

## Russell Blackford



*Unbelievable!*

When I was no older than 9 – for I recall the modest house in Belmont South, near Newcastle, Australia, where my family lived at the time – I concluded that the Bible stories I'd been exposed to were merely the mythology of our Christian age. The citizens of a future age, perhaps thousands of years hence, would, so I thought, have no more inclination to treat the stories as true than my relatives and teachers were disposed to believe in the gods of the Greeks and Romans. As it seemed to me, moreover, those future citizens would be *justified* in their blasé atheism.

Four decades and more later, I see much wisdom in that small child's conclusion, but for a time – roughly spanning my adolescent years – I attempted to *believe* Christianity's implausible claims. I can blame it on peer-group pressure, perhaps, since I fell in with a religious group of kids at high school, but at any rate I struggled for some years to find cogent reasons for Christian belief. My efforts at self-deception bore fruit, and I eventually became the Vice-President of the Evangelical Union (the EU) on my university campus. Yet I always had serious doubts at the back of my mind – often, in fact, rather closer to the front of it. Much about the whole worldview of evangelical Christianity (and all the other sorts that I knew of) seemed unbelievable.

I never did rise to the EU presidency, or to whatever loftier heights might have revealed themselves beyond it: perhaps some Christian ministry. Toward the end of my one-year term of office – I was then 19 or 20 – I concluded once and for all, but not without anguish, that

I couldn't subscribe to the Christian worldview. I quietly dropped out of evangelical activities, concentrated on my studies and the complications of my youthful love life, and made little fuss about my hard-won disbelief. Since then, I've often thought back to that formative period of my life, but I've never seriously wavered.

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It's not one single fact that makes orthodox forms of Christianity, and with them the entire tradition of orthodox Abrahamic theism, so unbelievable. There are innumerable tensions between (on the one hand) Abrahamic theism's image of the cosmos, our own planet, and humanity's exceptional place in the natural order and (on the other) the image that is gradually being revealed by well-corroborated, mainstream science. That said, my most serious problem was, and still is, with any view of the world that posits its creation by a loving and providential, yet all-powerful and all-knowing deity.

This, of course, relates to the traditional problem of evil: the difficulty involved in squaring God's power, knowledge, and perfect goodness with the presence of evil in the world. Note, however, that it is almost a cliché in current academic philosophy that the *logical* problem of evil can be solved, since, for a start, there is no formal contradiction in merely asserting the following:

- 1 God is all-powerful and all-knowing.
- 2 God is perfectly good.
- 3 There is evil in the world.

Further premises have to be relied upon if we are to produce a formal contradiction, but these are always open to challenge. Say, for example, that we postulate that an all-powerful, all-knowing being would be *capable* of removing or preventing evil, and that a perfectly good being would *wish* to do so. There is every prospect of employing additional premises something like these in a deductively valid argument that God, as described, does not exist. But are the additional premises acceptable?

It is often suggested by apologists for religion that a perfectly good being would *not* wish to remove or prevent all evil. Perhaps the risk (at least) of evil actions and events is logically necessary if human beings are to possess and exercise free will. Or perhaps the presence of some

evil is logically necessary for certain (allegedly great) goods to exist. For example, it might be logically necessary that there be at least some suffering in the world if it is going to contain feelings and acts of compassion. Even God must defer to logical necessity.

Well, perhaps. But at least two points must be made here. First, I see no evidence that the required form of free will – some sort of ultimate independence from the causal order that shaped us – is ever actually possessed by human beings in any event. We possess many abilities that it's rational to value: the ability to deliberate; the ability to reflect on our own values (but not from an Archimedean point outside them all); the ability to act in ways that are expressive of our values; and (often) the ability to affect the world by our choices. It may make sense to call these, compendiously, a capacity for "free will." But we are not ultimate self-creators, and we never possess free will *all the way down* below the events that shaped how we *are* (such as our genetic potentials and early childhood experiences).

Second, the ways of God can always be justified in one far-fetched manner or another. Despite all the horrific pain, suffering, and misery that we see in the world, it is always possible to identify *something* that logically depends on it, and then assert that this "something" is so stupendously valuable as to justify the pain, the suffering, the misery. When we think otherwise, might we be too squeamish? Might our values be too bland and shallow when we want people and other sentient things to be happy, not to be forced by circumstances to endure horrific pain, and so on? Perhaps we should actually want a world much like what we have: a world that is rather tigerish, with the constant prospect of pain, and suffering, and misery never far away (not to mention individual and mass death), but also with derring-do and heroism. Whatever *we* may think, so this approach suggests, God is justified in allowing all the horrors that he does in order to achieve what is greatly and truly valuable.

All this, I submit, is logically consistent – but what kind of mentality would actually *believe* it, while also taking the horrors seriously?

As we survey the vast abundance of the world's awful circumstances, the endlessly varied kinds of exquisite pain, the deep suffering and sheer misery, inflicted over untold years on so many human beings and other vulnerable living things, it is not believable that a *loving* and *providential* (yet all-powerful and all-knowing) God would have remotely adequate reasons to permit it all. It is not, I emphasize, *logically impossible* that such a God could have his (mysterious) reasons.

But what is the evidence for this picture, or anything remotely like it? Until we can be convinced, by cogent arguments, of a loving and providential God's existence, our best response to callous-sounding theodical rationalizations of pain and suffering is one that blends intellectual incredulity with moral repugnance.

Moreover, the cogent arguments have never been offered. Even the most promising arguments for the existence of some transcendent Creator (such as those which refer to an alleged fine-tuning of fundamental physical constants) go nowhere near establishing the existence of a *loving* and *providential* God.

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On further reflection, the theists' problems become even worse. Why would a loving and providential (as well as all-powerful and all-knowing) deity leave us in such doubt as to its very existence, requiring us to rely on, at best, ambiguous experiences, doubtful evidence, and murky arguments? Why, in particular, would such a being leave us without clear assurance of its presence and love, and with no definitive explanation of its reasons for allowing the world's continuing horrors?

Why, moreover, has this being employed biological evolution to bring about rational life forms like us, when its choice of the slow and clumsy methods of mutation, survival, and adaptation has foreseeably led to untold cruelty and misery in the animal world, imperfect functional designs, and a timeframe of billions of years for rational life to eventuate? An all-powerful and all-knowing being could have chosen the outcome it wanted, then brought it about, with no functional imperfections, in a blink of time or in a timeframe of mere days and nights, such as described in the opening verses of Genesis.

Again, answers can be attempted, and it is perhaps not *logically impossible* that a loving, providential (etc.) God could have good reasons for all this. But once again, unless we have independent evidence that such a being exists, we should look upon the excuses offered on God's behalf with open-mouthed incredulity.

In short, the arguments *against* the existence of a loving and providential (etc.) God are convincing, and no truly persuasive argument has ever been advanced *for* the existence of such a being. If the latter argument ever becomes available, we might then be swayed to accept that this being exists, while lamenting that its full motivation is so opaque

to mortal men and women. But as things stand, we should conclude that there is no loving and providential (etc.) deity looking over us. At least with respect to *this* portrayal of God, it is most rational to be an atheist.

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Earlier, I mentioned that my initial reaction to renouncing Christianity was a quiet one. I dropped out of evangelical activities, but made no fuss about it. That may have been partly from a sort of cowardice, a wish to avoid confrontations, but it was partly, too, from a heartfelt wish to protect the feelings of friends and loved ones. In any event, my life had other priorities.

But times have changed. In the 1970s, or even the 1990s, it was possible to think that further challenges to religious philosophies, institutions, and leaders were unnecessary. All the heavy work had been done, and religion was withering after the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, Darwin, and the social iconoclasm of the 1960s. The situation is now very different, even in the supposedly enlightened nations of the West: a revived Christian philosophy is well entrenched within Anglo-American philosophy of religion; deference is frequently given to specifically religious moralities during the policy-making process over such issues as stem-cell research and therapeutic cloning; and well-financed attempts are made to undermine public trust in science where it contradicts the literal Genesis narrative.

The struggle of ideas is far from over, and this is a good time to subject religion and all its claims to searching skeptical scrutiny. Those of us who do not believe now have more than enough reason to dispute the unwarranted prestige enjoyed by the many variations of orthodox Abrahamic theism (and other religious systems). We should challenge the special authority that is accorded, all too often, to pontiffs, priests, and presbyters. This is a good time for atheists, skeptics, and rationalists, for humanists, doubters, philosophical naturalists – whatever we call ourselves – to stand up openly and start debating. There's no time like now to voice our disbelief.