

The Day the Atheist Stopped By



A few months ago I was holding a gospel sign on a street corner in Corvallis when a man walked up to me to ask a few questions. He told me his name was Reed Byers, and that he was the vice-president of a local atheist group. He was also the editor of their atheistic newsletter called the *Willamette Freethinker*.

Reed had been seeing our signs around town, and wondered whether he would be able to interview me for the newsletter he edits. I told him that would be fine, so we exchanged contact information. After receiving his email, we invited him and his wife over for a meal, and then had a lengthy discussion after supper. A few weeks later he sent me a list of questions and an essay and invited me to respond to it. He told me to take all the space I needed, and that he would print my response in their next newsletter. Attached is the article that then appeared in the October 2012 issue of *Willamette Freethinker*. May God bless you as you read.

Roger Hertzler

Watchman Gospel Signs

Roger Hertzler:

An exchange of ideas

Editor's Note:

If you drive much around Corvallis, you can't have missed his car. "SIN. DEATH. JUDGMENT. ETERNITY. Are You Ready To Meet God?"

You might also find him standing on a downtown street corner, holding up signs to oncoming traffic, trying to save souls.

That's where I met him. His name is Roger Hertzler, and after years of spotting his vehicle around town, when I spotted him in person, I just had to pull over and introduce myself. I was dying to try and find out what drives a guy to do all this.

I mean, even among Christians, this seems pretty extreme.

It turns out, Roger is NOT a fire-and-brimstone kind of guy. Which is to say, he totally believes in the fire and the brimstone, but he is the direct opposite of the wild-eyed screaming nutcase you might expect. He is an extremely calm, friendly, quiet (even slightly shy) nutcase. :)

And he doesn't want to force anything on anyone; he just wants to politely let you know that, by the way, if you're not taking the Bible quite literally, then you're going to Hell. Have a nice day.

So we traded contact information, and he wound up graciously inviting Angela and me to his house, where I tried to convince myself that I would be able to hold an orderly interview for this newsletter.

We went, we ate, and we held a "spirited discussion" for many, many hours... but as for an orderly interview? Yeah, that didn't happen. (And it was at LEAST as much due to the two of us, as it was to him.)

So I wound up emailing him some questions, and an essay, to respond to as he saw fit. The vast majority of this newsletter is his response.

Now, I know what you're thinking. We atheists are drowning in Christian crap all the time. Why put it in the newsletter?

Well, I promise, this won't be a regular thing... but to me, this is sort of like Columbus talking to the Indians — this is such a COMPLETELY alien mindset, that I'm kind of fascinated.

Skip it (with my apologies) if you must, but if you're curious, come join me on my expedition...



1) Tell us a little about yourself and your family. Were you raised Anabaptist, or did you convert? How about your wife? What do you do for a living? What level of education did you and your wife complete?

Both my wife Phebe and I were raised in Anabaptist homes, for which we are very grateful. However, that fact would be worthless had we not each made a personal surrender to Jesus Christ out of our own free will and by His grace. We have been married 16 wonderful years and have 6 precious children, ages 14 to 1. I do accounting work for a living, primarily income tax preparation, and I have a bachelor's degree in accounting. My wife was obviously smarter than I, since she was able to get all the formal education she needed by grade 10.

2) What is an Anabaptist, and how does it differ from other branches of Christianity? How is it related to the Mennonites?

The Anabaptists are a group of Christians who originated during the reformation of the 1500's. They were committed, to the best of their ability, to a restoration of the faith of Christ and His apostles. Jesus had taught extensively about the kingdom of God, and they believed that this was a real kingdom with a real King (Jesus), with real subjects (true Christians), and real laws (Christ's commands, including those in the Sermon on the Mount). Contrary to both the Catholics and the Protestants, they taught that being a part of Christ's kingdom was a voluntary decision made by each member, rather than a forced conclusion based on the religion in control of your native country. Therefore, those that had been baptized as infants by either the Catholics or the Protestants chose to be baptized again as a sign that they had freely chosen to turn from sin surrender their lives to Jesus Christ. The reaction by the Catholics and Protestants was first to label

them as “Anabaptists” (re-baptizers) and then to slaughter them by the thousands.

The various branches of Mennonites would all be subgroups of the Anabaptists, along with others such as the Amish, the Hutterites, and the German Baptists. (The congregation I attend doesn't happen use any of these other labels, although we certainly wouldn't be offended if you would call us by one of them.)

3a) Do you believe that heaven and hell are real places?

Absolutely.

3b) Is everyone who is not Anabaptist going to hell?

God says prophetically in Revelation 20:15, “Anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.” I have no doubt that there will be both Anabaptists and non-Anabaptists on both sides of this great divide.

4a) Do you allow your children to come to their own conclusions on religious issues?

Yes. My belief would be of no value to them without them believing it themselves. However, I do all I can to influence those conclusions and point them to Jesus, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

4b) Are you concerned that ideas of hell (or other aspects of your religious “intensity”) might be frightening or disturbing to them?

There is a popular idea that we can somehow change reality by what we believe, or that we can choose our truth based on what we like. However, truth is truth regardless of whether I like it or not. Yes, the idea of Hell may be frightening, but if it's true, then I want my children to believe it anyway. They are far better off believing something disturbing that's true than believing something comforting that's false.

5a) Why do you hold signs by the side of the road, and cover your vehicles with religious messages?

I, along with God, do not want people to perish in Hell, but rather to come to repentance. However, even for the wicked who will not repent, God says in Ezekiel 33:7-9 that we are responsible to warn them of the danger they are in, or their blood will be required at our hands.

5b) How often do you stand by the road with your signs?

As often as I can.

5c) Are you accomplishing what you intend?

Yes, I certainly am. In only one short hour with a sign by a busy intersection, I can give a clear warning to thousands of people, converting them permanently from unwarned to warned, and getting their blood off my hands in the process. Even better, some of them will quite possibly go home, think about what they've read, and begin to seek the Lord while He may be found. (It's also been a good opportunity to make new friends, like the time a really nice atheist stopped to talk to me several months ago.)

5d) Do you get more positive or negative feedback from your messages?

It was 51% negative and 49% positive until I met you and your wife Angela, and then those percentages reversed.

Up until then I had never been invited to write for an atheist newsletter, so in case I forget to say it later, thank you very much!



6) Does your religion treat women as equal to men? Can they perform the same jobs, make choices for themselves, speak to God directly? Or are they expected to fill certain roles, be obedient towards men, and have men be the

intermediary, between them and God?

Christ and His apostles (including Paul) invited both men and women into our highest possible position: the role that our Creator has chosen for us. Yes, under God, women and men are equal. But yes, they do have different God-given roles, just like I and the traffic policeman have different roles, though we too are equal. God calls me to submit to the policeman (Romans 13), He calls wives to submit to their husbands and husbands to love their wives (Ephesians 5), and He calls children to obey their parents (Ephesians 6). Since He is our Creator, He has a right to choose these things for us. We may argue and complain and try to come up with our own idea, but the happiest people (both men and women) are those who accept with thanksgiving the role that God has picked out for them. Sadly, many men are failing in their calling to love their wives, which in turn makes it very difficult for the wives to submit to their husbands. But this isn't God's fault. His plan is still perfect, and it is we as humans who have messed it up.

Regarding your question about the intermediary: Christian women, just like Christian men, are invited to

come boldly before God's throne (Hebrews 4:16) without any intermediary other than the Lord Jesus Himself.

7) How about other minorities? Are different races superior/inferior? Is homosexuality a sin?

According to Acts 17:26, different races really do not exist. God created us all as "one blood" and we are all part of the human race. Yes, some of us may have more pigment in our skin than others, but to treat each other differently on that basis is absolutely contrary to everything Jesus and His apostles taught.

The question about homosexuality should have been a totally separate question, but since you asked it here, I'll answer it here. Is homosexuality a sin? If by homosexuality, you mean the condition of being tempted to engage in sexual relations with a person of the same gender, then the answer is no, since temptation by itself is never sin. If, on the other hand, you mean to yield to that temptation and to practice the homosexual lifestyle, then the answer is yes, it absolutely is a sin. God hates it passionately, just as He hates other sexual sins such as cheating on your spouse, having sex outside of marriage, using pornography, or divorce and remarriage. 1 Thessalonians 4:6 tells us that "the Lord is the avenger of all such" sins.

8) You disagree with much of how Christianity is practiced in America. Explain.

Much of what is called Christianity consists of simply giving a mental assent to some facts about Christ, rather than a true surrender to the lordship of Christ. Many teach that all you need to do to be right with God is to have "faith alone" (a term coined by Martin Luther but refuted by Scripture) or to "pray a sinner's prayer". Jesus, on the other hand, said that in order to truly build our lives on Him, we must both hear and obey the commands He gave (Matthew 7). In short, we need to have more than just a mental belief in Jesus. We need to have a relationship with Him, and that relationship needs to be characterized by love, faith, and obedience.

This problem is especially apparent when you look at how American Christians treat the commands of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) on the subjects of war, wealth, and divorce. Jesus told us to love our enemies, yet most Christians today seem to think it's OK for them to go to war and kill their enemies. (If professing Christians would have stayed true to the teachings of Jesus, atheists wouldn't be able to energize their cause by pointing to all the wars that have been fought in the name of Christianity.) Jesus told us not to accumulate wealth for ourselves on earth, yet Christians tend to be among the richest and most selfish people in society. Jesus preached against divorce and also remarriage after divorce, yet the divorce rate among Christians is virtually the same as it is among non-Christians. In short, Christians in America

seem to live as though Jesus said nothing about these subjects, when in fact He said a great deal about them.

In 1 John 2:3-4, we are told that the way to determine whether or not we really know Jesus is by whether or not we obey His commands; if anyone says that he knows Jesus, but doesn't obey His commands, he is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

9) Is America a "Christian nation"?

No. There is no Christian nation, and never has been, other than the kingdom of God. Satan is still the prince of the power of the air, and still exercises control over the nations of this world, even those that may have been influenced by certain principles from the Bible.

When Jesus invited men and women to follow Him, He was calling them to become citizens of His kingdom (see description under question 2) and to give their primary allegiance to that kingdom. Since a Christian's primary allegiance is to Christ's kingdom, the earthly country we live in can only have our secondary allegiance, at best. This will often bring us into conflict with our country of residence, especially when the values of the earthly kingdom clash with the values of the values of the Heavenly kingdom. (For instance, my earthly nation may tell me to join the military and fight against the same enemies that my King, Jesus, commands me to love). Further, we are to live as ambassadors from God's kingdom to the nation where we live, much as earthly ambassadors live in a foreign country in order to represent the interests of their homeland. (For a more thorough description of this relationship, read "The Kingdom that Turned the World Upside Down" by David Bercot.)

10) Explain your thoughts on "separation of church and state". For instance, should public schools be able to lead children in prayer? Should "God" be on our money, and bibles in our courtrooms? Why or why not?

Since I belong to another nation, as described above, these are questions I really don't spend a lot of time worrying about. I've been called to seek first God's kingdom and work for its causes, not to try to legislate godliness in an earthly kingdom which is destined to be destroyed. It would be a losing battle anyway, since all earthly kingdoms are still temporarily under the control of Satan. My calling, rather, is to show as many as possible how they can turn "from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and an inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith that is in Jesus Christ" (Acts 26:18)

It's true that our American society is on a downward slide away any sort of a fear of God, yet I would say the blame lies as much with the moral compromises of Christians as it does with the activism of the atheists. Having said that, though, I do think it is somewhat hypocritical for atheists to work so hard to get the religions of others (such as

Christianity) out of the classroom, but then want to have their own religions (naturalism and evolution) taught in its place. If you want to get religion out of the classroom, then why not get it all out?

11) Explain your biblical views on money. How do you know what is right or wrong with regards to money?

We as Christians are not owners of our money, but simply stewards for the real owner, who is God. As such, we need to listen to what Jesus said about money and act accordingly. So what did Jesus say? First of all, He said, "Woe to you who are rich" and "Blessed are you who are poor" (Luke 6). He also commanded us not to store up wealth for ourselves on earth (Matthew 6) but to sell our possessions and give to the poor (Luke 12). (This is actually a tremendous privilege, because Jesus said that in doing so we are accumulating riches for ourselves in Heaven.) My views are quite simple: Jesus gave these commands to us as Christians, and, at some level, He intends for us to obey them.

To read more about this, you are welcome to read for free my book entitled "Through the Eye of a Needle" by going to <http://www.watchmangospelsigns.com/resources.php>.

12a) When your family gets sick, do you go to doctors?

When necessary.

12b) Do your children get immunizations?

They've gotten some of them.

12c) Do you allow surgery, transfusions, etc, when necessary?

Yes.

12d) Or do you strictly rely on prayer?

See above.

13a) Does prayer always "work"?

No. God Himself says that there are conditions to Him hearing us, and if we don't meet those conditions, He puts Himself under no obligation to grant us our requests.

13b) Does God have a "plan", and does he change it based on prayer?

God does have a plan, and He is sovereign, controlling "all the keys on the ring" so to speak. However, because He is sovereign, He has the right to pull several keys from the ring, give them to us for a limited time, and call it free will. I believe that is exactly what He has done on certain issues, including prayer. So yes, He is willing to work and even "change His mind" in response to believing prayer,

precisely because He is the one who has handed us that key in the first place.

13c) Does he intervene in "small stuff", like football games?

You'll have to check with Tim Tebow about that one. I think his words were, "God doesn't care about football."

13d) What if both sides pray equally hard?

Overtime. (Assuming Tebow is wrong.)

Seriously, though, I believe God is much more concerned about the tens of thousands of people in the stadium who are worshiping the false god of sports than He is about who wins or loses the football game. But could He intervene in the game itself, if He wanted to? Sure.

NOTE TO ROGER: Probably the thing that was the most frustrating to me when we met, was your conviction that science ought to be more accepting of supernatural explanations for events.

So I'm going to try one more time to show you why you are totally wrong, then I'm going to let you try to convince us otherwise. :)

Reed's Essay

To start with, most people have believed in supernatural entities throughout history. [Atheists have NEVER been in the majority.] These people have earnestly tried to believe in supernatural causes for events. The cards have always been "stacked in favor" of supernatural explanations.

And yet, we have never yet found a supernatural explanation that turned out to be true.

We believed in gods of thunder, gods of lightning, gods who made volcanoes explode, gods who pulled the sun across the sky, monsters who swallowed the moon. Comets were signs from God.

Yet we always found non-supernatural explanations that turn out to be true. No matter how many times primitive people performed rituals and "succeeded" in scaring off the monster swallowing the moon, that didn't mean anything. The moon was never in any danger. It was just an eclipse.

We thought illnesses were caused by demons. Nope. Viruses and bacteria.

Surely the earth shaking beneath our feet must be gods or devils! Nope. Earthquakes.

Lightning from the sky must be the wrath of God! Some wrath. Ben Franklin stuck a big long metal pole in the ground and solved that problem.

[Think about that one for a moment. Churches were frequently the targets of lightning strikes, due to their tall steeples. Yet Christians still insisted that lightning was God's wrath! It took science to save them from their own

stupidity, precisely because science did NOT accept the supernatural explanation!]

Ghosts? No evidence. Fairies, leprechauns? Nada, zip. Angels, gods? Suspiciously absent.

If supernatural causes were real, we'd have a lot better than "ghost stories". We would KNOW.

What you CAN'T argue, is that science works, WITHOUT magic. We can land rovers on Mars with pinpoint accuracy. We can create microwaves and microchips.

Has fairy dust ever made someone fly? No. But science has.

If science had accepted the Christian explanation for the movements of the stars and planets, we'd have never travelled to the moon.

If science had accepted supernatural explanations for disease, we'd still be looking for ways to drive off evil spirits (and millions of children would still be dying of polio, measles, mumps, smallpox, and so on).

And which supernatural explanations should science accept? Native Americans had supernatural beliefs. The Muslims have supernatural beliefs. The Greeks and Romans once had supernatural beliefs. I once invented Invisible Massless Purple Unicorns. Someone else invented the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

Whose supernatural explanation should science agree with? What makes your PREFERRED source of supernatural belief (i.e. Christianity) any better than anyone else's?

Christianity doesn't exactly have a great track record for getting things right!

It's OK to not know the answers to things. Throughout history, we've never stopped learning new things, and we never will. By stopping NOW and pointing to something we don't understand yet, and saying "God did it" (or "it's magic"), we don't ACCOMPLISH anything.

Worse! When science gets something wrong, science eventually discovers the mistake and corrects it. But once a supernatural explanation is accepted as true, religious people fight to protect that idea. Religion not only fails to correct the mistake, it actively IMPEDES progress with every ounce of religious fervor.

Here we are in the 21st century, nearly 90 years after the Scopes Monkey Trial, and we STILL struggle to teach basic, well-established science in school, because extremist religious people are threatened by the evidence of the non-supernatural origins of the species.

We develop successful medications every day, by testing on animals — because we understand the degree to which we are related to them. I can point to goosebumps on my skin when I get cold — a feature that only makes sense in a furry animal, because goosebumps raise the fur, improving the insulation and helping the animal stay warm.

But simple, obvious proofs such as these don't sink in, to a religious mind determined to defend his preferred mindset.

Religious people themselves are the best reason why science must never corrupt itself by accepting supernatural explanations.

Only by continuing to study, do we learn the truth. Giving up and saying "God did it" is the worst kind of intellectual malpractice.

Faith does not free thought. It ends it.

NOTE TO ROGER: So, now then — your turn. Take all the space you need, and explain why science should accept the supernatural. Or, if you prefer, prove Jesus (miracles and all) actually existed. [Fair warning: Atheists hear a lot of this stuff. If your Jesus argument is mainly "other people have believed in Jesus and died for those beliefs", well, think about the 19 Muslims on 9/11, and maybe try a different argument...]

Roger's Essay

Thanks, Reed. Once again, I'm very grateful for this opportunity that you've opened up to me. I also appreciate your generous offer to "take all the space you need." It looks like I've more than taken advantage your offer with my longwinded essay, which I've broken down into ten separate points below.

Could I ask one favor from you, right here at the beginning? As I list these points, they will tend to elicit responses from you, and it might be tempting to mix those responses in with my comments. Could I humbly ask, though, that you save your responses until the end, or better yet, until the next newsletter? (That might be asking for too much, but I thought it wouldn't hurt to try.) Either way, here goes.

First of all, you mentioned my "conviction that science ought to be more accepting of supernatural explanations for events." Actually, my contention was that in order to truly be called science, it needs to be a genuine search for truth. This demands the freedom to follow the evidence wherever it leads.

There are a number of artificial restrictions that can impede this important ingredient called freedom. Restriction #1 is a worldview that says "everything is supernatural." This mindset discourages a person from even looking for a natural explanation, and instead simply puts everything into the category of the supernatural. You yourself pointed out the foolishness of this sort of thinking. Restriction #2 is a worldview that says "nothing is supernatural." This worldview is called naturalism, and it basically prohibits the consideration of the possibility that anything exists outside of nature.

My contention is that either of these restrictions will work against a genuine search for truth, since they both take

away the freedom to consider all possible explanations. True scientific freedom, on the other hand, allows us to put all options on the table, both the natural and the supernatural, and then to follow the evidence wherever it leads.

In your essay above, you indicate that it is dangerous to allow scientists to operate in the realm of freedom, since such an environment will make them lazy, and they will automatically gravitate toward the error of restriction #1. You believe scientists will be more productive when under the confines of restriction #2 (naturalism) and threatened with some sort of repercussion if they violate that restriction. I, on the other hand, believe that most scientists are mature enough to operate in the realm of freedom without abusing it. Most of them have a reasonable respect for truth, and they don't have to be told "you're only allowed to look into this box to find it."

However, if you still feel there is a need for such a restriction, then I guess that is your choice; but shouldn't you at least acknowledge that you are advocating scientific restriction rather than scientific freedom? Shouldn't you have the humility to admit that your definition of "science" is not so much a search for truth as it is a search for an explanation that fits into your unproven worldview of naturalism?

And by the way, isn't it a bit of a misnomer for someone to call himself a "freethinker" when in reality he wants to take away scientific freedom (by imposing either of the two restrictions above). A truly free thinker ought to be free to consider any of the available options, shouldn't he? (Perhaps, Reed, I am actually more of a "freethinker" than you are... ☺)

You gave many examples of scientific discoveries and implied repeatedly that these discoveries prove that science is on your side and not mine. Yet the opposite is actually true. These discoveries were made in an environment of freedom, not restriction. Or, perhaps, these scientists were willing to challenge the scientific restrictions of their day, whatever they were. Our scientists need to be willing to do the same with the prevailing ideology of our day, whether it is naturalism, evolutionism, or any other "ism".

Before I can convince you to take an honest look at my worldview, I must first somehow shake your faith in your own. So let's discuss naturalism some more.

Naturalism affirms the non-existence of supernatural beings, on the basis that they cannot be detected using naturalistic testing procedures. But let's ask ourselves, is this reasonable?

Let me illustrate it this way. Suppose you would build a weighing scale that is able to give the weight of any object with pinpoint accuracy. Then you observe that even small objects have at least some weight to them, and you therefore conclude that if something doesn't have weight, then it really doesn't exist. Since everyone around you is talking about this thing called "love", you decide to test

it with your scale to see whether or not there is such a thing. After running a series of super-accurate tests with your scale, you find no evidence whatsoever that love exists, and therefore you conclude that it doesn't. You try to explain your conclusions to a woman engaged to be married, but she just laughs at you, no matter how many charts you can produce to support your theory. She knows for sure that love exists, and that it certainly is not just a figment of her imagination. And even though she cannot give a coherent argument to defend her "faith", she would still be absolutely right and you would be wrong. The problem does not lie with her illogical mind, but in your choice of the wrong tool to detect existence.

The same thing is true of trying to detect supernatural beings through naturalistic testing. Supernatural beings, if they exist, by definition would not be under any obligation to subject themselves to your naturalistic testing procedures. And this applies both to God and to evil spirits. When you walk up to the witch doctor in Africa and offer to "prove" by your naturalistic testing that his powers don't exist, he's going to laugh in your face. He's seen far too much evidence for those powers to believe otherwise, and the fact that the powers stop working while he's in your science lab doesn't shake his faith a bit. The demons he serves have never promised to respond to your laboratory experiments, and he doesn't expect them to. This doesn't mean scientific experiments are worthless; they are just the wrong "machine" to use to try to detect the supernatural.

God has given us plenty of evidence for His existence, including the testimony of nature (Acts 14:17) and the testimony of our own consciences (Romans 2:15) so that we are without excuse. If, however, you are demanding evidence for God's existence which can be detected with the instrument of your choice, and which is of such a nature that it will force you to believe, then I'll be the first to tell you that you're probably not going to find it. God usually is not found by those who do not want to find Him, but says in Jeremiah 29:13, "You shall seek for Me, and find Me, when you shall search for Me with all your heart."

In order to preserve our free will, God will not force us to believe; He is willing for now to stay somewhat hidden from those who want nothing to do with Him. God did not create us to be robots who are compelled into a relationship with Him, but rather to be creatures who freely choose to love and obey their Creator. Yes, God is still honored when we put faith in Him, and just because an atheist says that "faith" is a bad word does not make it a bad word.

There is a popular myth that says that because we can learn a lot about how nature works by looking inside of nature, we should then also be able to discover the origin of the universe by looking inside the universe. This is a little like saying that since I can learn how a computer works by looking inside it, I should therefore also be able to find the origin of the computer by looking inside it. The truth, however, is that even though I can learn a lot

about the computer by looking inside it, I will most likely have to look outside the computer to find its builder. A logical mind would reject as nonsense the idea that the computer simply created itself out of nothing, or that the manufacture must be somewhere inside the computer or else he doesn't exist.

In the same way, although we can learn a lot about nature through scientific study of things inside the universe, it's simply bad logic to say that the creator of the universe must live inside it or else he doesn't exist. If it's reasonable to believe that the computer was made by someone outside the computer, isn't it likewise reasonable to open ourselves to the possibility that the universe was created by someone outside the universe? Isn't it reasonable to conclude that if the computer did not make itself, then the universe likely did not make itself, either?

The thing that keeps people from doing that, however, is the unbending assumption that "this universe is all there is." That assumption, however, needs itself to be tested before it can be relied upon as a solid foundation for finding truth. But since this assumption is both unproven and unprovable, it ought to be left in the category of superstition or religion. (By the way, I am willing to admit that my belief in the existence of God is a religious worldview. Are you willing to admit the same about your belief in the non-existence of God? That also is a position of faith, you know.)

We might as well just face the facts, Reed: something exists. We exist. And the universe exists around us. As we work our way backward from this unbending fact called existence, we are faced with only two options: either something came from nothing, or something had no beginning. We can squirm and philosophize all we want, but we are still stuck with these two possibilities, and no others. Whatever worldview we hold, it needs to answer which of these options is correct, or it's not much of a worldview.

The big weakness in naturalism lies not only in the wrong answers that it gives, but also in the questions that it doesn't even try to answer. Two examples are the questions, "Where did the matter and energy come from?" and "How did the first life begin?" It's become popular lately for atheists to answer these questions a little like this: "We don't know. Ha! See, we are more honest and humble than 'religious' people are, because we are willing to admit that we don't know."

The problem with this approach is that you are saying "I don't know" to some of the most significant questions known to man. These are not tiny little peripheral questions that we can shrug off as inconsequential; rather, they are some of the most meaningful questions of our existence. It's a little like a prosecuting attorney in a murder case saying, "I'm ready to go to trial now, since I have good evidence for 90% of the facts. Oh, yes, there is still one small issue, in that we don't yet have a suspect. But we should be able to have a successful trial

anyway, because we have answers to nearly all the other questions."

We'd all agree that this is silly. In a murder trial, the lack of a suspect is not a "little issue" that can simply be overlooked. And in the human experience, the original cause of the universe is not a little issue either. We all seem to know intuitively that this is one question that we need to get right, and knowing 90% of all the other facts is simply not going to cut it.

Does this mean, then, that we should just grab an answer and go with it ("the Flying Spaghetti Monster made everything") simply because any answer is better than no answer? No, of course not. Although giving no answer to these questions is unsatisfactory, giving a wrong answer would be worse. So do we have any possible way to get a good answer to these questions? I believe we do. Keep reading to find out why.

I'm hoping that by now I have shaken your faith in the philosophy of naturalism, or at least planted a few seeds of doubt in your mind. (If I haven't, then I have to hand it to you: you certainly are a man of great faith! J) Either way, I think it's time for me to move forward with the assumption that those seeds of doubt do exist, if not in your mind, then perhaps in the minds of some of your readers.

So go ahead, take a deep breath, and ask yourself, "If naturalism can't be trusted to give me accurate answers about the things that really matter, how can I know where to find those answers? If I'm going to open myself up to 'turning religious' at this point in my journey, how can I possibly know which of the religious viewpoints is the right one?" Great question. Let me try to answer it this way.

Suppose we would gather together ten people at random from an average American city and invite them to take part in a discussion entitled "What is Truth?" Specifically, what is the truth about the major questions of life, such as "Where did we come from?" "Why are we here?" "Where are we going when we die?" "Is there such a thing as right and wrong?"

To kick off the discussion we ask all ten people to give their individual views about these questions. Not surprisingly, we receive ten completely different answers. Each person has his own worldview which is fundamentally different, in some way, from each of the other nine. And so we begin to discuss, debate, and argue, hoping somehow to come to a consensus and settle once and for all the question about what truth is.

As the discussion progresses, however, it soon becomes obvious that each person in the group is thoroughly convinced that his version of truth is the right one. Nobody seems willing to consider giving up his opinion about truth in favor of another person's opinion. We finally realize that it's going to be difficult to convince even one person to change his views, let alone all ten. Since coming to a consensus is going to be virtually

impossible, we decide, we might as well give up and go home.

Before we separate, however, another man approaches our little group, raises his hand, and announces that he can provide us with the answer, once and for all, to the question about what truth is. We turn and look at the stranger skeptically, and explain to him that all afternoon we've been debating this question about what truth is, but none of us has been able to convince the others that his version is the right one. "Can you tell us, Sir," we ask, "why you think your opinion about truth is so much more convincing than ours is?"

"No, you don't understand," the man replies to us. "I don't just have an opinion about truth. I also have evidence I can give you to prove that what I say is true." This comment causes us all to pause for a moment. The rest of us had all had opinions about what we thought was the truth, but this man is saying that he has not just an opinion, but rather evidence for his version of truth.

"Well, sir," we reply to him, "if you really do have solid evidence for your version of truth, then that would certainly be different from what the rest of us had. We only had opinions about what we thought was true. But tell us, sir, what is this evidence you are going to give us? It had better be pretty powerful evidence since these issues are some of the most important ones we have ever dealt with. We're not sure we want to put much faith in your so-called evidence unless it is basically irrefutable."

"Very well," replies the stranger. "Here is my evidence. After I tell you what my version of truth is, I'm going to allow you to kill me and bury my body. If I stay in the grave like all of you are going to stay in the grave, then nothing I that I have said is true. If, however, my body comes back to life after three days, then everything I've said is true."

The rest of us all stare at him, and then at each other, in utter amazement. This man certainly is sticking his neck out! Never before in the history of mankind has anyone ever proposed such a wager. Or if they have, we can be certain they have all lost miserably. Now we are sure this man is mentally deranged!

Yet, on the other hand, we reason, what if this man really does hold the key to ultimate truth? We'll never know for sure unless we take him up on his offer. If this miracle of miracles does not occur, then we can ignore what he said and go on with our lives. But if he does somehow come through on the evidence he is offering, then we would have to be fools to reject even part of that which he calls truth.

"All right, sir," we finally respond. "We'll take you up on your offer. So before we kill you, go ahead and tell us what your version of truth is."

The stranger starts by telling us that there is a God, and that He is the Creator of all things seen and unseen. He says that this God has established rules that we as humans must obey, and that the violation of those rules

is called sin. He says further that those who commit sin are the servants of sin, and that ultimately all sin will be destroyed, along with those who serve it, in a lake of fire called Hell. He says that Hell is a place of eternal torment for those who enter it, and that we ought to be willing to do absolutely anything, even if it means maiming our own bodies, to avoid going there.

By this time we listeners are getting rather uncomfortable with all this talk about sin and eternal punishment. But then we remember that the important question is not whether or not we like it, but, rather, whether or not it is true. And we won't know whether it is true until we've seen whether this man can provide us with the evidence he has promised. If he stays in the grave after we've killed him, then we really don't have to worry about this place he calls Hell. But if he can substantiate his claims by coming back to life, then what he is saying about the afterlife must be true whether we like it or not.

The stranger goes on to make some astounding statements about himself. He says that he is the son, the only son, of the Creator of the universe. Furthermore, he says that he himself is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one can come to God except through him. He even goes so far as to say that he, this man standing in front of us, is one with God!

"Wow!" some of us listeners say to ourselves, "This man surely has an ego, doesn't he! Now we know for sure that he is mentally deranged." Some of the more cautious among us, however, remind ourselves not to pass judgment too quickly. This is an ego problem, we reason, only if these statements are not true. And we won't know whether they are true until we see whether or not he comes through on the evidence he has promised us. If he stays dead, then it's all a bunch of lies. But if he comes back to life like he says he's going to, then we really have no choice but to accept as truth these fantastic claims he is making.

Finally, the time comes for us to put this man, and his version of truth, to the test of the ages. He willingly allows us to put him to death. We bury him in a well-known location and make sure we are all familiar with the spot. We hire well-armed guards to keep an eye on the grave to make sure it is left completely alone. And then we wait.

Three days later we begin to hear reports that the grave had been discovered empty, and that large numbers of people have been seeing this man alive. When questioned, the guards cannot produce a plausible story about what happened to the body they were supposed to be guarding. The evidence is becoming more and more convincing that this stranger, who had predicted his own death and resurrection, has somehow done exactly what he said he was going to do. Each of us begins to wrestle individually with the most momentous decision of our lives. Shall I accept the evidence, and therefore the truth of the claims this man made about himself? Shall I believe the witnesses, and therefore acknowledge his authority over me and respond accordingly? Or shall I ignore the

evidence and try to come up with my own opinion about who this mysterious stranger really was?

Two thousand years ago a Man named Jesus of Nazareth made claims very similar to those described above. Understandably, people doubted His claims and asked Him to give them evidence to support them. He responded by predicting His own resurrection from the dead. And the overwhelming conclusion of the historical evidence we have available is that He did exactly that.

If you are searching for truth, friend, I urge you to start by seeking an answer to the most significant question of all time: did Jesus Christ rise from the dead, or didn't He?

If He did not, then we are left to choose between a huge array of belief systems, religions, and philosophies about life without any clear direction as to which one is really the truth.

But if He did, then the key to truth is wrapped up in this Man who walked among us two thousand years ago. He becomes the ultimate yardstick by which all other so-called truth is measured.

Perhaps you'd challenge my statement above about Jesus that "the overwhelming conclusion of the historical evidence we have available is that He did" rise from the dead. What exactly is this evidence? Good question. And even though the complete answer is far more than what I can take space for here, I'll try to point you in the general direction, just in case you or any of your readers are interested.

According to the book *Jesus' Resurrection: Fact or Figment* (a debate between a believer and a skeptic), any "adequate historical hypothesis" about what happened to Jesus of Nazareth must be able to explain four established facts (accepted by the majority of New Testament scholars, liberal and conservative alike). These four facts are 1. Jesus' burial, 2. The discovery of the empty tomb, 3. The postmortem appearances, and 4. The origin of the disciples' belief in the resurrection. (You mentioned only the final one in your challenge to me above, and I agree with you: this fact by itself is inconclusive. When taken in conjunction with the other three, however, it changes this discussion completely.)

I believe that the only hypothesis that adequately explains all four of these facts is that God raised Jesus from the dead, just as the apostles taught. It is by far the most plausible conclusion, in my opinion, when all the surrounding facts and circumstances are taken into consideration.

There are, however, a number of competing theories that have been suggested, so let's look at them briefly. One idea is that the postmortem appearances were the result of a chain of hallucinations; this would supposedly explain the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection, even though it really hadn't happened. This idea does not, however, explain why the tomb was empty. Another theory is that the disciples stole Jesus' body from the tomb. This would explain the empty tomb, but it wouldn't explain why

the disciples believed in the resurrection so strongly that they would die for that belief. A third proposal is that the Jewish or the Roman authorities stole Jesus' body from the tomb and hid it somewhere. This could explain the disciples' belief and also the empty tomb, but it doesn't explain the postmortem appearances. It also doesn't explain why these authorities, who desperately wanted to suppress this new religion from the outset, did not simply produce the body and dispel forever both the resurrection theory and the Christian religion with it. (The easiest way to disprove a resurrection is to simply produce a body. No one did.)

Another theory is that Jesus somehow naturally rose from the dead. This is of course silly, since science has conclusively shown that this sort of thing just doesn't happen. The idea that billions of dead cells could spontaneously spring back into life, all at the same time, defies all the known laws of logic, science, and mathematical probability. (Once again, Reed, I have utmost respect for science, and its ability to tell us what can and what can't naturally happen. It is simply the wrong tool, however, to determine what might occur in the supernatural.)

Finally, it appears that we ought to humbly admit that the most reasonable explanation is that God really did raise Jesus from the dead. The only thing that would prohibit us from accepting this explanation is if we have arbitrarily ruled out the possibility of miracles from the outset, or if we have bought into some philosophy, religion, or pre-conceived notion that the supernatural does not exist.

Jesus is the only person in history who has been able to 1. Claim to be divine, 2. Use His self-predicted resurrection as the primary evidence for that claim, and 3. Keep His credibility in the process.

Many others have claimed to be divine. Many others have claimed to rise from the dead. Many others have kept a degree of credibility, to the point that they were able to found worldwide religions with devotees in the millions. But only Jesus was able to do all three. Think about it.

Now I would like to respond briefly to a few of the other specific statements you made above.

"Atheists have never been in the majority."

No, of course not. Most people are alert enough to recognize that something exists, and it takes more faith than most people have to believe that something just popped into existence out of nothing. The more widespread confusion is not whether a deity exists, but rather, who is He, and how does He reveal Himself to us, if at all? This confusion was cleared up, for those who love the truth, in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

"We have never found a supernatural explanation that turned out to be true."

What you mean is, you have never found a supernatural explanation that could be detected with naturalistic

testing methods. Just like you have never found love that could be detected with your postal scale.

“We always found non-supernatural explanations”

My guess is that most of the “we” you are referring to have been scientists — many of whom believed in God — who were operating in the realm of freedom, looking for the truth wherever the evidence might lead. It was not atheism, but rather science, that made these discoveries, and the scientists involved probably wouldn’t appreciate atheism trying to take credit for them.

“Once a supernatural explanation is accepted as true, religious people fight to protect that idea.”

When atheists fight against all logic to protect naturalism as true, does that make them religious?

“We still struggle to teach basic, well-established science in school”

I just want to clear up a common misconception. The words “evolution” and “science” are repeatedly used together as though they mean the same thing, but they simply don’t. I love science and support it completely. Evolution, on the other hand, though it claims to be science, is actually more religious than scientific. Why do I say that? Because of this: of the six types of evolution — Cosmic Evolution (big bang/origin of matter), Chemical Evolution (formation of the higher chemicals), Planetary and Stellar Evolution (origin of the stars), Organic Evolution (origin of life), Macroevolution (animals changing into new kinds), and Microevolution (variations within kinds) — only the final one, Microevolution, is actually observable science. The rest are basically religious, or perhaps just wishful thinking.

“But simple, obvious proofs such as these don’t sink in, to a religious mind determined to defend his preferred mindset.”

Let me just ask you, Reed: Of all the great scientists that have believed in God, are you really saying that all of them were unintelligent and irrational? Or would you admit that there have been at least some intelligent, rational scientists that have believed in God? If so, have you ever stopped to ask yourself why they, of all people, would choose to believe in God? What is it these intelligent, rational scientists saw that you don’t?

“Faith does not free thought. It ends it.”

I agree with this, particularly when it is a blind faith that is placed in something that isn’t true. For instance, a blind faith in naturalism puts an end to honest, open thought about many of the questions that really matter.

Recently the atheist AronRa was asked this question. “If I could prove to your satisfaction that the God of the Bible exists, would you worship Him?” To his credit, AronRa was honest enough to answer that no, he would not. He was admitting, in other words, that his primary motive for rejecting God was not about the logic or the evidence, but rather because of some other personal motive.

In this essay, I’ve been trying to look at both logic and evidence in my effort to encourage you and your readers to seek and find the God who created you. I’m concerned that I may be wasting my time, however, if there are some of you who, like AronRa, do not really care about the evidence, but simply have a hatred for God out of some personal motive. Wherever this is true, I might as well lay aside my efforts at logic, and plead with you instead to humble yourselves, however painful it might be to do so. Please don’t wait for God to humble you against your will, which will be many times more painful than doing it voluntarily.

Finally, Reed, this entire discussion is not so much a debate between atheism and religion as it is a struggle between truth and falsehood. Picture a big, bright line called Truth cutting its way relentlessly through every idea, worldview, and philosophy, and leaving them all sitting meekly on one side or the other, either in the realm of the true or the realm of the false. Everything on the side of the false by definition is opposed to everything on the side of the true, even if the various forms of falsehood cannot agree with one another.

I remember you telling me, Reed, about how you and other atheists got together on May 21, 2011 to have a good laugh over all the billboards which had proclaimed that that day would be Judgment Day. If the great division is between atheism and religion, then congratulations, you had a good laugh at the expense of the enemy. If, on the other hand, the great division is between the true and the false, then is it possible that you actually were mocking your own teammates?

Jesus stated, along with plenty of evidence to satisfy those who love the truth, that He is the way, the truth, and the life. He also said, for the sake of Harold Camping and his billboards, that no man knows the day or the hour of His return.

Whenever that day comes, however, this little dialogue between you and me will be over. Every eye will be opened, every knee will bend, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Until then I am

Yours Truly,
Roger Hertzler

Roger asked me not to respond to his answers, to let him have the last word for this exchange, so I will. I don’t really need to respond here. I know my audience! Besides, the newsletter’s long enough already. :)

Roger HAS tentatively agreed to throw himself into the proverbial lion’s pit, though, and join us for our next meeting.

Let’s try to behave and not maul him TOO badly, shall we?