

IS GOD REAL?

EXPLORING THE ULTIMATE
QUESTION OF LIFE

LEE STROBEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

 ZONDERVAN
BOOKS

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Is God Real?

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*To Tony and Debbie Ferguson ☒
encouragers*

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INTRODUCTION

Exploring Whether God Is Real

Believing in something doesn't make it true. Hoping that something is true doesn't make it true. The existence of God is not subjective. He either exists or he doesn't. It's not a matter of opinion. You can have your own opinions. But you can't have your own facts.

Ricky Gervais, "Why I'm an Atheist," all

Comedian, December 9, 2010

More than two hundred times a second, around the clock, someone is asking an online search engine about God—often with the simple inquiry, “Is God real?” If you type that question into Google, you’ll get 3.7 billion results in two-thirds of a second—a digital tidal wave that generates more confusion than enlightenment.¹

As for those who seek wisdom from the disembodied voice of Siri, there’s only disappointment. Asked if God is real, she replies with a seeming shrug: “It’s all a mystery to me.” Even Artificial Intelligence comes up short. When ChatGPT is asked whether God exists, it offers a shallow overview of competing perspectives before concluding, “I cannot give a personal opinion on this matter.”

Indeed, the question of whether God is real is the most

consequential issue of all because so much hangs on the answer. What exactly is at stake? As evolutionary biologist and atheist William Provine said, if there is no creator, then these are the inescapable implications:

- ☒ There's no evidence for God.
- ☒ There's no life after death.
- ☒ There's no absolute foundation for right and wrong.
- ☒ There's no absolute meaning for life.
- ☒ People don't really have free will.²

In recent years, the percentage of Americans who believe in God has been declining. According to Gallup, 87 percent said they believed in God in 2017, but that number dropped to 81 percent by 2022—the lowest in American history. In contrast, the number was 98 percent in 1967. When pressed about whether they are *certain* that God exists, only 64 percent of US adults

now say yes.³

"The question of whether God is real is the most consequential issue of all because so much hangs on the answer."

Still, there are some positive spiritual signs as well. A survey in late 2022 showed that three

out of four US adults said they want to grow spiritually, and nearly half (44 percent) said they are more open to God today than before the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Three-quarters of Millennials say they're "searching for a sense of purpose in life."⁵

The numbers are starker for younger Americans. Generation Z (those born between 1999 and 2015) has been called the first post-Christian generation. For them, said Barna Research, "'atheist' is no longer a dirty word." They are twice as likely to call themselves atheist as older adults (3 percent versus 6 percent)⁶

At the same time, rates of depression and anxiety are soaring among young people. According to a 2023 report by the Centers for Disease Control, “almost 60 percent of female students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year and nearly 25 percent made a suicide plan.”⁷

“The bad news is that Gen X is flat on its back, knocked down by sadness, loneliness, and anxiety,” said youth ministry expert Greg Stier. The good news, he said, is that this sense of hopelessness is resulting in an increased openness to seeking spiritual answers.⁸

Shane Pruitt, who travels the country to speak with young people about faith, said in 2023, “I’ve personally seen more college students and teens start following Jesus in the last three years than in the previous eighteen years of ministry combined.”⁹

Pollster David Kinnaman put it this way: “The rumors of Christianity’s demise among younger people are greatly exaggerated.”¹⁰ In fact, predictions about the death of Christianity in America date back two hundred years, with Thomas Jefferson claiming in the 1820s that Christianity would soon give way to a more modern faith that eschewed miracles. Yet these prognostications have failed to materialize.¹¹

I’ve spoken with a lot of people from various generations and found that so many of them are sincerely interested in exploring faith, with quite a few genuinely intrigued and even enthralled by Jesus. In my view, it’s difficult not to have a sense of spiritual optimism, despite some of the troubling trends.

Right now, where do you stand on the question of whether God is real? Does the needle on your spiritual gauge point more toward skepticism or belief? Or would you say you’re somewhere in the middle, not hostile toward faith but honestly interested in following the evidence wherever it leads?

Reflecting Belief in ☒ ☒

Among those who are convinced that God doesn't exist is British comedian and armchair philosopher Ricky Gervais. In an essay titled "Why I'm an Atheist," he explained that when he was about eight years old, Jesus was his hero. One day, he was at the kitchen table drawing a picture of Christ when his older brother Bob came in and asked, "Why do you believe in God?"

Said Gervais, "Just a simple question. But my mum panicked. 'Bob,' she said in a tone that I knew meant, 'Shut up!' Why was that a bad thing to ask? If there was a God and my faith was strong it didn't matter what people said. Oh . . . hang on. There is no God. He knows it, and she knows it deep down. It was as simple as that. I started thinking about it and asking more questions, and within an hour, I was an atheist."¹²

Others have reached a similar conclusion for varying reasons. The founding publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, Michael Shermer, told me he was led to Christ by his friend George when they were in high school, though Shermer admits he had mixed motives because he thought a conversion might help his odds of dating George's sister. Shermer lived as an evangelical Christian until he gradually lost his faith in college, where a professor attacked his beliefs and Shermer didn't find satisfying answers to some of his nettlesome theological questions.

Then his college sweetheart became paralyzed in a motor vehicle accident. Shermer asked God to heal her, and yet she remained disabled. I asked Shermer, "Was this the final nail in the coffin of your faith?" He replied, "Yeah, that pretty much did it. I was like, 'Ah, the heck with it.'"¹³

Can you relate to that? Has there been a time when you called out to God during a crisis but felt like you were only talking to yourself? For some people, God seems too hidden to be real.

Charles Templeton was the pastor of a burgeoning church in Toronto and pulpit partner of renowned evangelist Billy Graham before morphing into Canada's best-known spiritual skeptic. When I asked Templeton if there had been one thing in particular that caused him to lose his faith in God, he said it was a photograph in *Life* magazine many years earlier.

"It was a picture of a Black woman in northern Africa," he told me. "They were experiencing a devastating drought. And she was holding her dead baby in her arms and looking up to heaven with the most forlorn expression. I looked at it and I thought, *Is it possible to believe there is a loving or caring creator when all this woman needed was rain?*"

He shook his head. "I immediately knew it is not possible for this to happen and for there to be a loving God. There was no way."

Interestingly, though, Templeton broke down in tears during our interview because he said he missed Jesus—and there's reason to believe he did ultimately return to faith in God on his deathbed a few years later.¹⁴

Scholar Bart Ehrman said he left Christianity to become an agnostic partly because his research on the text of the New Testament cast doubt on the Bible's reliability—ironic because he dedicated his book on the topic to his mentor, Bruce Metzger, who told me that his own study of the matter only served to *deepen* his faith.¹⁵

Like Templeton, Ehrman also attributed his abandonment of Christianity to his inability to reconcile the existence of pain and anguish with a loving God. "For many people who inhabit this planet, life is a cesspool of misery and suffering," he wrote. "I came to a point where I simply could not believe that there is a good and kindly disposed Ruler who is in charge of it."¹⁶

Among evangelical Christians, a phenomenon called

deconstruction has been gaining notoriety in recent years. Some people have found that this systematic dissecting and reexamining of their beliefs has led to a stronger and more secure faith in the end. But Alisa Childers, author of *Another Gospel* has warned that “sometimes the Christian will deconstruct all the way into atheism.”¹⁷ In many instances, she said, the deconstructed faith fails to retain “any vestiges of actual Christianity.”¹⁸

The size of the trend is uncertain, but by 2023, there were already nearly 350,000 posts on Instagram using the hashtag #deconstruction.¹⁹ Said Sean McDowell and John Marriott in their book *Set Adrift: Deconstructing What You Believe without Sinking Your Faith*, “College students and young adults are finding it increasingly difficult to retain their faith and, as a result, are deconverting from it.”²⁰

As for me, however, I went in a far different direction. I deconstructed my atheism.²¹

From Skepticism to Belief

For years, I was a happy spiritual skeptic, with degrees in journalism and law and enjoying my career as a legal editor at the *Chicago Tribune*.²² Then my agnostic wife’s conversion to Christianity prompted me to spend nearly two years investigating whether God is real, focusing largely on the resurrection of Jesus.

Reluctantly, I became convinced that Jesus not only claimed to be the unique Son of God, but he also proved it by rising from the dead. I put my trust in Christ in 1981, and my life has never been the same—in a good way!

In fact, I’ve seen that kind of story again and again among people I’ve encountered down through the years. For example, just from within my sphere of relationships are these stories:

- ☒ J. Warner Wallace, a cold-case homicide detective, used his well-honed investigative skills to painstakingly analyze the historical reliability of the Gospels. He concluded that these written accounts “reliably and accurately described the resurrection of Jesus without ulterior motive.” When he realized this, “everything changed for me.”²³ He renounced his atheism and wrote the bestselling book *Cold-Case Christianity*.²⁴
- ☒ Sarah Salviander, an astrophysicist raised by atheists, believed that Christianity was “philosophically trivial.” But as she was studying deuterium abundances in relation to the big bang, she became “‘completely and utterly awed’ by the underlying order of the universe and the fact it could be explored scientifically”—and she became a Christian.²⁵ “I was awakened,” she said, “to what Psalm 19 tells us so clearly: ‘The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands.’”
- ☒ Stephen McWhirter, a musician, was a methamphetamine addict. The troubled son of a pastor, he hated Christianity and yet he inexplicably accepted a book from a friend about Jesus. As he read it at 3:00 a.m. amidst his drug paraphernalia, he encountered the presence of the living God. “I went from addiction to redemption,” he said, “because God’s real.” Today he writes Christian worship songs.²⁶
- ☒ Guillaume Bignon, a cynical software engineer, became a Christian after studying, among other topics, the nature of morality. Concerning his exploration of faith, he said, “I had to force myself to be open-minded because I really wanted everything to be false.” But his skepticism withered the more he explored the evidence. He not only be-

came a Christian, but he went on to earn his doctorate in philosophical theology and write the memoir *Confessions of a French Atheist*.²⁷

- ☒ Louis Lapidès, a spiritually skeptical Vietnam veteran, examined the ancient messianic prophecies, prompting him to conclude that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the divine Messiah sent to save Israel and the world. Lapidès, raised Jewish, became a Christian and later a minister. “My friends knew my life had changed, and they couldn’t understand it,” he said. “I would say, ‘Well, I can’t explain what happened. All I know is that there’s someone in my life, and it’s someone who’s holy, who’s righteous, who’s a source of positive thoughts about life—and I just feel whole.’”²⁸
- ☒ Holly Ordway, an atheist professor of English literature, started to ask herself, *what if God is real?* Christian fiction planted seeds in her imagination; Christian philosophers provided a counterpoint to her naturalistic worldview; and her fencing coach turned out to be a Christian. “I realized that I could ask my coach questions and feel safe and respected while having a dialogue about these issues,” she said. She ultimately found that the evidence of history “was best explained by concluding that the resurrection really happened.” She became a Christian, a professor of apologetics, and author of the book *Not God’s Type: A Rational Academic Finds a Radical Faith*.²⁹
- ☒ Cody Huff, a drug addict and convicted burglar, was living on the streets of Las Vegas when he went to get a free shower at a church. A volunteer offered a hug and the words “Jesus loves you”—and it was the pivotal moment of his life. “Right away something was different,” he told me. “The more I heard about Jesus, the more I wanted to hear. I couldn’t get enough of the Bible.” He came to

faith, was ordained as a Baptist minister, and devoted the rest of his life to helping the homeless.³⁰

- ☒ Michael Brown, a Jewish hippie with an insatiable appetite for illicit drugs, went to rescue two friends who were attending church in pursuit of girls. Brown got into discussions with Christians about why they believed that God is real. He became a follower of Christ, and now, with a doctorate in Near Eastern Languages, he is among the foremost defenders of Jesus being the Messiah.³¹
- ☒ Thomas Tarrants, a Ku Klux Klan terrorist, was wounded in a shoot-out with the FBI when he went to ☒rebomb the home of a civil rights leader in Mississippi. Sentenced to prison, he escaped and survived another shoot-out in which an accomplice was killed. He then spent three years by himself in a six-by-nine-foot cell—with a Bible. He delved deeply into the Scriptures, eventually coming to a profound faith in Christ that liberated him from his racial hatred. Finally released, he earned his doctorate, was named president of the C. S. Lewis Institute, and became a champion of racial reconciliation.³²

Again, these are just a few of the people I have personally known, and I could have added many others. All of them had some things in common. Despite their initial doubts about God, they kept an open mind and pursued the evidence and arguments wherever it took them. In the end, they were willing to reach an informed verdict in the case for God.

☒earning for the Transcen☒ent

Let's face it, the question of whether God is real resonates deep inside all of us. Who doesn't want to know where we come from

and where we're going after we die? Staring into the darkness in the middle of the night, we tend to wonder about the purpose of life.

Are we accidents of nature, destined to flourish for a brief moment and then wither and decay forever? Or are we the creation of a beneficent God who loves us and imbues meaning into our existence? Is there really hope after the grave, or is that merely wishful thinking from the only species that is able to recognize the horror of its inevitable demise?

From time to time, we feel an innate longing for God—which might actually be evidence that he is real. “One argument for God’s existence regards the aching absence of God in human experience,” said philosopher Douglas Groothuis. “There is, on the one hand, the pained longing for the transcendent and, on the other, the sense of the inadequacy of merely earthly goods to satisfy that longing. . . . We all experience a deep sense of yearning or longing for something that the present natural world cannot fulfill—something transcendentally glorious.”³³

He pointed out that C. S. Lewis talked about several instances in which he sensed something wonderful beyond his grasp. “These were fleeting but invaluable moments, which he called the experience of ‘joy,’” Groothuis said. “They were indicators that the everyday world was not a self-enclosed system; a light from beyond would sometimes peek through the ‘shadow lands.’ This thirst, which is intensified by small tastes of transcendence, indicates the possibility of fulfillment.”³⁴

Wrote Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire

which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.”³⁵

So perhaps our longing for the transcendent is a clue that it actually does exist. And yet there could be another explanation. Maybe our imagination conjures up the idea of God because we desperately want to be rescued from our fear of death. Could it be that we are so frightened by our own mortality that we subconsciously manufacture false ideas about a loving deity and eternity in heaven in order to ease our death anxiety?

One way or the other, our beliefs have very real consequences. How we live our lives and what we value the most inevitably flow from our convictions. The paramount question becomes whether our beliefs

are based on fact or fantasy.

My motive has been to discover truth, regardless of what the implications might be. Maybe that’s fueled by

my investigative reporting at the *Chicago Tribune*, where I relentlessly followed the facts to make sure I was exposing the news as accurately as I could. Or maybe it’s rooted in my law training, where I came to admire the beauty of a legal system designed to ferret out the truth. Regardless, I became obsessed with getting to the bottom of whether or not there’s a God and then living with the consequences, one way or the other.

If he was real, I wanted to know him personally. And if he wasn’t, then I wasn’t interested in playing any religious games.

Because truth matters.

“Our beliefs have very real consequences. How we live our lives and what we value the most inevitably flow from our convictions.”

“Now—Here Is My Secret”

Canadian writer Douglas Coupland, described as “possibly the most gifted exegete of North American mass culture,”³⁶ authored the book *Life after God* nearly three decades ago, and yet its themes remain hauntingly relevant even today.

The book tracks a young man through a troubled era. He’s remorseful over his mistakes. His marriage has stagnated. He’s ensnared in a meaningless job. Instead of deep friendships, he endures what he calls “halfway relationships.” He’s worried that he doesn’t *feel* life the way he used to. But after 358 pages of aimlessness and frustration, this was his conclusion:

“Now—here is my secret:

I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you read these words. My secret is that I need God—that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving—to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness—to bring me love, as I seem beyond being able to love.”³⁸

Maybe you’re a little like Coupland’s character. Perhaps you have a secret too. It could be that your circumstances are causing you to conclude that maybe—*just maybe*—you need God to breathe new hope and life into your world. Or maybe you need him to chisel the crust off a heart that’s corroded with self-interest and cynicism. Or maybe you need him because—well, to be honest, you’re not sure why. You just sense that there’s got to be more to your existence than a job, three meals a day, and the gnawing feeling that something’s missing.

So you've started reading this book to see if it really makes sense to believe that God is real. Questions swirl in your mind. And maybe you're a little afraid of what you might find.

Or possibly you know a lot about the *idea* of God, but you're realizing that you don't really know God *personally*. You went to church as a kid or even went through some religious classes, but all of it has seemed to have numbed you toward God more than sensitized you to him. If someone asked, you'd say you were a spiritual person, although the truth is that a soul-satisfying faith has always eluded you.

Let me suggest this. Before you begin the first chapter of this book, pray a twenty-word prayer that can kindle a revolution in your soul. Pray it even though you may doubt that anyone is listening: *God, if you open my eyes to who you really are, then I will open my life fully to you.*

From your perspective, that prayer may seem peppered with risk. Because if you sincerely pray it, it catapults you from the status of an observer to someone who is intent on getting to the truth about God. You've entered uncharted territory. That old saying pops into your head: "Be careful what you ask for because you might get it."

You may be afraid that if you end up following Jesus, you'll find yourself stuffed inside a moral straitjacket that will suffocate you. Your freedom will be choked by restrictive regulations at a time when you see your life as needing fewer rules, not more.

Maybe you envision a risk of being turned into something you don't want to be—some kind of proselytizer who punctures every sentence with "Amen!" Or someone who forfeits fun in favor of faith.

Or it could be that you see a risk to your self-image if you're forced to concede some things about yourself that you'd rather not talk about. After all, isn't it healthier to focus on all the positive things you've done rather than dredge up your mistakes?

I prayed a prayer like this on January 20, 1980, even though those kinds of worries loomed large for me. I investigated God, encountered him, and then responded to him in a prayer of commitment and faith. Today, I can look back at the revolution that has happened with my life and say with complete candor that those initial risks I imagined were tremendously overblown. Personally, I found the Bible's promise to be true: "God rewards those who earnestly seek him."³⁸

Starting Our Journey of Discovery

What about you? Are you open to the idea of evaluating the evidence and coming to an informed conclusion about whether God is real? Imagine yourself as an umpire behind home plate in a baseball game, calling strikes and balls as you see them, without fear or favor. In other words, your task is to set aside bias and prejudice as best you can.

Will you find an ironclad case? Few things in life can be established without any doubt whatsoever. For instance, we can say with absolute certainty that 2 + 2 = 4. Mostly, though, we make important decisions in our lives based on the preponderance of evidence. *Here do the facts point most convincingly* *hat is consistent with the evidence* *hat is more likely than not to be true* *Does this case make sense*

Look at it this way. Right now, I'm typing on a computer in my home office outside of Houston, Texas. Occasionally, I pause to sip from a bottle of water. But how do I know for sure that the water hasn't been poisoned?

Well, the water comes from a reputable supplier. The bottle was sealed when I got it. The water looks clear. There's no discoloration. It doesn't have an unusual odor. I haven't heard of

anyone else getting sick from drinking water recently. My wife gave me the bottle, and she has no reason to hurt me.

And yet it *could* be poisoned. I don't have absolute proof that it's safe. But I do have sufficient evidence to warrant taking a step of faith by tasting it and finding that it's truly good.

Belief in God is similar. We evaluate the evidence and arguments; we test them with objections; we seek clarity; we pursue further answers. And if we end up with sufficient confidence, we take the advice of Psalm 34:8: "Taste and see that the LORD is good."

In fact, Jesus claimed to offer what he called "living water," saying, "Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."³⁹

So let me take you on a stimulating journey of discovery. Come with me as we travel around America—from Boston to Seattle, from Denver to Los Angeles, from Texas to Indiana—to meet some of the scholars I've interviewed about this foundational question of whether or not God is real. We'll look at science, philosophy, history, morality, and human nature.

And since 52 percent of Americans say they've experienced religious doubt in the past few years,⁴⁰ we'll examine two of the biggest obstacles to belief in God: ☒☒ If he's real, why does he allow suffering in the world? And ☒☒ if he's real, why does he seem so hidden from us?

Remember, much hangs in the balance. Beliefs have real-world consequences. Let these experts make their best case. Evaluate their insights and consider whether there is sufficient evidence to drink deeply from the living water that Jesus offers.

Then *you* decide. Is God real?



CHAPTER 1

THE COSMOS REQUIRES A CREATOR

*Perhaps the best argument . . . that
the Big Bang supports theism is
the obvious unease with which it is
greeted by some atheist physicists.*

**Astrophysicist C. J. Isham, "Creation of
the Universe as a Quantum Process"**

My eyes scanned the magazines at a newsstand near my home. A woman graced *Glamour*. Sleek cars streaked across *Motor Trend*. And there on the cover of *Discover* magazine, unadorned, floating in a sea of pure white background, was a simple red sphere. It was just three-quarters of an inch in diameter, not too much bigger than a marble.

As staggering as it seems, it represented the actual size of the entire universe when it was just an infinitesimal fraction of one second old. Cried out the headline, *Where Did Everything Come From?*¹

Thousands of years ago, the Hebrews believed they had the answer: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" are the Bible's opening words.² Everything began, they

claimed, with the primordial *fiat lux*—the voice of God commanding light into existence.³

What's your view of that claim? Does it seem like a simplistic superstition? An unsupported theory? Or perhaps a divinely inspired insight? Does the beginning of the universe really point toward the existence of a divine creator?

For some people, the mere presence of the universe somehow explains itself. "It seems impossible that you could get something from nothing," Bill Bryson said in his book *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, "but the fact that once there was nothing and now there is a universe is evident proof that you can."⁴

But does that make sense? Maybe British astrophysicist Edward Milne was right when he capped a mathematical treatise by saying, "As to the first cause of the Universe . . . that is left for

"I wasn't interested in unsupported conjecture or armchair musings. I wanted the hard facts of mathematics, the cold data of cosmology."

the reader to insert, but our picture is incomplete without Him."⁵

As for myself, I wasn't interested in unsupported conjecture or armchair

musings. I wanted the hard facts of mathematics, the cold data of cosmology, and only the most reasonable inferences that can be drawn from them. That's what sent me to a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, to visit a widely published scholar who has studied and debated these issues for decades.⁶

INTERVIEW WITH

William Lane Craig, PhD, DTheol

As a college student who graduated in 1971, Bill Craig had been taught that various arguments for the existence of God were weak, outdated, and ultimately ineffective. And that's what he believed—until he happened upon philosopher Stuart C. Hackett's 1957 book *The Resurrection of Theism*.¹

Hackett was a brilliant thinker who took these theistic arguments seriously, rigorously defending them from every objection he could find or imagine. One argument in the book was that the universe must have had a beginning and therefore a creator.

Craig was so intrigued that he decided to use his doctoral studies under British theologian John Hick to see if this argument could withstand scrutiny. He ended up writing his dissertation on the topic—an exercise that launched him into a lifetime of exploring cosmology.

Today, Craig has authored more than thirty books, including *The Kalam Cosmological Argument; Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology*; and *Time and Eternity*, as well as scores of scholarly articles in professional journals of philosophy and theology. In 2016, he was named by *The Best Schools* as one of the fifty most influential living philosophers. He has spoken at major universities around the world, including Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Oxford, Cambridge, and Moscow.

Despite his lofty academic achievements, Craig has an uncanny ability to communicate complex concepts in accessible

and yet technically accurate language—a rare skill I planned to put to the test with this challenging subject.

The *Kalam* Cosmological Argument

“You’re a famous proponent of the *kalam* cosmological argument for God’s existence,” I said as we began our conversation. “Before you define what that is, though, give me some background. What does *kalam* mean?”

“Let me describe the origins of the argument,” he said. “In ancient Greece, Aristotle believed that God isn’t the creator of the universe, but that he simply imbues order into it. In his view, both God and the universe are eternal. Of course, that contradicted the Hebrew notion that God created the world out of nothing. So Christians later sought to refute Aristotle. One prominent Christian philosopher on the topic was John Philoponus of Alexandria, Egypt, who lived in the fourth century. He argued that the universe had a beginning.

“When Islam took over North Africa, Muslim theologians picked up these arguments because they also believed in creation. One of the most famous Muslim proponents was al-Ghazali, who lived from 1058 to 1111.

“Now, back to your question about the word *kalam*—it’s Arabic for ‘speech’ or ‘doctrine,’ but it came to characterize the whole medieval movement of Islamic theology. That was called *kalam*—this highly academic theology of the Middle Ages, which later evaporated.”

“How do you frame the *kalam* argument?”

“As formulated by al-Ghazali, the argument has three simple steps: ‘Whatever begins to exist has a cause. The universe began to exist. Therefore, the universe has a cause.’ Then you can do a conceptual analysis of what it means to be a cause

of the universe, and a striking number of divine attributes can be identified.”

I decided to work my way through all three steps of al-Ghazali’s nearly millennium-old argument, starting with a point that—surprisingly—has become more and more disputed in recent years.

STEP #1: Whatever Begins to Exist Has a Cause

“When I first began to defend the *kalam* argument,” Craig said, “I anticipated that its first premise—that whatever begins to exist has a cause—would be accepted by virtually everyone. I thought the second premise—that the universe began to exist—would be much more controversial. But the scientific evidence has accumulated to the extent that atheists are finding it difficult to deny that the universe had a beginning. So they’ve been forced to attack the first premise instead.”

Craig shook his head. “To me, this is absolutely bewildering!” he said, his voice rising in dismay. “It seems metaphysically necessary that anything which begins to exist *has* to have a cause that brings it into being. Things don’t just pop into existence, uncaused, out of nothing. Yet the atheist Quentin Smith concluded our book on the topic by claiming that ‘the most reasonable belief is that we came from nothing, by nothing, and for nothing.’² That sounds like a good conclusion to the Gettysburg Address of Atheism! It simply amazes me that anyone can think this is the most rational view.

“Generally, people who take this position don’t try to prove the premise is false because they can’t do that. Instead, they fold their arms and play the skeptic by saying, ‘You can’t prove that’s true.’ They dial their degree of skepticism so high that nothing could possibly convince them.”

I asked, “What positive proof can you offer?”

“This first premise is intuitively obvious once you clearly grasp the concept of absolute nothingness,” he said. “You see, the idea that things can come into being uncaused out of nothing is worse than magic. At least when a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat, there’s the magician and the hat!

“But in atheism, the universe just pops into being out of nothing, with absolutely no explanation at all. I think once people understand the concept of absolute nothingness, it’s simply obvious to them that if something has a beginning, it could not have popped into being out of nothing but must have a cause that brings it into existence.”

Admittedly, that was difficult to dispute, but I needed something more substantial. “Can you offer anything harder than just intuition? What scientific evidence is there?”

“Well, we certainly have empirical evidence for the truth of this premise. This is a principle that is constantly confirmed and never falsified. We never see things coming into being uncaused out of nothing. Nobody worries that while they’re away at work, say, a horse might pop into being, uncaused, out of nothing, in their living room, and be there defiling the carpet. We don’t worry about those kinds of things because they never happen. So this is a principle that is constantly verified by science. At least, Lee, you have to admit we have better reason to think it’s true than it’s false.”

Still, my research had yielded at least one substantive objection to *kalam*’s first premise. It emanates from the wacky world of quantum physics, where all kinds of strange, unexpected things happen at the subatomic level—a level, by the way, at which the entire universe existed in its very earliest stages, when electrons, protons, and neutrinos were bursting forth in the big bang.

Maybe our commonplace understanding of cause and effect doesn’t apply in this circus-mirror environment of “quantum

weirdness,” a place where, as science writer Timothy Ferris writes, “the logical foundations of classical science are violated.”³

IS THE UNIVERSE A FREE LUNCH?

I pulled out the copy of the *Discover* magazine with the marble-sized universe on its cover. The article, I said to Craig, says that according to quantum theory, things can materialize out of a vacuum, even though it’s generally pairs of short-lived subatomic particles. In fact, said the article, “the spontaneous, persistent creation of something even as large as a molecule is profoundly unlikely.” Yet in 1973, an assistant professor at Columbia University suggested that the entire universe might have come into existence this way. The whole universe might be, to use MIT physicist Alan Guth’s phrase, “a free lunch.”⁴

“These subatomic particles the article talks about are called ‘virtual particles,’” Craig said. “They are theoretical entities, and it’s not even clear that they actually exist as opposed to being merely theoretical constructs.

“However, there’s a much more important point. You see, these particles, if they are real, do *not* come out of nothing. The quantum vacuum is not what most people envision when they think of a vacuum—that is, absolutely nothing. On the contrary, it’s a sea of fluctuating energy, an arena of violent activity that has a rich physical structure and can be described by physical laws. These particles are thought to originate by fluctuations of the energy in the vacuum.

“So it’s not an example of something coming into being out of nothing or something coming into being without a cause. The quantum vacuum and the energy locked up in the vacuum are the cause of these particles. And then we have to ask, ‘Well, what is the origin of the whole quantum vacuum itself? Where does *it* come from?’”

He let that question linger before continuing. “You’ve simply pushed back the issue of creation. Now you’ve got to account for how this very active ocean of fluctuating energy came into being. Suddenly, we’re back to the origins question.”

Craig’s answer satisfied me. In fact, there didn’t seem to be any rational objection that could seriously jeopardize the initial assertion of the *kalam* argument—and it has been that way since the early philosophers began to use it centuries ago.

STEP #2: The Universe Had a Beginning

Turning to the second premise of the *kalam* argument, I said to Craig, “If we were sitting here a hundred years ago, the idea that the universe began to exist at a specific point in the past would have been very controversial, wouldn’t it?”

“No question about it,” replied Craig. “The assumption ever since the ancient Greeks has been that the material world is eternal. Christians have denied this on the basis of biblical revelation, but secular science always assumed the universe’s eternity. So the discovery in the twentieth century that the universe is not an unchanging, eternal entity was a complete shock to secular minds.”

“How do we really know that the universe started at some point in the past?” I asked.

“Essentially,” said Craig, “there are two pathways toward establishing it. One could be called either mathematical or philosophical, while the other is scientific. Let’s begin with the mathematical argument, which, incidentally, picks up on the thinking of Philoponus and the medieval Islamic theologians I mentioned earlier.”

THE PATHWAY OF MATHEMATICS

The early Christian and Muslim scholars, Craig explained, used mathematical reasoning to demonstrate that it was impossible

to have an infinite past. Their conclusion, therefore, was that the universe's age must be finite—that is, it must have had a beginning.

“They pointed out that counterintuitive absurdities would result if you were to have an actually infinite number of things,” he said. “Since an infinite past would involve an actually infinite number of events, then the past simply can't be infinite.

“Let's use an example involving marbles,” he continued. “Imagine I had an infinite number of marbles in my possession and that I wanted to give you an infinite number of marbles. One way I could do that would be to give you the entire pile of marbles. In that case, I would have zero marbles left for myself.

“However, another way to do it would be to give you all of the odd-numbered marbles. Then I would still have an infinity left over for myself, and you would have an infinity too. You'd have just as many as I would—and, in fact, each of us would have just as many as I originally had before we divided into odd and even! Or another approach would be for me to give you all of the marbles numbered four and higher. That way, you would have an infinity of marbles, but I would have only three marbles left.

“What these illustrations demonstrate is that the notion of an actual infinite number of things leads to contradictory results. In the first case, infinity minus infinity is zero; in the second case, infinity minus infinity is infinity; and in the third case, infinity minus infinity is three. In each case, we have subtracted the identical number from the identical number, but we have come up with nonidentical results.

“For that reason, mathematicians are forbidden from doing subtraction and division in transfinite arithmetic because this would lead to contradictions. You see, the idea of an actual infinity is just conceptual; it exists only in our minds. Working within

certain rules, mathematicians can deal with infinite quantities and infinite numbers in the conceptual realm. However—and here’s the point—it’s not descriptive of what can happen in the real world.”

I was following Craig so far. “You’re saying, then, that you couldn’t have an infinite number of events in the past.”

“Exactly, because you would run into similar paradoxes,” he said. “Substitute ‘past events’ for ‘marbles,’ and you can see the absurdities that would result. So the universe can’t have an infinite number of events in its past. It must have had a beginning.”

However, I spotted an inconsistency. “Then what about the idea of God being infinitely old?” I asked. “Doesn’t your reasoning also rule out the idea of an eternal deity?”

“It rules out the concept of a God who has endured through an infinite past time. But that’s not the classic idea of God,” he said. “Time and space are creations of God that began at the big bang. If you go back beyond the beginning of time itself, there is simply eternity. By that, I mean eternity in the sense of timelessness. God, the eternal, is timeless in his being. God did not endure through an infinite amount of time up to the moment of creation; that would be absurd. God transcends time. He’s beyond time. Once God creates the universe, he could enter time, but that’s a different topic altogether.”

I quickly reviewed in my mind what Craig had said so far, concluding that it seemed logically coherent. “How convincing do you think the mathematical pathway is?” I asked.

“Well, *I’m* convinced of it!” he replied with a chuckle. “In fact, this is such a good argument that even if I had lived in the nineteenth century, when there was little scientific evidence for the beginning of the universe, I would still believe that the universe is finite in the past on the basis of these arguments.”

THE PATHWAY OF SCIENCE

We turned the corner to begin discussing the scientific evidence for the universe being created in the big bang billions of years ago.⁵ “What discoveries began pointing scientists toward this model?” I asked.

“When Albert Einstein developed his general theory of relativity in 1915 and started applying it to the universe as a whole, he was shocked to discover it didn’t allow for a static universe. According to his equations, the universe should either be exploding or imploding. In order to make the universe static, he had to fudge his equations by putting in a factor that would hold the universe steady.

“In the 1920s, the Russian mathematician Alexander Friedman and the Belgium astronomer George Lemaître developed models based on Einstein’s theory. They predicted the universe was expanding. Of course, this meant that if you went backward in time, the universe would go back to a single origin before which it didn’t exist. Astronomer Fred Hoyle derisively called this the ‘big bang’—and the name stuck!

“Starting in the 1920s, scientists began to find empirical evidence that supported these purely mathematical models. For instance, in 1929, the American astronomer Edwin Hubble discovered that the light coming to us from distant galaxies appeared to be redder than it should be, and that this was a universal feature of galaxies in all parts of the sky. Hubble explained this red shift as the result of the fact that the galaxies are moving away from us. He concluded that the universe is literally flying apart at enormous velocities.

“Then in the 1940s, George Gamow predicted that if the big bang really happened, then the background temperature of the universe should be just a few degrees above absolute zero. He said this would be a relic from a very early stage of

the universe. Sure enough, in 1965, two scientists accidentally discovered the universe's background radiation—and it was only about 3.7 degrees above absolute zero. There's no explanation for this apart from the fact that it is a vestige of a very early and a very dense state of the universe, which was predicted by the big bang model.

“The third main piece of evidence for the big bang is the origin of light elements. Heavy elements, like carbon and iron, are synthesized in the interior of stars and then exploded through supernovae into space. But the very, very light elements, like deuterium and helium, cannot have been synthesized in the interior of stars because you would need an even more powerful furnace to create them. These elements must have been forged in the furnace of the big bang itself at temperatures that were billions of degrees.

“So predictions about the big bang have been consistently verified by scientific data. Moreover, they have been corroborated by the failure of every attempt to falsify them by alternative models. Unquestionably, the big bang model has impressive scientific credentials.”

I knew, however, that there have been more recent refinements of the standard big bang model. “How would you assess the health of the big bang model today?” I asked.

“It's the standard paradigm of contemporary cosmology,” he answered. “I would say that its broad framework is very securely established as a scientific fact. Stephen Hawking has said, ‘Almost everyone now believes that the universe, and time itself, had a beginning at the Big Bang.’”⁶

By this point in our discussion, Craig had provided compelling facts to support the two premises of the *kalam* argument. All that remained was its conclusion—and the absolutely staggering implications that logically flow from it.

STEP #3: Therefore the Universe Has a Cause

“Given that whatever begins to exist has a cause and that the universe began to exist, there *must* be some sort of transcendent cause for the origin of the universe,” Craig told me.

“Even atheist Kai Nielsen said, ‘Suppose you suddenly hear a loud bang . . . and you ask me, ‘What made that bang?’ and I reply, ‘Nothing, it just happened.’ You would not accept that.’⁷ He’s right, of course. And if a cause is needed for a small bang like that, then it’s needed for the big bang as well. This is an inescapable conclusion—and it’s a stunning confirmation of the millennia-old Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation out of nothing.”

“Given that whatever begins to exist has a cause and that the universe began to exist, there must be some sort of transcendent cause for the origin of the universe.”

But although logic dictates that a cause sparked the big bang, I wondered how much logic can also tell us about its identity. “What specifically can you deduce about this cause?” I asked Craig.

“There are several qualities we can identify,” he replied. “A cause of space and time must be an uncaused, beginningless, timeless, spaceless, immaterial, personal being endowed with freedom of will and enormous power,” he said. “And that is a core concept of God.”

“Hold on!” I insisted. “Many atheists see a fatal inconsistency. They don’t see how you can say the creator could be ‘uncaused.’ One of them, George Smith, says, ‘If *everything* must have a cause, how did god become exempt?’”⁸

Craig’s eyebrows shot up. “Well, that just misses the point!” he exclaimed. “Obviously, they’re not dealing with the first premise of the *kalam* argument, which is *not* that *everything* has a cause, but that *whatever begins to exist* has a cause. I don’t know

of any reputable philosopher who would say *everything* has a cause. So they're simply not dealing with a correct formulation of the *kalam* argument.

"And this is not special pleading in the case of God. After all, atheists have long maintained that the universe doesn't need a cause because it's eternal. How can they possibly maintain that the universe can be eternal and uncaused, yet God cannot be timeless and uncaused?"

At that point, another objection popped into my mind. "Why does it have to be one creator?" I asked. "Why couldn't multiple creators have been involved?"

"My opinion," Craig answered, "is that Occam's razor would shave away any additional creators."

"What's Occam's razor?"

"It's a scientific principle that says we should not multiply causes beyond what's necessary to explain the effect. Since one creator is sufficient to explain the effect, you would be unwarranted in going beyond the evidence to posit a plurality."

"That seems a little soft to me," I said.

"Well, it's a universally accepted principle of scientific methodology," he replied. "And besides, the *kalam* argument can't prove everything about the creator. Nothing restricts us from looking at wider considerations. For instance, Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed the truth of monotheism, and he was vindicated by his resurrection from the dead, for which we have convincing historical evidence.⁹ Consequently, we have good grounds for believing that what he said was true."

I conceded the point, but at the same time, my mind began to fill with other objections about the identity of the universe's cause. Among the most troubling was whether the *kalam* argument can tell us if the creator is personal, as Christians believe, or merely an impersonal force, as many New Age adherents maintain.

The Personal Creator

“One of the most remarkable features of the *kalam* argument is that it gives us more than just a transcendent cause of the universe, but it also implies a personal creator,” Craig said.

“How so?”

“There are two types of explanations—scientific and personal,” he began, adopting a professorial tone. “Scientific explanations explain a phenomenon in terms of certain initial conditions and natural laws, which explain how those initial conditions evolved to produce the phenomenon under consideration. By contrast, personal explanations explain things by means of an agent and that agent’s volition or will.”

I interrupted to ask Craig for an illustration. He obliged by saying, “Imagine you walked into the kitchen and saw a kettle boiling on the stove. You ask, ‘Why is the kettle boiling?’ Your wife might say, ‘Well, because the kinetic energy of the flame is conducted by the metal bottom of the kettle to the water, causing the water molecules to vibrate faster and faster until they’re thrown off in the form of steam.’ That would be a scientific explanation. Or she might say, ‘I put it on to make a cup of tea.’ That would be a personal explanation. Both are legitimate, but they explain the phenomenon in different ways.”

So far, so good. “But how does this relate to cosmology?”

“You see, there cannot be a scientific explanation of the first state of the universe. Since it’s the first state, it simply cannot be explained in terms of earlier initial conditions and natural laws leading up to it. So if there is an explanation of the first state of the universe, it *has* to be a personal explanation—that is, an agent who has volition to create it. That would be the first reason that the cause of the universe must be personal.

“A second reason is that because the cause of the universe

transcends time and space, it cannot be a physical reality. Instead, it must be nonphysical or immaterial. Well, there are only two types of things that can be timeless and immaterial. One would be abstract objects, like numbers or mathematical entities. However, abstract objects can't cause anything to happen. The second kind of immaterial reality would be a mind. A mind can be a cause, and so it makes sense that the universe is the product of an unembodied mind that brought it into existence.

“Finally, let me give you an analogy that will help explain a third reason for why the first cause is personal. Water freezes at zero degrees centigrade. If the temperature were below zero degrees from eternity past, then any water that was around would be frozen from eternity past. It would be impossible for the water to just begin to freeze a finite time ago. In other words, once the sufficient conditions were met—that is, the temperature was low enough—then the consequence would be that water would automatically freeze.

“So if the universe were just a mechanical consequence that would occur whenever sufficient conditions were met, and the sufficient conditions were met eternally, then it would exist from eternity past. The effect would be co-eternal with the cause.

“How do you explain, then, the origin of a finite universe from a timeless cause? I can only think of one explanation: the cause of the universe is a personal agent who has freedom of will. He can create a new effect without any antecedent determining conditions. He could decide to say, ‘Let there be light,’ and the universe would spring into existence. I’ve never seen a good response to this argument on the part of any atheist.”

Alternatives to the Big Bang

Efforts to come up with alternatives to the standard big bang model have intensified in recent years. Some scientists are troubled by

the fact that the beginning of the universe necessitates a creator. Others are perturbed because the laws of physics can't account for the creation event. "Has this kind of attitude," I asked Craig, "fueled efforts to circumvent the idea of the big bang?"

"I believe it has. A good example is the steady state theory proposed in 1948," he replied. "It said that the universe was expanding, all right, but claimed that as galaxies retreat from each other, new matter comes into being out of nothing and fills the void. So in contradiction to the first law of thermodynamics, which says that matter is neither created nor destroyed, the universe is supposedly being continually replenished with new stuff."

"What was the evidence for it?"

"There was none!" Craig declared. "It never secured a single piece of experimental verification. It was motivated purely by a desire to avoid the absolute beginning of the universe predicted by the big bang model—in fact, one of its originators, Sir Fred Hoyle, was quite overt about this."

Over the next several hours, I peppered Craig with various exotic theories that attempt to eliminate the need for a beginning of the universe. One by one, he was able to explain why they fall short, either because they violate the laws of physics or lack any scientific verification.

One challenge came from the late J. Howard Sobel, a professor at the University of Toronto, who was among the world's leading defenders of atheism. He devoted seventy pages in his magnum opus to critiquing the cosmological argument, though he focused primarily on a version advanced by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and only secondarily addressed the *kalam* formulation popularized by Craig.

Responding in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Craig was able to demonstrate that Sobel's rebuttal of the philosophical

arguments against the infinitude of the past are “fallacious” and that Sobel’s response to the evidence for the beginning of the universe “involves a gratuitous and radical revision of contemporary astrophysical cosmogony.”¹⁰

“What’s important to understand, Lee, is how reversed the situation is from, say, a hundred years ago,” Craig said to me. “Back then, Christians had to maintain by faith in the Bible that despite all appearances to the contrary, the universe was not eternal but was created out of nothing a finite time ago. Now, the situation is exactly the opposite.

“It is the atheist who has to maintain, by faith, despite all of the evidence to the contrary, that the universe did not have a beginning a finite time ago but is in some inexplicable way eternal after all. So the shoe is on the other foot. It’s the atheist who feels very uncomfortable and marginalized today.”

As I sat there in Craig’s office, my mind could conjure up no rational scenario that could derail the inexorable logic of the *kalam* argument. The philosophical and scientific evidence of contemporary cosmology was pointing persuasively toward the

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In other words, God is real.

Now it was time to consider the laws and

parameters of physics. Is there any credibility to the claim that they have been tuned to an incomprehensible precision in order to create a livable habitat for humankind—another category of evidence that, indeed, points toward the existence of God?