the laws of nature and the material stuff of the world, that sort of the boundary of their explanatory viewpoint. And they might equally ask, "why that particular stopping point? How have you arrived at that particular belief that that's the case?" So perhaps take a moment to explain where you do sit on that – do you call yourself in that sense an atheist naturalist or something else? And you know, what makes you confident that atheism or naturalism is indeed the best explanation for the world we live in?

AO: Well this all very much depends on how we interpret the terms. For example, we were talking about God as being a kind of explanatory stopping point. And you could say the same thing about naturalism if you are a naturalist – if you're someone who believes that the only thing that exists is physical material, essentially. But something like naturalism can also be a methodological process – in other words, as we investigate the world, we make the assumption that there's no supernatural agency at play. So the scientific method for instance tends to assume naturalism – it is that we're going to investigate the world only in regards to physical material. Now that doesn't necessarily commit them to the conclusion that that's all there is; it just means they're using that as a methodology.

I would say that in the former sense, in the explanatory sense, I wouldn't call myself a naturalist; I wouldn't make the claim that there's no supernatural dimension to the universe – I couldn't possibly know this. What I can say is that I've seen no evidence to suggest that there is such a thing, and so I kind of abstain from really holding a belief on that position;

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I remain rather agnostic. But for that reason, I employ a methodological naturalism, which says that I know that the physical world exists – at least to some extent – on most accounts of knowledge that can be made sense of. And so for that reason, when I'm investigating the world, I'll make that assumption. Now I would have no problem incorporating a non-naturalistic framework into the way I investigate the world, if it turns out that there is some reason to think that that does exist in the universe. But if you see what I'm saying, whilst I wouldn't assert that I'm a naturalist in the sense that I believe that that's all that there is in the universe, I may employ it methodologically speaking.

I would also say, just to respond to what Bishop Barron said a moment ago, because I think it's beautifully put and one of the things that a lot of people misunderstand about causation is that there are two types of causation that can be at play here. When we were talking about causation on your show Justin, we were talking about causation in the latter sense that Bishop Barron mentioned, like, "I was caused by my parents, my parents caused by their parents". But as Bishop Barron implies, there is another type of causation, which is a more kind of simultaneous causation. The thing about parentage is that if my parents cause me, if my parents then go away and die or whatever, I'm still here, right.

But there's another kind of causation, this kind of hierarchical causation, as Ed Feser describes it, which is the kind of causation that says that the laptop I'm speaking to you on is being held up by a table, and the table is being held up by the ground. Now if you get rid of the table, the computer doesn't stay where it is. The computer being caused to be where it is as it is, is being caused by the table, but not in such a way like with my parents, where if you took it away and disappeared, it would still be here, but rather

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if you take that away, it completely disappears. The interesting implication of this is that when we talk about a cause and a cause and a cause and a cause and a chain of causation, that's not what we should be describing, because the intermediate steps actually have no causal power of their own. The table only has causal power to hold up the computer in so far as the ground gives it that causal power. Because if the ground takes that away, the table doesn't have that causal power on its own. And so the very language that we speak about these things in, when we say, "well actually, there's this kind of causation which works hierarchically speaking", right – I'm not sure that that's entirely accurate. Because of the fact that we're not really talking about causes here; we're kind of talking about an intermediary stage of things that don't have any causal power of their own accord.

The crucial question there is then, "what gives this entire chain of contingent things its causal power, as one block?" – that's the question that needs to be discussed. And the Christian says that it's God; the atheist

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might say that it's the necessity of the chain itself, or perhaps the necessity of the universe or something like that. But talking about causation in that manner I think is ill-advised, but I would recommend to people who are listening who want an accessible version to understand this kind of causation, that isn't the kind apparent in the Kalam cosmological argument – you know, a cause before an effect kind of thing – but this different slightly less intuitive form of causation, I'd certainly recommend reading Ed Feser's book, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God*, on that topic. But I just wanted to make that observation before moving on completely.

JB: Sure. Did you want to add anything to that, Bishop Robert Barron?

BRB: Well simply this: that I wouldn't use the language of the intermediary elements not having causal efficacy - it's a borrowed casual efficacy. Just as the state of affairs obtaining now exist but doesn't have to exist – it doesn't contain within itself the reason for its own subsistence. And so it's a borrowed subsistence, if you want. And the same is true of all the elements within the chain; they are truly causes, but their causality is borrowed, or they're actualised by a higher, higher chain. But the important thing is, whatever we want to call that, it has to be grounded somewhere, or else we can't explain these state of affairs in front of us that needs to be explained.

As you say, the computer resting on the table – we can't explain what obtains now, if we simply infinitely postpone the explanation, which is what's implicit in an infinite causal series of that type. Now Aquinas will say, "and this hole people call 'God'" – I'm happy for the moment to say, let's just stop there. And there's got to be something like a non-contingent source of contingency. Now by several other steps, I think we can get to something that really resembles what classically characterises God, but

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that's a second or third move.

AO: Yes, now that's why it needs discussion, and in fact I would still quarrel slightly with what you're saying, in the sense of the terminology of borrowed causal efficacy and the idea that the table does have causal power that it's borrowing from the ground, that kind of thing. I'm imagining an analogy that's often used to describe this kind of causation, is that of the paintbrush and the idea of a kind of infinite paintbrush somehow painting a picture – that wouldn't make any sense. I would say if you had a painter who is painting an image, I don't think it would make sense to say that the paintbrush itself has artistic efficacy that it's borrowing from the painter. I'd say if the painter puts the paintbrush to paper, it's the painter that has that efficacy – that has that artistic efficacy – and through the paintbrush, which has none of the efficacy itself, it's getting to the paper.

In the same way I would say that whatever causes are naturally sustaining another things ability to create or to withhold or sustain something, I think it does make sense to say that actually no it doesn't have causal power if it's entire ability to do that causation comes completely from something else, which is giving it that power in the same way that the painter gives the paintbrush artistic efficacy – I don't think you would use that kind of language.

BRB: No you're equivocating there though, because you don't give the paintbrush as such aesthetic efficacy – it has to efficacy to put colour on canvas, it's got that kind of efficacy. I'd just use Platonic language there – participation – you've got a kind of participated causality. All of it, quite right, is ground in the supreme causality of God. But Aquinas talks about the being given the privilege of participating in God's causality, so the way

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that we share in God's providence; God is providential over all things, but I can participate in that causality. Material things do it unconsciously – we can do it through conscious cooperation. But I don't know, to me though whatever we want to call that, it wouldn't really affect the argument that we have to come to some first instance.

JB: What I'd love to move onto at this point – and again, there's a great conversation on the contingency argument you can find on the Unbelievable channel elsewhere – but is in a sense the question of well, presumably Bishop Barron you're not a Christian – you're not a Catholic – just because of some great arguments that Aquinas made a millennia and a half ago or whatever. So what for you is faith? Presumably it's more than just those intellectual arguments that obviously have been part of your journey along the way?

BRB: Let me start with a very quick little anecdote... I don't know if over in the UK you know Bill Maher's programme? He's a very well known kind of left-wing political and cultural commentator; fiercely atheist, hates religion. Well one time he had a Christian on his show who was a political lobbyist. So they talked politics for a time, but then he said to him, "now you're a man of faith"; and he said, "yes". "That means you accept all kinds of things on the basis of no evidence" – and the man said, "yes". Well, I had the channel switcher in my hand, and I threw it at the TV, because I thought, "no man, that's the whole problem!"

Paul Tillich, the great protestant theologian, said, "faith is the most misunderstood word in the religious lexicon", because it's construed just that way. Faith means some wild credulity; some crazy superstition – believing any old nonsense on the basis of nothing. That's not what faith is

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in our great people; that's not what faith is in Thomas Aquinas or Anselm or Augustine of any of the great figures. To put it simply, faith is never infra-rational. So superstition, gullibility, accepting any old nonsense – that's all infra-rational. I'm against that; the church is against that – it's superstitious nonsense. Faith authentically construed is always supra-rational; it's a surrender at the far side of reason.

I think that the best analogy to it is in our coming to know a person, right. So I'm meeting both of you – at least virtually – now for the first time. I've watched videos of you; my mind was alive to see what you're like and listen to you talk and I drew conclusions and so on. I hope someday I can meet you in person – have an even more thorough knowledge of you, my mind will be fully engaged around that. But I mean, let's suppose we continue to get to know each other and we develop into real friends. Well my mind has never gone to sleep in this process; my mind is still alive and awake and alert and studying. But at some point in that friendship, you would reveal something to me that I could never have learned through my own reason – by reading about you or even talking to you or talking to others about you. You'd speak some truth about your life that I could never have guessed unless you had told me. And see at that point, I have to make a decision whether I believe you or not. You could be making some crazy stuff up, I don't know, or you could be telling me the deepest truth of your heart. I have to decide at that point, do I believe you?

Now I haven't put reason to sleep at all; at no point in this process have I set reason aside. But at a key moment, if I really want to get to know you, I have to say, "yeah, based on a lot of things and hunches and intuitions and experience and knowledge and what I've gathered about this person, I'm willing to say yes, I believe that truth about you". That's an analogy that

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seems to me to be religious faith authentically construed, that we would hold. And we could talk about what this means – doesn't mean voices coming out of clouds – that God speaks. If I accept things on the basis of no reason or no argument – just any old nonsense – that's credulity and superstition. But a surrender on the far side of reason to the self-revealing God – that's faith authentically construed I think.

AO: Well I mean, look I would put it rather plainly and say that with the proposition you've put forward is quite a simple one, you know. Someone you know puts forward a piece of information and you've got to decide whether to trust them or not. There are two options here: you're either basing this on some form of reason, that is, you say, "listen, they've never lied to me before, I understand that this is a rational person, I know who they are, I know what their motives are, and therefore I conclude that what they're saying is true" – I wouldn't call that faith; I'd call that perfectly in line with what the average person would call reason. The other option is that you're doing it, as you describe, on a kind of hunch; an intuition – that is to say, the lack of evidence. I would say that what you're describing is either an instance of believing what they say because you have reason to do so, or believing what they say despite having no reason to do so, on a hunch or an intuition. If it's the first, then I'd just call it reason, and if it's the second, then I'm supposing you wouldn't call it faith?

BRB: Take the first part of our conversation. So we've been going through some of these classical paths to God, which I think very convincingly show that belief in God or acceptance of God's existence is a reasonable position to hold. So when someone out of a religion tradition – so let's say out of the biblical tradition – says that God has spoken, and again, I'm not talking about a voice from the cloud, that's a symbol of what I'm talking about –

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that God has spoken... well, I have a very reasonable context for that claim: that God exists – and I can show I think by a number of steps too that God is intelligent, that God has will, that God is connected to his world, that God has created the world out of love. Within that context, it makes perfect sense to say that God would want to communicate precisely in human history, to his intelligent creatures. So that's not an unreasonable claim; it's in a reasonable context. And so I accept that. When I said hunch/intuition I really meant that sort of thing, that there's a context providing reason for the claim that God has spoken.

Now what does it mean to say "God has spoken"? I rather like Paul Tillich's description of the breakthrough of the unconditioned into our ordinary experience. It's why a lot of contemporary theologians don't use classical arguments; they'll talk often about limit experiences. At the limit of our knowing; at the limit of our capacities; at the limit of our attainment, we often look toward that which transcends those limits, right. Hegel's line about, "to know a limit as a limit is to already be beyond the limit". At the limit we gaze into what transcends that limit. Are there some people who have experienced the breakthrough of the unconditioned; that the unconditioned being itself, if you want – God, speaks? God breaks through our ordinary experience. Faith is the sort of epistemological move that corresponds to that event. The Bible witnesses to those moments, it seems to me. Now poets point in that direction often too, but the Bible witnesses to people that have had the experience of the breakthrough of the unconditioned.

AO: But I feel like, interesting as it may be, this is off track from the original point, which is to say look, I mean, I think what you're making is a distinction without difference here. You say that faith needs to be

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distinct from reason, otherwise there's no point in having the term, right. We're talking about something that's distinct from the average kind of, "here's a reason for believing something, so I believe it". And you've said, "no, it's not that I kind of use reason to come to this conclusion, I just have a context of reason from which I arrive at this belief", is I think the terminology you used. I'm failing to see the distinction here. In other words, the question is quite simple, it's like, when it comes to something – some proposition which you would say you need faith to believe, whether that be a religious claim or a claim that a person you've met is making – you either have sufficient reason to believe what they're saying, in which case you're relying on reason, or you don't, in which case sure, you're relying on faith. but then faith would entail a lack of sufficient reason. I feel like those are the only two options available to you.

BRB: No I think we're probably just using terms in somewhat different senses, because I think when that person speaks her heart to you, your reason is not in control. Your reason has prepared the way; your reason provides a certain condition for the possibility. But accepting what she says – that has to be an act of real belief that goes beyond your capacity to control. You see, one of the marks it seems to me that differentiates a philosopher approaching God and one of the great biblical figures, philosophers are always, for the most part, in control of the situation – they're proposing their premises, they're analysing, they're proposing arguments, drawing conclusions – they're in the drivers seat, epistemologically. The great biblical figures, you don't find anything like an argument for God's existence in the Bible, which is very interesting, because they're very much in the passive voice. They've been addressed; they've been spoken to, you know. Isaiah's vision in the temple – that's a symbol of what it's like to be addressed by God. So it's not repugnant to

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reason – in fact, reason provides a context for that. But it goes beyond it; it's something that reason can't control on its own.

JB: What might help here, Alex, is just for you to kind of explain, just to help move this on here, is what would be, for you, a reasonable evidence for God, if you like? And if that were presented to you, would you still say, “well, I'm not believing by faith at this point; I'm simply believing by reason, in God”. What would that sort of a reason have to look like?

AO: Yes, well see I'm not sure exactly. I know what the reason would kind of look like, which is some kind of sound, valid argument in favour of God's existence. If the ontological argument is sound, then the conclusion of the ontological argument is true, you know – it's as simple as it gets. Now I find this interesting because I mean it's actually fairly recently that this analytic style of philosophical thinking has been applied to religion, and traditional systematic theologians were – at least originally – quite hostile to the introduction of analytic philosophy to doing theology. And they say that the reason that this is, is because, you know, religion requires narrative; it requires poetry, it requires this kind of faith-based thinking that analytic philosophy – reason alone – can't really grasp at.

This I find to be telling, right. We have someone coming along and saying, “listen, I am going to accept what can be reasonably shown to be the case”, and systematic theology essentially rejecting it on the basis of it not being able to properly handle the content of their beliefs. I find it incredibly telling that when we try to apply this kind of analytic style of thinking to theological thought, the response is never to try and show why actually you know we can provide an analysis which shows that this is in keeping with our reason or logical thinking, but rather to say that actually the

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methodology is inappropriate to use in this case and we should be using this vague concept of faith instead. Which I still haven't heard precisely defined from Bishop Barron and would be quite helpful actually if rather than kind of talking around the subject as I think we've been doing here, I think it would be helpful to the listener and to me if we could have a sentence perhaps that sums up what faith is as a dictionary theology definition.

BRB: I believe there's a response to the revealing God. Faith is a response to the revealing God. The response of the whole self in the presence of the God who reveals himself. Now that's not repugnant at all to what we were doing 20 minutes ago, in talking rationally about God in terms of philosophical proofs; I think those are very effective ways to approach the mystery of God. But then there's the claim – the strange claim from the heart of religious traditions – that God has spoken, which means God has revealed something of himself beyond what the mind on its own can grasp. Now the mind can understand it; it can take it in, think about it – faith seeking understanding etc. But to make it more specific, in the Christian context we're talking about the incarnation; we're talking about the trinity – two realities that reason can't on its own grasp, but were given to us, were revealed to us. And faith is the response of the entire person to the revealing God.

AO: Well to be clear, I mean, I think it goes further than that, which is to say it's not just the concept of the trinity is something that reason and analysis can't really touch upon, it's something that flatly contradicts reason and analysis, and that's the very problem, right. I think you know there's the famous paper by... – is it Richard Cartwright that I'm thinking of? Who analyses the trinity and says, "listen, we can break this down

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into seven propositions; we can formalise this very easily, you know. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit and the Son is not the Father. Seventh proposition – there is exactly one God”.

You can formalize these propositions, logically speaking, and show that they are inconsistent. The only way to resolve this kind of dispute is either to reinterpret the terms in a way that something like Richard Swinburne might do and say that when we say that God is the Father, we're not talking about numerical identity – we're not saying that God is the same thing as the Father – we're saying that the Father kind of shares in the divine nature, in the same way that we might say that Spiderman is strong, rather than Spiderman is Peter Parker, you know; there are different ways of using the word 'is'. If you use it in the former sense, “Spiderman is strong”, there are many things which can be strong, you know; the Father just shares in this nature of divine essence. You can do that. But what you can't do is say that there is some way to actually, in keeping with the fundamental assumptions of analytic philosophy, which is to say if something is logically contradictory, then it must be false – you cannot...

BRB: But it's not a logical contradiction. But it's not, because you're talking at two different levels – you're talking about the nature of God – the essence of God – and you're talking about subsistent relations within that essence. So the distinction between Father, Son and Spirit is operating at one level, but you're not establishing a contradiction between those two levels. Having made that distinction, it avoids that danger.

AO: I can try to do so by asking a series of questions and perhaps this can elucidate where I'm going wrong here, because if I'm making a mistake here

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this will help to identify where it is. Would you say that when someone says, “the Father is God”, they’re speaking in the sense of numerical identity – that is they are one and the same thing?

BRB: Well no, the Father has a share in the divine essence, put it that way.

AO: Would you call yourself like a social Trinitarian?

BRB: Define the meaning?

AO: As in, would you say that saying God is divine is kind of like saying someone is human – they share in the human nature, but it’s not saying that the Father and God are the same thing?

BRB: Well look, the danger with that way of doing it is then you’re going to exclude the Son and the Spirit.

AO: But that’s precisely the problem...

BRB: The Father has the divine nature; so does the Son, so does the Spirit.

AO: I didn’t quite catch that.

BRB: The Father has the divine nature; so does the Son, so does the Spirit.

AO: Sure. And so that’s what you mean by saying, “the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God – that they all share in this godly nature”. So then the problem becomes Christianity being insufficiently monotheistic, I would say, because the seventh proposition that I detailed

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a moment ago – that there is exactly one God – becomes quite vague. If we're going to say that there is precisely one God and that's what makes Christianity a monotheistic religion, and yet when we talk about God in terms of the trinity, we're not talking about a singular, identifiable, concrete, individual thing – we're talking about an essence; a nature that can kind of be shared by multiple beings or something like that. That doesn't sound sufficiently monotheistic to be in keeping at least with the traditional doctrines of Catholicism.

BRB: No they're not multiple beings though, that's the problem. So people like Augustine and later Aquinas, refined that language by calling them subsistent relations, which I realise in sort of classical terms is – to give it a positive spin – poetic; give it a negative spin – nonsensical. But on purpose, it's taking the classical language and kind of bending and breaking it, because you have to, under the weight of what's been revealed. Because the one thing that a relation is not classically, is subsistent. The one thing subsistent things aren't, is relational. So when Thomas calls them subsistent relations, he is engaging in a kind of metaphysical poetry to express this dynamic. You know what's behind the trinity though, ultimately, is the claim that God is love – that's where it comes from. If God is love and love isn't just something God has, well then there must be within the unity of God: lover – the Father; a beloved – the Son, and the shared love – the Spirit. I think that's the kind of fundamental claim that the trinity is trying to articulate. And see, that God is love is revealed in the dying and rising of Jesus. So what I'm trying to do is bring that back to those original experiences of revelation, to which faith is responding.

AO: I enjoy the language you used a moment ago talking about taking our traditional conceptions of language and philosophy and essentially

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completely distorting them and bending them in order to fit with this revelation of the trinity. That's in so many words the point that I'm trying to make, is that in order to make this work, we have to completely reinterpret the way that we're even thinking about these problems. I would say that if you take a traditional numerical view of the trinity, if numerical identity – that is to say the Father is the same thing as God – that's what it means to say that the Father is God; that's what it means to pray to God, because if they're not the same thing then you're committing idolatry by praying to one and not the other, they must be the same thing.

Identity is a symmetric and a transitive relation; in other words, if p is q, then q is also p. And it's also the case that if p is q, and q is r, then p is r. So if we say that the Father is God and that God is the Son, we're saying the Father is the Son, right? Now of course, it's not like this is something that hasn't been addressed by Christian theologians – of course it has, this is the fundamental concept of Christianity, perhaps second to the resurrection of Jesus. The thing that I'm seeing is that all of the attempts or at least all of the kind of promising attempts that have been made to get around this problem, involve essentially completely re-understanding the way we do philosophy – to some extent with some theologians even rejecting that analytic philosophy is even an appropriate tool to use when talking about this issue. And I think that's telling for the plausibility of the problem at hand.

JB: One quick response and we'll go to a final break and then I want to move this into some fresh areas...

BRB: Yeah, let me just say this, you know how in theoretical physics it's often the case that when you get to the most fundamental level, the typical

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categories of explanation tend to break down and they become anomalous and the way that we typically think about ordinary experience doesn't obtain. Why are we all that surprised that when we're coming to the most fundamental level of being itself, we're coming to Ipsum Esse, right – the sheer act of to be itself – that odd things would obtain; that the categories we use to analyse our ordinary experience wouldn't be entirely adequate. And I think that's what's happening... the great theologians who knew very well the classical metaphysical categories and they applied them in sort of a highly analogical way. But similar to the way physicists I think will take ordinary language and then it starts breaking and coming apart when they're talking about the most fundamental levels, so in that way I'm not all together surprised that they begin reaching for this sort of poetic, reapplication of the language. So that you have the one God and then three subsistent relations within that God, not three numerically separate beings – not four beings certainly, not one nature variously participated. So I mean all those were proposers ways of thinking about it, but the one God in three subsistent relations, but all of it in service of the claim that God is love, which is a very unique and strange claim and accompanied by an equally unique and strange metaphysics.

JB: We'll come back to this claim at the heart of Christianity, that God is love, and what the claims are at the heart of an atheist perspective on the universe. I want to move us on in the next section gentleman to just at least briefly touching on issues around our actual experience of life. Obviously the pain and suffering that often accompany it – we're in the midst of a global pandemic – and how both of your perspectives as a Christian and an atheist bear on that.

PART THREE

JB: We've talked a lot about some of the intellectual arguments, nature of faith, we've even delved into the trinity in the course of today's show – we've covered an awful lot of ground, folks. But I suppose at a practical level, most people if they accept or indeed often reject faith, it comes at a more experiential kind of level – they're not necessarily thinking about the argument for God or against God, of Aquinas or Richard Dawkins. It's often, you know, most people's journey involves some experiential element to it. As I said, we're living through a pandemic where people are asking big questions around the nature of life, suffering and everything else. And I suppose at some level I see people both rejecting faith and being drawn to faith during this pandemic; people who when they see suffering, actually they throw themselves upon God and others who say well, I want nothing to do with God if this is the kind of world he creates. I mean, does atheism per se, Alex, have anything to say to this issue, or is atheism more just as you've said a kind of point of view on one issue, and people will have to kind of deal of the issue of pain and suffering in whatever form they can if they do happen to be an atheist?

AO: Atheism doesn't claim to have any explanatory power, ok. What we can say is that we would expect, if there is a world in which there are conscious creatures – which I recognise some people think is unlikely given atheism generally – but if that's our premise, what would we expect to find? Well we'd have no reason not to expect there to be all kinds of unpredictable and seemingly arbitrary suffering. It's not me who has to do the explaining here, you know. And you're right Justin that during a tragedy like this, you find that people come to religion and people go away from religion. But that falls within the realm I think of a psychological discussion; it's like,

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people might come to God because they find it's a good way to deal with the immense tragedy of the suffering that we're facing, but that says nothing about whether or not religion provides a sufficient explanation for why it's happening or justification for why it's happening.

Because here's the problem: in order to assert that there is an all-loving God who is supervising this – and you know, I'm not the one here who is claiming that this is being supervised; that somebody is watching this, somebody knows that this is occurring and somebody's allowing it to occur. If we're going to assert that there is a benevolent being who's allowing this to occur, then it must follow that there is morally sufficient reason for this to occur. In the United Kingdom just today we passed 100,000 people who've been killed by the virus, and the Christian has to say that this is morally justified. And they're welcome to do so with reference to theodicies, by saying that, you know, people like to speak abstractly about how pain and suffering might be necessary to obtain certain goods, or it'll all be compensated in the afterlife, or something of this sort. But we have to say specifically on an issue like this, that yes, this specifically hundred thousand people who have died of Covid have done so because God allowed it – that's the first thing that needs to be admitted by the Christian, and most Christians have no problem accepting that. The difficulty comes in in the second proposition, which is that it's justified; this needs to happen or this should have happened or at least there's no kind of moral qualm with this having been allowed to happen – that's the problem that needs to be faced.

JB: And can I just from you Alex just understand, is this a major reason why you don't believe in God? I.e. the problem of evil is for you a major objection to God?

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AO: Yes, call it not an active cause of my atheism but a sustaining cause. It wasn't the reason why I left the faith originally, but it's one of the reasons that prevent me from re-entertaining the idea. I mean, as we've discussed, there are plenty of seemingly plausible arguments to say that there's a necessary being at the bottom of contingent chains in the universe; that there's a being who sustains things; there's an arbitrary first cause or something like this. But to say that this first cause is a loving God who will preside over the kind of the suffering that we've seen, not just in the human context – of something like the coronavirus – but also the hundreds of billions and trillions – if you include sea life – of animals who are going through suffering that we wouldn't even be capable of imagining. There seems to be no explanation for this.

JB: Ok, so this is a huge question that we're trying to sum up the programme with here. Where are you going to begin with this Bishop Barron?

BRB: Well, how about with Aquinas in the Summa, when he poses the question, “*utrum Deus sit*” – “is there a God?” And Aquinas famously puts up objections first, right. Well two of them we've talked about: one is that nature is a self-contained system; there's no need to go outside of nature to explain what's going on within nature – that's objection one. Objection two – and Thomas states it I think more eloquently than anyone in the tradition, and I include the atheist tradition – Thomas said, “if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed”. So if there were infinite heat there would be no coal – that's his example. But God has called the infinite good, therefore there should be no evil if there is an infinite good – but there is evil, therefore there is no infinite good. That's a good argument; that's an eloquently stated argument. And it's what has

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been argued for millennia, right – it's the perennial objection.

Now, I'm sure everyone here knows the classical response rooted in people like Augustine, repeated by Aquinas, that God doesn't cause evil but God is so good that he draws good out of evil that might not have existed without evil. He permits evil to bring about a greater good. Now, can we see that sometimes? Sure. I mean, there are obvious examples in our ordinary experience of evils that actually produce a great good. Can we very often not see it? Well, yes, of course, I'd say even typically we don't see right away – “oh yeah, that's the reason why that was permitted”. So do we hold as theists the God who is providentially ordering the whole of the universe, that Jean-Pierre de Caussade put it, “everything that is, is in some sense the will of God – either actively or permissively” – yeah, I think we are obliged to hold that view. Therefore something like this formula has to obtain that God permits forms of suffering to bring about a greater good.

Now, can we see it, as I say – sometimes, yes; typically, no. But that shouldn't surprise us, right. If we're talking about not one contingent cause among many – someone who might be ordering things in one corner of the universe – but of God, *ipsum esse*, the creator of all things, whose preserve is all of space and all of time, is it at all likely that we're going to see the full implications of whatever is happening – the full implications across space and time, of what's being permitted? And the answer there is obviously no. And I think now go back to the book of Job – is the classic biblical answer: in the presence of great evil and great suffering, is we don't know what God is up to. And we're in no position – and I put that back on Alex – we're in no position to say, definitively, there is no morally justifiable reason for this particular evil. Because we'd need a God-like perspective on all of space and all of time, in order to make that claim. And that's the import of God's

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speech to Job, the longest speech of God anywhere in the Bible, “where were you when I made the heavens and the earth”, etc. It just means you’re in no position to articulate that premise, that you have clear knowledge there can’t be a morally justifiable reason for a given suffering.

It seems to me that from a purely logical standpoint, the argument’s not that compelling. It is filled with emotional power – I completely get it. Like anybody that’s lived more than two years on planet earth, I’ve suffered in my life and wondered why and asked the question – of course I do. And then as Alex and many others point out, the really horrific suffering that we can see at all levels of sentient being – sure, I get it, I totally get the emotional power of that. But it seems to me from a strictly logical standpoint, it’s not a compelling argument, because it assumes you have a God-like perspective.

AO: This of course doesn’t need to be framed in a logical way, of course; the logical problem of evil has been famously made by a number of atheists. But this can also just be seen as an inductive point, right. Because what’s being said here, in many eloquent words, I believe, is essentially in the context of the coronavirus which is how you originally brought this up Justin, is the claim that it’s worth it; we don’t know what for, but it’s worth it. You know, 100,000 people have been killed by this virus, which you know; if it is the case that some good was necessitated by the death of these people, humanity seemed to have been getting on just fine for around 200,000 years before the coronavirus appeared on the scene – I don’t see why now all of a sudden it’s now necessary to bring in this new virus to produce some good that everybody else seemed to do without. And you’d have to turn around and say that the reason this is happening is because it’s worth it. And someone asks you, “well what on earth for? What on earth is this

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worth it for? 100,000 people! Why couldn't it be 99,999? Why couldn't one person have been spared? Why couldn't one person's suffering have been marginally less? Surely the same kind of good of community spirit or whatever you think the good is that's come out of this coronavirus could have been achieved with one less person dying?"

And not only does God turn around and say, "well listen, you know, you don't know what I know – just wait and see", he turns around and says, "who is this that darkenth counsel by words without knowledge? How dare you even suggest that you know better than me? How dare you even ask the question? How dare you question that me allowing this to happen is a good thing, is worth it?" And you have to look your dying father in the eyes and say, "I'm sorry, I'm not allowed to say that this is a tragedy, because I know that from a divine perspective the only way to reconcile my Christianity is to say not just that this is some kind of tragedy with an explanation, but no this is worth it, this is good, this brings about something better". I don't think that's a task that can be done.

BRB: Yes but who are you or I or anyone to say? How do we know? How would anyone... We'd have to have a God-like grasp of all of space and all of time to make a judgment, pro or con. Neither one of us, no one, can make that judgment. I mean, you can characterise it the way that you did in a sort of flip manner, but that God permits evil to bring about some greater good – I don't know what that is? How do I know specifically what that is? Though I can state the principle, I think legitimately, but I don't know – how do I know? How does anybody know? I think it's arrogant on either side in a way, to claim that knowledge. I know that God exists on other terms. So I think through various paths and various rational means. I know that God exists; I also know that evil is present in the world – so I've got to find a way

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to reconcile those. It seems to me the principle achieves that. The details of it... prrrrrfff... I don't know – how would I possibly know?

AO: Well perhaps I can elucidate the problem I have with this view, by asking you a question. Bishop Barron, would you say, for instance, that it is bad when a woman has a miscarriage, or a baby is ripped from the arms of its mother in a tsunami – would you say this was a bad thing?

BRB: Sure.

AO: Well how could you possibly say that? How could you be so arrogant to suggest that you know enough about the ultimate reasons for this happening, that you can conclude that this is overall, all things considered, a bad thing? The problem is that if we say that because we don't have this divine universal perspective that allows us to understand the exact, complete kind of field of play that's going on here – I'm not allowed to say that actually there's no justification for this, because I can't possibly know that – then we forfeit our right to use any kind of moral language, because we are never ever in a position to judge these things. And so we can never say that something is bad or something is good, because we don't have that perspective.

BRB: No, I don't see why that would follow. I can say a moral action is bad; I can say what Hitler did was bad – morally wrong. Now did God permit that? Well sure, in the measure that God permitted Hitler to come into being; that God didn't interfere with Hitler's activity. So God allowed that; God permitted it. But I can still say it's bad. But does God allow that evil to bring about some greater good that I can't see? That's the principle. But I've no hesitation calling things good or bad.

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JB: I mean, earlier on you said as well Alex that you can't call the death of someone's father a tragedy if you're a Christian, because it can't be a tragedy if God has some greater purpose in mind. But presumably Bishop Barron, you would say tragedy exists for Christians, even if we do believe there's an ultimate reason?

BRB: Yes, again we're probably equivocating a bit. I mean, I'd subscribe to Dante's ultimate dealing with the divine comedy, so in that grandest possible sense, there is no tragedy – I'm dealing with a comedy, finally. But sure, within that, sure, from our perspective we can identify something is tragic or deeply sad or wicked. But God's perspective – God is not one fussy competitive object among many. God's not one little fussy cause among many, but God is ipsum esse – more like the author of a novel than a character in it, right. And so Dostoevsky allowing all sorts of darkness within his great novels, but still having a commanding viewpoint – it's an analogy that limps, I call analogies – but God's more like that than one fussy character among many within the novel.

AO: Well, yes, I mean when Dostoevsky allows a character to be mistreated, it's certainly good for the plotline, but it's not good for the character – and that's the point here. The theodicy that's been proposed here is one saying that, you know, evil is allowed because some greater good can be brought from it. Which means the corollary of this is that any time an evil exists – any time bad exists – it exists precisely because some good is going to be brought out of it. That is to say, evil is actually an indication that something good is happening. Which means that all of these evil incidences – and I specifically avoided using instances that have the complication of free will; so I wouldn't use something like the Holocaust, but I use something

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like the coronavirus or something like a miscarriage – the implication of this, the implication of saying that evil is always an indication that some good is being obtained, is to say that these are things worth celebrating. Any time that one of these things these happen; any time that a tragedy – and of course you can see it as an emotional tragedy, the Christian is still perfectly entitled to say that they are upset by this, that they're sad, that they're angry, that they don't understand the reasons – but ultimately philosophically they have to say, “this is a cause for celebration; thank goodness that this has been allowed to happen so that we can draw out some good. Thank goodness that this 100,000 people in the United Kingdom have been killed by this virus, so that some good can be achieved” – that's the implication...

BRB: No that's an emotional appeal though, Alex, I don't think that's right. I mean, the Christian would look gravely at the situation and acknowledge God's will is at work here though I can't see it. I mean, I think that's the right attitude; to say I would celebrate it, seems to me the wrong point of view. You'd look at it and acknowledge there's a dimension to this that I can't fully appreciate. I place it within the context of God's ultimate purposes, but I do so... I mean, obviously in a very grave manner typically, in the presence of great suffering. So I wouldn't say that we celebrate it...

AO: We can have grave celebrations, right. I mean, would you not say that God's will being done to produce good ends is worth celebrating? Of course if God's will is being done to produce a good end, that's something worth celebrating. Now in the same way, if we win World War Two, we celebrate that that happened, but's a kind of solemn celebration, because we recognise the cost that was paid – but it's still a celebration; it's still a good thing that we won that war. If evil is actually an indication of God's

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will being done by the procurement of some good through some evil, then as solemnly as that celebration may occur, it should have to be something worth celebrating, which seems to be totally anathema to the way that any person could – let alone should – entertain these kinds of tragedies.

BRB: I would say you put it within the context of God's will and God's purpose, and you do so in the right spiritual frame of mind. But I wouldn't speak of celebration. It's an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty, if you want – God's sovereignty over creation.

JB: I suppose I mean my thought on this Alex is that even Jesus in the Gospel of John weeps at the grave of Lazarus, shortly before he brings him back from the dead. So there's a sense in which I don't see the Christian story as negating the fact of tragedy, even in the context of believing that there will be some greater good that ultimately comes out of it. And I suppose there is the practical dimension for me, and I do want to kind of move us here, which is if you're saying Alex, Bishop Barron and Christians in general should frame suffering within the context of a greater meaning and a purpose that God may have – even though as Bishop Barron says they may not always see that – I suppose I would want to put the challenge to you as well, where does the atheist go with that? Because at one level is it arguable that suffering and pain and evil in the world, there cannot be any meaning to it? It is in a sense meaningless, because it is just the way the world is; there isn't going to be any final consolation, any justice, any ultimate, you know, making sense of this. It just is what it is and that is our lot, whatever life has thrown at us.

AO: Well allow me to answer both of your points there. The first point about Jesus weeping, don't misunderstand me, it's certainly compatible

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with the kind of – I suppose you would see it as a caricature of the Christian position – but if that were the position, it's certainly compatible with it to cry, to be sad, to be upset. The archetypal example here I think would be the crucifixion. If you were present at the crucifixion, it was a horrific, tragic event – everybody's weeping, everybody's crying apart from the people initiating the thing of course. You know, Jesus' suffering, it's a horrible, horrible event – and yet it's still celebrated in the modern day. It's celebrated on Good Friday, because we recognise that yes, it's a tragic event that's worth weeping over, but ultimately speaking, because this brought about the greatest good, it's worth celebrating this solemn and tragic event, and that's what I'm talking about. Your father dying of coronavirus or something – you can weep, you can weep and weep and weep, but as a Christian, you have to deep down accept that it's worth it, that this is a good thing, that I'm glad that God's will is being done here. Because otherwise you're saying that you're not glad when God's will is being done, which seems to be out of character for a Christian.

I would just add that you're perfectly entitled to ask, “well what kind of consolation does the atheist give?” I remember when Christopher Hitchens was asked this question on stage, he was asked, “listen, what would you say to a friend who was dying on their deathbed”. And his response was to say, “well funnily enough, I'm not usually the one they ask to come along and offer that”. I think I would have to plead the same, which is to say, “look, I don't know what I would say to a friend who's dying”, right. I really don't know and I don't claim to have an explanation for why this is happening; I don't claim to have an answer to how justice will be served. But the one thing I won't do is offer false consolation to my dying friend; that's the one thing I won't do. Unless I'm certain and I'm able to say, “listen, I know why this is happening, don't worry, you can relax, everything's going to be

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ok". If I don't have philosophically sufficient grounds to say that then it would be not just foolish, but malicious of me, to lie to them. And I'm not accusing Christians of lying, but I'm saying that if you're going to make that claim, you'd better be sure that you're philosophically justified in doing so. And as far as the responses to the problem of evil that I've generally seen entertained by Christians, it doesn't even come close.

BRB: Can I respond just a little bit, because actually I'm changing my mind I suppose a little bit with the word celebration. Because when you said celebration, I thought immediately of, "well put on a party hat and let's throw confetti all over – we're having a celebration because your dad is dying". But the very fact that we talk about the mass being celebrated – and the mass is nothing but a representation of Calvary – so indeed, it is Good Friday represented and we're celebrating the mass, or the celebration of the Good Friday service. But we're a long way from party hats and confetti. We're celebrating but the kind of beautiful solemnity and grandeur and deep sadness of that Good Friday celebration that would signal the right Christian attitude. So I'm ok with that; we're celebrating it. It's not party hats celebration, it's this – think of the Good Friday liturgy as the way a Christian would celebrate suffering.

AO: I'm glad we kind of bridged that gap there. I would just add though that the implication of this is to say... I mean, you can imagine as you say, celebration we shouldn't really be thinking about someone throwing a party, but imagine you know that in 10 years time we all get together to celebrate the coronavirus, you know. And don't worry, we're not throwing a party – we're not making cakes and wearing party hats – but we all get together in a room and we say, "thanks be to God for blessing us with the coronavirus" – it would seem absurd; it would seem absolutely insane

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if that's what we were doing. But that's the view that's implied by this theodicy, which is to say that maybe not the kind of celebration that involves a party hat, but the kind of celebration that involves us being able to get together and say, "thank you God for allowing this to happen". I don't know who in their right mind could possibly thank God for the coronavirus.

BRB: I think what's undergirding your analysis here is some assumption that we know what it is; we get it, we see the reason. And I think we hardly ever see the reason. We might get glimpses. I mean I know lots of examples as a pastoral minister, lots of examples of beautiful expressions of love that have occurred in the midst of this pandemic. I know lots of people who have responded in these wonderful ways – "now, that's the reason, I've got it, I know what God's up to!" No. I might get one little hint or one move of the chessboard of good that has come from this, but I mean, I don't know – I'm like Job, I don't know what God's purpose ultimately is. So I'm resisting at least the implication that, "oh yeah, I've got it figured out, I get it, I see exactly what God's up to". I never see that. But yet in faith, I would say I can place suffering within the context of God's purpose, the contours of which I can't typically grasp. I don't think that it's an intellectually incoherent position at all, but what might be emotionally difficult to move into it.

JB: I was going to say as well before we come to Alex and we will also have to start winding up the conversation in a moment. But presumably within that mystery, Bishop Barron, you still see Christianity as offering a better explanation of that suffering than an atheistic perspective, a naturalistic perspective?

BRB: Well I'd say this, for an atheist it's not a problem; there is no problem

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of evil for an atheist, there is no problem of suffering – as you say, it's just dumb suffering, it just happens, it's just the way natural forces bounce off of each other. I don't mean that in a dismissive way, I'm just saying it dissolves the problem. It's a problem for believers. So theodicy is trying to justify the ways of God and the presence of suffering. And an atheist doesn't have that burden. So an atheist just says, "dumb suffering – it's the way it is". So we do bear the burden there, we believers, to make sense of this. I don't think an atheist has to make sense of it – it's just the way things bounce off of each other.

AO: I think you're right in some respects, but wrong in another. You're right in the respect that in terms of actually requiring some explanation, I think you're right – the atheist doesn't need to address this problem. That's not to say that they can't, right. It's just to say they don't need to. The Christian is committed to having to find some explanation for this suffering. But the implication of saying that there cannot be such a thing as a problem of evil for an atheist, is to assume that there can be no such thing as ethics without God. And you know, I'm aware that that's a common philosophical position that's held, but it's not one that's held universally – I know plenty of atheists who would certainly consider themselves to be even moral realists, despite not believing in God. But you're right that it's a problem for the Christian, but that's in so many words the point that I'm trying to make, which is that when we discuss the existence of suffering – and I frame it in suffering instead of evil for precisely this reason – this is a problem for Christianity; it's not a problem for me, right. People like to turn around and say, "well what's your account?" It's like, I don't need to have one because I'm not the one claiming that there's an explanation here.

BRB: I agree; it's a problem for those who hold belief in God.

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AO: Yes. I would say though, just to respond to what you said before a moment ago, I mean I think I'm much like Job as well, except I don't like to stop asking the questions when God kind of turns around and says, "because I said so", it's that kind of parental tactic of like, "well look, I've got my reasons that you'll never understand, but I'm just going to let you have it". But what you appear to be doing is, by saying, you know, "look, there are many good things that have come out of something like Covid" – and many good things maybe have come out that we don't know of – it's like, man, it's like somebody getting cancer and then somebody being so grateful that the existence of cancer has allowed great medical advancements to be made. It's like, celebrating the fact... but, you know, we're seeing some good come out of this in the sense that we developed medicines and treatments and things like this. I'd rather no cancer and no treatments, right. Yes there may be some good things that have come out of this coronavirus, such as people getting together to give up their town hall to become an emergency hospital. But I'd rather not have that good and not have that evil. It's so unclear to me that this is even a viable option.

BRB: It's you from your necessarily very limited perspective, or me, from mine. I can say, "sure, I'd like the world this way; I wish that never happened; I wish it was...", but I'm seeing this little tiny, tiny swath of space and time. God, who masters all of space and time – so don't read the answer to Job as like, "oh, shut up". It's more the acknowledgement of a creaturely mind could never even in principle understand what God's about. He's not like disciplining a recalcitrant child; it's simply acknowledging... It's like trying to explain to a dog why you're bringing the dog to the vet. That's a better comparison, because even in principle I couldn't explain to the dog, because of the capacious of my mind compared to his. Now a fortiori – to

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the highest possible degree, the difference between God's grasp of space and time and mine, even in principle, God can't explain it. I'd read Job that way, rather than God sort of just brushing aside the question.

AO: Well yes, I mean there's something I think we could potentially agree on here, but first something that we don't, which is to say I like this analogy – it's an analogy I've sometimes heard framed as a child being taken to the dentist, the same kind of thing. You take your dog to the vet; you cannot in principle explain why it's being done, but you recognise it's a good thing that is being done. But if you as that pet owner were in a position to make it such so that the vet wasn't needed, you'd be out of your mind to say that you'd rather have the dog going through whatever it's going through so that you can take it to the vet to bring that good – surely. If that badness is there – if that suffering is there – then you can say, yes, I have a reason to take my dog to the vet. But if you're in a position where you are capable of allowing that evil to not exist in the first place, I think you'd rather no dog injury and no vet.

BRB: That is one very particular instance. But now you've got all of space and all of time; every possible implication and consequence of that, I mean, how do I possibly grasp that? How do I know what the ultimate purpose and the ultimate good is? I can't control that.

AO: Well that's the atheist position, is that you don't know; I don't know; nobody knows. Here's what I think we can agree on, is this. If you're a Christian, it can be logically compatible of you to say I have this worldview that says God is all loving. There's the seeming depths and depths of misery and suffering, but we're not in a position to know that this is incompatible with God. So I'm a Christian and evil doesn't mean that I have to give that

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up. I think you're welcome to do that. But what doesn't make sense is going in the other direction, is to start with the evil and suffering and to say the best explanation for this is Christianity. If you're already a Christian, you're welcome to say that any evil that you witness is by definition just compatible with your view – which makes it unfalsifiable by the way, but you're welcome to do it; you're welcome to say we will just never know the whole moral scheme and so it's going to be compatible. But you can't start from a neutral, non-Christian perspective – with the suffering, with the evil, with the disgusting levels of suffering that we're seeing – and from that say, well, this seems to point to the existence of a omnibenevolent God.

JB: Final thought from Bishop Barron and we'll start to wrap it up.

BRB: Because I wouldn't start there. I would start with my knowledge of God's existence, derived by various rational paths, and I have good reason to believe that God exists. Now I also know that there's suffering and evil, so I've got to find a way to reconcile them. But I'd begin with the existence and goodness of God, that's my primary point of reference. Now I've got to figure out how to... but I wouldn't start with evil.

AO: Well the question for the listener I think then, to decide kind of which approach is better here, is to say, "what do we start with? What do you think is more obviously present in your life? The existence of a God, or the existence of suffering?" If you start with God, you can make it compatible with evil; but if you start with suffering, as Bishop Barron would not, I don't think you can get to Christianity. It's up to you to decide whether you think one is more present to the other. To me I think that suffering is more obviously present than the existence of a God, but that's just my opinion.

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BRB: But there's a more fundamental metaphysical point, that evil is a privatio bone, right – evils' a privation of the good. Therefore starting with evil is always a problematic thing; it's metaphysically incoherent, because it's always a privation of a greater good, like a cavity in a tooth. So metaphysically speaking you can't really start with evil; that's never the primordial reality. Wherever sin abounds, grace abounds the more – as Paul put it – but good is always greater than evil. So I would begin there, metaphysically, as well as ethically.

JB: We're going to have to...

AO: I was going to say to you Justin, I won't try and unpack that...!

JB: I understand we could keep going and I'd love to if time allowed, but maybe we can do a round two at some point. Maybe just to sum this all up, and I'll just ask you to keep this to a minute or so at most, but why don't we return to that original question which we started with: Christianity or atheism – which makes best sense of who we are? I'll let you go first Alex and then Bishop Barron. Why for you ultimately does atheism make better sense of who we are than Christianity does?

AO: Well I think this is a good opportunity to kind of restate the point I ended on there, which is to say that if you think that there are philosophical reasons that are kind of really compellingly leading you to believe that there's some form of God, and from that you have to make sense of the world, then I think sure – it can make sense to be a Christian, right. But if you accept the premise that I've put forward, which is that if you start with the suffering it doesn't seem to lead to God, then the question becomes, "what is more obviously present?"

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And to me, when I wake up, when I reflect on the state of the world, when I reflect on the nature of contingency and the nature of causation – but I also reflect on the nature of death and suffering and misery – the thing that's more obviously real and more undeniably real, and therefore I think a better philosophical starting point, a more justified starting ground, is the existence of the suffering. If I cannot get from that existence of suffering – which is undeniable; nobody can deny that that exists – if I can't find a root from that suffering to the existence of a loving God, then I can't use Christianity to make sense of the world that I find myself in. You're welcome to go in the other direction if you'd like, but if you share in my view that suffering is so obviously present that it should be the starting point of philosophy, then I don't think that you can make sense of it with Christianity alone.

JB: And for you, Bishop Barron, why does Christianity, in your view, make best sense of who we are?

BRB: I would maybe stay with that point, because it's very interesting to me. Because I think it's never right, metaphysically, to begin with pain or with suffering. I don't think that's coherent, because that's always a subset of something much more fundamental. So I think that's a really problematic starting point and if you do that, I think you're going to be metaphysically on very shaky ground and will be led to strange conclusions. So that's interesting that you name that as a starting point. I would say very quickly, Christianity makes much better sense of how to explain a radically contingent world, and it makes much better sense of the dynamism of the human spirit, which pushes out toward the unconditioned truth and the unconditioned good. It makes sense of both the beginning and the end, if

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you want – the alpha and the omega. To me, the atheist perspective doesn't make sense of either of those and ends up becoming, from a rational standpoint, to my mind, quite incoherent.

JB: We're going to leave it there, but can I just say thank you both for such an engaging and... you know, the good spirit in which the conversation was had as well, and both being willing to listen and hear each other and respond. And perhaps we can do it again at some point in the future, but for now, thank you very much Bishop Barron and Alex – great to have you with me.

AO: It's been a pleasure.

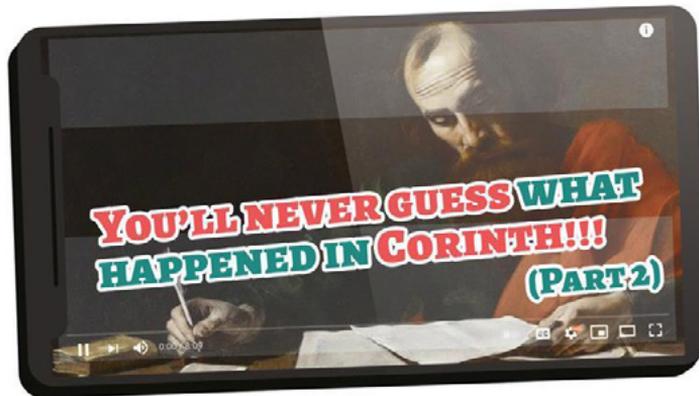
BRB: Thanks to both of you.

YouTube is the new front line for religious debates. St Paul would have loved it

Chris Goswami

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The modern-day Areopagus is increasingly providing Christians with spiritual content and is an ideal platform for evangelism and debate, says Chris Goswami

In the series *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, there are three rules that summarise people's attitude to technology. The rules say: "Stuff invented before you were born is normal and ordinary, it's the way the world works. Stuff invented between when you're 15 and 35 is exciting and revolutionary, you can probably make a career out of it. But stuff invented after you're 35 is unnatural and best avoided!"

If you're in the last category, you may well have this view regarding internet-enabled media, including the rise of YouTube. "YouTubing" is one of the top pastimes for young adults and many aspire to be 'influencers'. Not surprising when you look at Ryan, a nine-year-old, who makes \$26m a year reviewing toys.

For those of us a lot older than Ryan, YouTube can be a bewildering place. The statistics are overwhelming: YouTube is the world's most popular

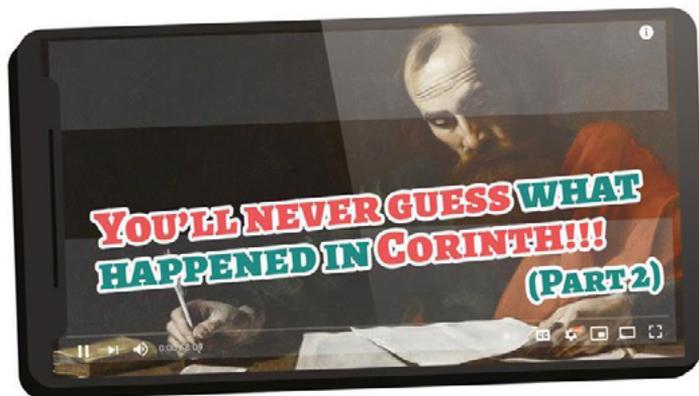
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website after Google. Five hundred hours of video are uploaded every minute of every day and, with its presence in more than 100 countries and 2 billion registered users, it has greater reach than any TV or radio network in history.

To maintain growth, YouTube must keep you watching. The more you watch, the more ads you see, the greater the revenue they earn. So, there is always that endless list of suggestions of what to watch next. These recommendations are based on your viewing habits and are often spot on – YouTube’s algorithms are smart. This is the standard business model for pretty much any ‘free’ internet service: you are the product being sold to advertisers.

But YouTube doesn’t just serve up shareable videos of cute cats and conspiracy theories. It’s a place of genuine debate, insightful thought leadership and, increasingly for the Church, nimble new ministries.



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The New Marketplace

The popular Catholic YouTuber Bishop Barron has likened YouTube to Paul's experience in the Areopagus (Acts 17). Here, Paul, in Athens awaiting his friends' arrival, begins reasoning – or debating – in the marketplace and synagogue every day with whoever will listen (and note that 'reasoning' is different to 'preaching'). His marketplace reasoning is overheard by philosophers who are sufficiently impressed to invite Paul to the Areopagus, a first-century debating court. Once there, he is given a formal platform to address local and influential aristocrats.

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'Reasoning the faith' is something that YouTube is well suited to. It means giving discussion space to views we may disagree with, hopefully in a friendly, courteous manner. It's not always courteous, though. Some YouTube faith discussions can be offensive, deliberately mocking, or designed to be outrageous. Discussion is not the only type of YouTube ministry that would interest Christians – other YouTube channels include Christian influencer, worship and educational channels – but YouTube lends itself exceptionally well to the debate format. The fact that you can both see and hear two sides of a discussion, with speakers potentially in

different countries, often makes for a compelling experience. Younger viewers in particular are engaging with these debates in increasing numbers.

Accountability, Authority and Tribalism

As well as benefits, there are potential risks to Christians surfing from one discussion to the next on YouTube. Firstly, there is an issue of accountability and authority. As long as you don't break the law, anyone can publish anything on YouTube with minimal resistance. And many of these people appear authoritative to us...even if they're not. Research into 'what makes a person authoritative' reveals that personal charisma is a significant factor. That means simply looking cool online can make you an 'authority' in the eyes of millions of viewers. The technical ability to make well-produced videos can give the impression of intellectual authority.

The internet has not removed authority, it has simply changed the nature of it. In previous centuries, religious authority was top-down: ie if you had a question, you might go to your minister, who might go to a more senior minister. (Of course, they, too, might come back with dreadful theology!) But with its 'participatory culture', the internet has democratised this process. Nowadays, authority is more horizontal, meaning your video – or your comment on a video – is perceived to be as valid as anybody else's. What used to be top-down dissemination of religious teaching has now become a conversation.

Secondly, there is an issue of tribalism and outrage. In churches, we can form tribes of people who think like us, which can lead to intolerance

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towards other believers. The same happens online. Continually viewing videos from the same sources can narrow our perspective. Remember, YouTube's algorithms are based on a business model designed to keep you watching. This model offers you 'more of the same', based on the video you just watched – that's not good for hearing views outside our own. However 'right' you think you are, the internet's technological silos can mean that we end up falling into ideological tribes, warring over issues from doctrine to politics, gender to race.



Dr Peter Phillips, head of digital theology at Premier explains: “We live in a culture of outrage, and being outrageous is a classic symbol of YouTube authority. Many YouTube influencers make use of our enjoyment of outrage to increase their popularity. Whereas we used to have Victor Meldrew saying, ‘I don’t believe it!’ – today we have a sarcastic YouTuber saying, ‘Really? Tell me more!’”

One way to reduce both tribalism and outrage is to engage with YouTube channels that offer different views. Premier’s Unbelievable? does this very

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successfully, pitting Christian versus atheist, and Christian versus Christian on diverse topics, but always within an atmosphere of respect.

Tribalism can run deep. As a minister, I find that people's 'search for truth', even within Christianity, is often restricted to their personal framework of what that truth should be. The idea that a Christian from a different tradition might bring a different approach to, say, the cross, or how science overlaps with faith can (again) cause outrage. At its very best, YouTube can help break down barriers. It can connect people who are physically remote and culturally diverse, creating an anonymous intimacy that can often serve to lessen prejudice.

There is one more risk of watching YouTube videos: the fear of people losing their faith or becoming confused. Some of the debates I have viewed over the past ten years feature brilliant atheist debaters (see Cosmic Sceptic). These are articulate, intelligent communicators who – unless you actively engage with understanding the opposing views – can be very convincing. With atheist vs Christian dialogue in particular, we need to understand what we recommend, who we recommend it to, and if it's right for them.

**GOD HAS AN EXTENSIVE TRACK
RECORD OF INNOVATING WITH
CUTTING-EDGE 'TECHNOLOGY'
TO COMMUNICATE HIS MESSAGE**

God Loves Tech

YouTube's "Broadcast yourself!" motto is a little egocentric, but YouTube can be an effective ministry tool for the 21st Century.

A friend of mine once commented that Paul didn't have all these new-fangled internet tools: "Paul preached the word, why do we need anything else?" But this comment is profoundly mistaken. God has an extensive track record of innovating with cutting-edge 'technology' to communicate his message. Look at your Bible, it's full of novel and dramatic examples. God uses the media of angels and tablets of stone; he uses burning bushes and talking donkeys; he uses scrolls, parchments, letters and, yes, sometimes he even uses the preached word! Paul used technology to the full, including the Roman road network and communication hubs like Ephesus and Rome. "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some", he writes (1 Corinthians 9:22). God uses media and technology to meet people wherever they are. Today they are on YouTube, a virtual, yet genuine, Areopagus.

To ignore YouTube is to place yourself in the backwaters of Christian ministry. It would be like a 16th-Century believer saying: "Let's not bother with the printing press." For one thing, traditional pulpit-based teaching reaches people for maybe one hour per week. Many young adults watch YouTube for several hours per day.

Attitude Not Age

Don't worry if, like me, you are much older than 35! This is about attitude, not age. The trick is to get out in front and set the agenda rather than being dragged along behind. Consider how you could build YouTube and other internet content into your ministry, ie into small groups, youth groups, as sermon illustrations etc. Noting the risks that I highlighted earlier, the key to success is great content curation.

Firstly, curate your own content. Ask questions as you explore YouTube: *Who is this person and why did they produce this video? Am I willing to be open-minded within the limits of biblical truth? (Don't switch off just because you disagree!) Does this video encourage prejudice or outrage towards another group?*

As Dr Phillips says: "Although it's important to engage with a variety of views on YouTube, you don't have to listen to every view. Consider Philippians 4:8: 'whatever is true, whatever is noble...if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.' Avoid speakers who pull you down."

PEOPLE ARE INCREASINGLY
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Secondly, if you are a leader, think about how your church can spend more time curating good YouTube content, and potentially less time writing sermons (controversial, I know!). This doesn't have to be complicated. In my church, a group of middle-aged men meet regularly to watch a YouTube video (secular or Christian) which they select and then debate. This 'intelligence of the crowd' between group members is a healthy kind of curation and easy to replicate in most churches...and incidentally, a great way to get blokes to interact!

Thirdly, communicate your curated content – don't keep it to yourself! Perhaps you could add a review section in your newsletter, or share great content between small groups?

People are increasingly getting their Christian teaching online, whether we like it or not, and from sources we may – or may not – approve of. But with relationships and conversations at a local level, we can work with them to encourage discernment and provide direction. *Happy YouTubing!*

Should the suffering caused by Covid shake our faith?

Bishop Robert Barron

Should the suffering caused by Covid shake our faith?

Bishop Robert Barron



Following a recent survey suggesting that the Coronavirus has caused many people to question their faith, Bishop Robert Barron of Word on Fire shares his thoughts about faith and suffering. You can watch him discussing this topic with atheist YouTuber Cosmic Skeptic on a brand new episode of The Big Conversation here.

Premier Christian Radio recently commissioned a survey, which investigated how the Covid crisis has affected religious beliefs and attitudes. There were three major findings, namely, that 67 per cent of those who characterize themselves as “religious” found their belief in God challenged, that almost a quarter of all those questioned said that the pandemic made them more fearful of death, and that around a third of those surveyed said that their prayer life had been affected by the crisis.

Justin Brierly, who hosts the popular program Unbelievable?, commented that he was especially impressed by the substantial number of those who, due to Covid, have experienced difficulty believing in a loving God. I should like to focus on this finding as well.

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Objection to Belief

Of course, in one sense, I understand the problem. An altogether standard objection to belief in God is human suffering, especially when it is visited upon the innocent. The apologist for atheism or naturalism quite readily asks the believer: “How could you possibly assert the existence of a loving God given...the Holocaust, school shootings, tsunamis that kill hundreds of thousands, pandemics, etc, etc?”

But I must confess that, in another sense, I find this argument from evil utterly unconvincing. And I say this precisely as a Catholic bishop, that is, someone who holds and teaches the doctrine of God that comes from the Bible. For I don't think that anyone who reads the scriptures carefully could ever conclude that belief in a loving God is somehow incompatible with suffering.

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Suffering in the Bible

There is no question that God loves Noah and yet he puts Noah through the unspeakably trying ordeal of a flood that wipes out almost all of life on the earth. It is without doubt that God loves Abraham and yet he asks that patriarch to sacrifice, with his own hand, his beloved son Isaac.

More than almost anyone else in the biblical tradition, God loves Moses and yet he prevents the great liberator from entering into the Promised Land. David is a man after the Lord's own heart, the sweet singer of the house of Israel, and yet God punishes David for his adultery and his conspiracy to murder.

Jeremiah is specially chosen by God to speak the divine word and yet the prophet ends up rejected and sent into exile. The people of Israel are God's uniquely chosen race, his royal priesthood, and yet God permits Israel to be enslaved, exiled and brutalized by her enemies.

And bringing this dynamic to full expression, God delivers his only-begotten Son to be tortured to death on a cross.

Conclusions in the Bible

Once again, the point, anomalous indeed to both believers and non-believers today, is that the biblical authors saw no contradiction whatsoever between affirming the existence of a loving God and the fact of human suffering, even unmerited human suffering. Rather, they appreciated it as, mysteriously enough, an ingredient in the plan of God, and they proposed

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various schemata for understanding this.

For instance, sometimes, they speculated, suffering is visited upon us as punishment for sin. Other times, it might be a means by which God effects a spiritual purification in his people. Still other times, it might be the only way that, given the conditions of a finite universe, God could bring about certain goods.

But they also acknowledged that, more often than not, we just don't know how suffering fits into God's designs, and this is precisely because our finite and historically conditioned minds could not, even in principle, comprehend the intentions and purposes of an infinite mind, which is concerned with the whole of space and time. Practically the entire burden of the book of Job is to show this. When Job protests against what he takes to be the massive injustice of his sufferings, God responds with a lengthy speech, in fact his longest oration in the Bible, reminding Job of how much of God's purposes his humble human servant does not know:

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world...?”

Whether they half-understood the purpose of human suffering or understood it not at all, no biblical author was tempted to say that said evil is incompatible with the existence of a loving God. To be sure, they lamented and complained, but the recipient of the lamentation and complaint was none other than the God who, they firmly believed, loved them.

The Mystery of God

I don't for a moment doubt that many feel today that suffering poses an insurmountable obstacle to belief in God, but I remain convinced that this feeling is a function of the fact that religious leaders have been rather inept at teaching the biblical doctrine of God. For if human suffering undermines your belief in God, then, quite simply, you were not believing in the God presented by the Bible.

I want to be clear that none of the above is meant to make light of the awful experience of suffering or cavalierly to dismiss the intellectual tensions that it produces. But it is indeed my intention to invite people into a deeper encounter with the mystery of God.

Like Jacob who wrestled all night with the angel, we must not give up on God but rather struggle with him. Our suffering shouldn't lead us to dismiss the divine love, but rather to appreciate it as stranger than we ever imagined. It is perfectly understandable that, like Job, we might shout our protest against God, but then, like that great spiritual hero, we must be willing to hear the Voice that answers us from the whirlwind.

Bishop Robert Barron

Thank God for the atheists who rid us of idols

Erik Strandness

Thank God for the atheists who rid us of idols

Erik Strandness



The Big Conversation is off to a great start. I have to admit that I approached this first episode, which compares Christianity and Atheism, with some trepidation because I worried it would be a conversation between the teacher and the student – the wise and experienced Bishop Robert Barron and the upstart atheist philosopher Alex O'Connor. But I have to admit, O'Connor exhibited a thoughtful intellect beyond his years and demonstrated that he is a force to be reckoned with.

However, while O'Connor gave thoughtful philosophical arguments against Christianity, I felt like some of his answers revealed a certain lack of life experience. This is certainly not his fault, but is inherent in anyone who lacks the requisite gray hair and wrinkles that accompany years of struggling to match thought and reality. At the risk of quoting a problematic public figure, Bill Cosby framed the nature of the discussion quite nicely:

“Gray hair is God’s graffiti.”

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The question posed by *The Big Conversation: Christianity or Atheism*: Which makes best sense of who we are? is best answered by analyzing our spectacular journey from womb to tomb, because only then can we determine if gray hair is the result of wrestling with God or struggling to be the most fit survivor.

A Big Conversation deserves a big blog, so I will present it in two parts. The first blog will address the problem of arguing about the existence of an abstract God rather than the God of the Bible, while the second will focus on the nature of faith and the difficulty of maintaining it in the face of pain and suffering.

The Necessity of Atheism

While atheist critiques are often painful they do serve as a thorn in the flesh to remind us that we must never allow Christianity to become idolatry.

Barron said:

“Atheists serve a very important function and that’s to debunk forms of idolatry.”

Atheism is iconoclastic because it takes crude perceptions of God and deconstructs them. It lumps all religions together and then forces us to ask why the Christian God is any different? Barron stated it like this:

“When God is construed as one competitive being among many a lot of the problems that the atheists put their finger on emerge...When God is construed competitively, competing for us on the same ontological

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playing field, a lot of the typical atheist reactions occur and they're right to put their finger on that and say that god doesn't exist...Thank God for those atheists who rid us of certain idols."

It is for this reason that we must have conversations with our atheist friends because they actually make us better Christians. O'Connor seems more interested in encouraging us to be thoughtful Christians rather than converting us to atheism. So, perhaps we need to reorient our thinking and spend more time proclaiming the value of the deposit of faith and less time pointing out the poverty of atheism.

The late Christopher Hitchens gave a stark demonstration of the ability of atheists to call Christians back to the heart of their faith in a telling exchange with liberal Unitarian Christian Marilyn Sewell in 2009.

Sewell: "I'm a liberal Christian, and I don't take the stories from the scripture literally. I don't believe in the doctrine of atonement (that Jesus died for our sins, for example). Do you make a distinction between fundamentalist faith and liberal religion?"

Hitchens: "I would say that if you don't believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and Messiah, and that he rose again from the dead and by his sacrifice our sins are forgiven, you're really not in any meaningful sense a Christian."

Ouch! Hitchens had a crystal-clear understanding of the Christianity he opposed while Sewell seemed to have a confused view of the Christianity she supported.

Servant or Syllogism

While the intellectual arguments for the existence of God are quite fascinating, the average person on the street is more likely to have their eyes roll rather than their minds blown. The cumulative evidence brought from academia seems to pale in comparison to the life experience of the common man or woman. While many will plant a philosophical or scientific victory flag on the faith battlefield, the majority of the struggle will have already been fought in the trenches of the heart and soul.

When we remove God from the pages of scripture and distill him into a collection of philosophical abstractions we are engaging in divine profiling and end up defining God by a rap sheet and not a personal encounter. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and not the god of Plato, Spinoza and Kant. He is a God who comes to us as a suffering servant and not as a series of syllogisms.

Father of All Fact-hood

I'm reminded of a scene in C.S. Lewis' magnificent book, *The Great Divorce*, which depicts this delicate balance between intellectual assent and personal relationship. The basic premise of the book is that a busload of ghosts from hell have been transported to heaven where they encounter a variety of heavenly beings who try to convince them to stay.

In one particular scene, an 'Episcopal ghost', who is more interested in pondering the nature of God than actually meeting him, declines the invitation to remain because he must get back to hell in order to deliver

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a paper to a theological society. He's not particularly enamored with the intellectual acumen of this particular society because the members exhibit a "certain lack of grip – a confusion of mind," yet he is determined to present his cutting-edge theory on how Jesus would have been different had he lived to a ripe old age instead of being crucified:

"What a different Christianity we might have had if only the Founder had reached his full stature!"

The ghost is so infatuated with speculating about God that he doesn't have time to meet him in person. The heavenly representative, Dick, responds by explaining what he will miss if he doesn't stay:

"Hitherto you have experienced truth only with the abstract intellect. I will bring you where you can taste it like honey and be embraced by it as by a bridegroom. Your thirst shall be quenched."

The ghost wants to be academically rigorous in hell, but Dick explains that he can be intellectually fulfilled in heaven:

"We know nothing of religion here: we think only of Christ. We know nothing of speculation. Come and see. I will bring you to Eternal Fact, the Father of all other fact-hood."

I tell this story because I often see myself in the person of the Episcopal ghost. I find God to be so interesting that I spend more time learning about him than getting to know him personally. I think this is a particular danger for apologists because they are so smitten with God's CV that they never sit down with him for a personal interview. They are so busy feeding their

minds that they don't taste and see that he is good.

God of the 'Omnis'

We need to be careful when we argue for a God of the omnis (from the Latin meaning 'all' eg omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent), because when we do, we create categories outside of God to which he is held accountable. The divine omnis can be helpful for those who want to describe the nature of a God out there but are quite useless if one wants to invite him into their hearts. When we dissect God's attributes our worship looks more like an intellectual autopsy than a meet-and-greet.

It's difficult to argue for God's philosophical omnipotence in the face of kenosis (Jesus' self-emptying seen in Philippians 2:7). It's a problem to appeal to an all-powerful God who finds power in weakness and who saves through suffering service. Christians must reconcile a God who spoke the universe into existence from heaven and yet also uttered: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" from a Roman cross.

O'Connor related the story of his Oxford University admission interview where he was asked why an atheist would want to study theology:

"I remember thinking that I don't believe any of this, but I want to be sure because if it is true then it's the most important truth that there is."

I appreciate the fact that O'Connor is a sincere seeker of truth but wonder if he will ever achieve omni-assurance if he believes that faith is only a matter of intellectual assent and not a surrendering of the heart.

See You on the Flip Side

Just because we open our hearts to Jesus doesn't mean we check our brains at the door. Our belief system must appeal to both the mind and heart otherwise we won't be able to connect the intellectual initiative with the emotional blood flow necessary to give us the strength to go to the ends of the earth. While we ultimately want to form an emotional bond with God, we cannot forget that he is also the brains behind the operation. He is the Author of academia, so we cannot just worship the lover of our soul but must also acknowledge his professorial prowess.

Barron pointed out that the New Atheism became popular not because it offered any new arguments but because the old arguments fell upon intellectually unprepared ears. Christianity certainly needs to shoulder some of the blame for dumbing down its youth by fostering a stereotype of God as a benevolent old man in the sky, but O'Connor also noted a lack of intellectual acumen and humility amongst his atheist interlocutors.

The problem, therefore, is not unique to either camp but seems to be part of a larger scholarly malaise. Our culture seems to be more enamored with the emotional appeal of *talking points* than the intellectual satisfaction of *talking about points*. Shows like *Unbelievable?* will hopefully gain in popular appeal and help change this cultural dynamic.

Conclusion

Christianity is both a head and heart issue and we dismiss one or the other at our own peril. We must be careful to argue rationally but also remember

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that God made himself empirically known. We need to remember that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob didn't just think about God but actually talked, walked and wrestled with him.

God, therefore, is not just an intellectual exercise but also a relational scrimmage. We cannot get complacent by isolating ourselves in a Christian echo chamber where we only hear what our itching ears want to hear but must open the doors and windows and let opposing voices be heard because only then will we truly recognize the distinctiveness of the Shepherd's voice.

Barron and O'Connor have demonstrated that rigorous discussion need not result in winners and losers but rather an edified audience.

Dr. Erik Strandness is a physician and Christian apologist who has practiced neonatal medicine for more than 20 years

Bishop Barron's 'luring horizon' – why faith in God is a surrender at the far side of reason

Erik Strandness



Erik Strandness shares some further thoughts about a recent debate between Bishop Robert Barron and Alex O'Connor (aka CosmicSkeptic).

I, like many others, have stared at the vast night sky and asked: “What lies beyond?” It’s a crude form of the contingency argument that I think most people have entertained at one time or another. Why would we even ask that question? I believe it’s because we see a contingent sky and wonder if maybe there is a larger non-contingent behind it all.

In a recent Big Conversation between Bishop Robert Barron and Alex O'Connor, Barron described this as a “*luring horizon*” that calls us beyond all knowledge. A horizon that he believes represents God:

“God, if you want, is not of the things in the world that I might find, any of the truths my mind might discover, it’s not some good I might achieve, but a kind of a luring horizon for the inner dynamism of the spirit.”

C.S. Lewis described this desire for the horizon as ‘sehnsucht’:

“The inconsolable longing in the human heart for we know not what. A yearning for a far, familiar, non-earthly land one can identify as one’s home.”

Lewis was *surprised by the joy* he experienced when he realized that this longing was complete only in that which he couldn’t possess. It’s a way of thinking that deviates from our usual ‘desire and acquire’ mentality and can be more accurately described as ‘admire the desire’. Contrary to what our critics may say, this longing for the horizon doesn’t eliminate the intellect but engages it even more fervently:

“Such longing is in itself the very reverse of wishful thinking: it is more like thoughtful wishing.” (C.S. Lewis – Narrative Poems)

Perhaps, O’Connor needs to distinguish between knowledge and his insatiable desire to know. The longing he has for logical certainty may never be satisfied until he encounters Logic Itself.

Pursuing the Perimeter

O’Connor described the acquisition of knowledge as a circle that expands

every time a new question is generated by a new piece of information. Academicians view this receding horizon as the elusive “theory of everything” while the Christian views it as God. O’Connor appropriately raised the concern that without an honest intellectual pursuit of the edges of knowledge, Christianity offers nothing more than an academically lazy God-of-the-horizon argument. If we view God as a vague horizon then any god will do.

It’s acceptable to acknowledge a certain mystery surrounding God but unacceptable if we use that as an excuse not to plumb its depths. I would argue that since the expanding circle of knowledge is full of information, we can infer that what lies on the edge is an Information Generator. We have clues about the identity of this God because He has left a paper trail of revelation.

Unlike Tiamat, Brahman or Mother Earth, the Christian God has been a revealer since the very beginning when “*God said...*” He has made Himself known through His creational words, scriptural Word and incarnate Word. And while we can’t know all of His thoughts, we are acutely aware that He has spoken. We are the only creatures on this planet equipped with divine voice recognition software and, as such, we know the Shepherd’s voice.

The horizon calls to both the atheist and the Christian. The difference, however, is that the Christian has evidence to suggest that it ends in a Mind while the atheist believes it ends in a warm little pond. As we attempt to move closer to the luring horizon, we need to ask ourselves if we are pursuing the material edge of reality or longing for the beginning of eternity.

What is Faith?

I think it's fair to define faith as confidence in the identity of the Horizon. O'Connor argued that reason should be able to bring us to its doorstep, while Barron said that reason could only bring us so far and then we would have to take a step of faith:

“Faith, authentically construed, is always supra-rational. It's a surrender at the far side of reason.”

Barron explained that it's not a step into the unknown because, *“Faith is a response to the revealing God.”* O'Connor respects the rational pursuit of God, but I suspect he would have a difficult time laying down his intellect and *“surrendering at the far side of reason”*.

I got the sense that O'Connor would become a believer only if God could be logically proven and not because he had run out of syllogisms.

Quantum Questions

I think an excellent example of the differences between the way the two guests viewed the pursuit of God occurred when they discussed the trinity (available as part of the podcast version – YouTube viewers will need to subscribe to The Big Conversation newsletter to receive it as a bonus video). O'Connor couldn't get past the logical impossibility of three adding up to one, while Barron embraced it in terms of the love between the lover and beloved.

“If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:2)

I think O'Connor needs to look past analytical philosophy because something deeper is going on. Analytical philosophy is like classical physics – it explains our day-to-day operations but breaks down once you ask deeper quantum-like questions. I hope that while O'Connor does the important work of counting petals, he also takes a moment to smell the roses. C.S Lewis explains it this way:

“The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust them; it is not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things – the beauty, the memory of our own past – are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.” (C.S. Lewis – The Weight of Glory)

The True Starting Point

It wouldn't be a proper discussion between an atheist and Christian if the subject of pain and suffering wasn't brought up and the show didn't disappoint.

O'Connor interestingly wanted to use pain and suffering as a logical

starting point for the truth of Christianity:

“If I cannot get from the existence of suffering, which is undeniable. If I can’t find a root from that suffering to the existence of a loving God, then I can’t use Christianity to make sense of the world that I find myself in.”

I appreciated his desire to take perhaps the most troubling issue in this debate and use it as a starting point to build a logical argument for the truth of Christianity, because then if it fails this most important test it can be rightly rejected. However, I think he has bypassed a crucial step in his argument. I think an even more foundational starting point is to ask why people think pain and suffering is bad in the first place. Surely, a material creature that evolved through thousands of years of survival of the fittest wouldn't find pain and suffering surprising at all.

Garden Life

If the road to the most highly evolved creature involved the pain, suffering and death of the unfit, why did we suddenly wake up and think it was so horrific? While the existence of Eden may be controversial, we all seem to think that a comfortable garden life is preferable to a thorny wilderness existence.

Why are we the only creatures on the planet that save extinct species even though they have failed evolution 101? Why do we waste resources trying to get beached whales that don't seem to understand survival of the fittest back out to sea?

We seem to think creatures shouldn't suffer, yet our nearest common ancestors don't seem to give it a second thought. The first question in any logical argument about pain and suffering should be: why do we care?

Justifying or Redeeming Suffering?

I was a bit disappointed by Barron's appeal to God's sovereignty as an explanation for pain and suffering. He compared God to the author of a book who knows the entire plot line and a cast of human characters who may experience tragedy but are unaware of its importance in the larger story. O'Connor made a profound point:

"It's good for the plot line, but it's not good for the character and that's the point here...The theodicy that's been proposed here is one saying that evil is allowed because some greater good can be brought from it, which means that the corollary of this is that any time something evil exists, anytime bad exists, it exists precisely because some good is going to be brought out of it. That is to say that evil is an indication that something good is happening...which is to say that these things are worth celebrating." (My emphasis)

Personally, I have a hard time justifying pain and suffering by appealing to God's sovereignty alone. I do believe that God allows pain and suffering, not to teach a lesson, but rather to allow for the possibility of redemption. The ultimate manifestation of the Christian God is as a suffering servant, a God that takes on pain and suffering, and rather than explain it away, transforms it into the best news ever.

Pain and suffering exist whether we believe in God or not. Therefore the question is: what do we do with this ever-present reality? The Buddhist avoids it, the Hindu believes it refines them for the next life, the New Spiritualist tries to suppress it by thinking happy thoughts and the atheist shrugs their shoulders. The Christian, however, looking to the example of their Savior redeems it for something better.

Philosopher Chaplain

Justin turned the tables and asked O'Connor to offer the atheist response to pain and suffering. O'Connor honestly admitted that he had no response, but said he wouldn't give false consolation:

“I don't know what I would say to a friend who is dying. I don't claim to have an explanation for why this is happening. I don't claim to have an answer to how justice will be served, but the one thing I won't do is offer false consolation to my dying friend...Unless I'm certain and I'm able to say listen I know why this is happening, don't worry, you can relax, everything's going to be OK. If I don't have philosophically sufficient grounds to say that, then it would not just be foolish but malicious of me to lie to them.”

I appreciate O'Connor's allegiance to his intellectual integrity, but as one who has had to walk families through the death of their babies, I can assure him that the vast majority do believe that something lies beyond the horizon and are grateful when someone tells them everything will be OK. I'm thankful we have philosophers to make sure we think straight, but I am also relieved that ministering to dying patients isn't included in their job

description. Syllogisms pale in comparison to prayers. And survival of the fittest is inadequate consolation for those whose health is failing.

I hope I have given you some ideas to ponder and I want to encourage you to listen to the program because you will be blessed. It was an outstanding discussion between two formidable gentlemen and if the rest of the Big Conversations are as excellent as this episode, then we are in store for a wonderful year of transformative talk.

Dr. Erik Strandness is a physician and Christian apologist who has practiced neonatal medicine for more than 20 years

The Big Conv ersa tion

The Big Conversation is a unique video series from Unbelievable?, the flagship apologetics and theology discussion show on Premier Christian Radio in the UK.

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We believe there is too much heat and not enough light when we discuss faith online. That we won't make progress until we can learn to discuss and disagree well.

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