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THE FOLLY OF FAITH

Faith is when you believe something that no one in his right mind would believe

– Archie Bunker

Far from Benign

In America “people of faith” are treated with great deference. They are assumed to be persons of the highest moral standards – exemplars of goodness, kindness, and charity. But why should that be? How does faith qualify a person for such high esteem? After all, faith is belief in the absence of supportive evidence and even in light of contrary evidence. How can such a frame of mind be expected to result in any special insight?

In any human activity other than religion, someone ignoring evidence would be regarded as a fool. A homeowner would be unwise not to close up her house on the signs of an approaching storm. A shopkeeper would be imprudent to continue stocking an item that doesn’t sell. What doctor, lawyer, detective, or scientist would go about his business without giving primary attention to evidence?

Yet, as Sam Harris says, “Criticizing a person’s faith is currently taboo in every corner of our culture.”¹ For example,

When a Muslim suicide bomber obliterates himself along with a score of innocents on a Jerusalem street, the role that faith played in his action is invariably discounted. His motives must have been political, economic, or entirely personal. Without faith, desperate people would still do terrible things. Faith itself is always, and everywhere, exonerated.²

Christian apologist David Marshall quotes St. Paul: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things *unseen*."³ Christopher Hitchens notes,

If one must have faith in order to believe something, or believe *in* something, then the likelihood of that something having any truth or value is considerably diminished. The harder work of inquiry, proof, and demonstration is infinitely more rewarding, and has confronted us with findings far more "miraculous" and "transcendent" than any theology.⁴

One of the significant propositions of New Atheism is that faith should not be exonerated, should not be treated with respect, but rather disputed and, when damaging to individuals or society, condemned. In fact, we should call faith exactly what it is – absurd. The new atheists argue that faith is far from a benign force that can simply be tolerated by those who know better. Rather it plays a significant role in much of the violent conflict in the world. Furthermore, faith results in the disregarding of important values such as freethinking and objective

truthseeking that are needed to solve the problems in modern society. We have just lived through a disastrous eight-year period where decision after decision in the most important office in the world, the Oval Office of the White House, has been made on the basis of an irrational mode of thought founded on faith and suspicious of any reasoned argument that contradicted that faith.

Harris asks,

Why did nineteen well-educated, middle class men trade their lives in this world for the privilege of killing thousands of our neighbors? Because they believed that they would go straight to paradise for doing so.⁵

Could anything have been more irrational, other than the responses of some Christian leaders that September 11 was God's punishment or the work of the devil?

Doing the Right Thing

Even worse than September 11 – and it is possible for something to be worse – belief in ancient myths joins with other negative forces in our society to keep most of the world from advancing scientifically, economically, and socially at a time when a rapid advancement in these areas and others is absolutely essential for the survival of humanity. We are now probably only about a generation or two away from the catastrophic problems that are anticipated from global warming, pollution, and overpopulation: flooded coastal areas, severe climatic changes, epidemics caused by overcrowding, and starvation for much of

humanity. Such disasters are predicted to generate worldwide conflict on a scale that could exceed that of the great twentieth century wars, with nuclear weapons in the hands of unstable nations and terrorist groups.

By virtue of its scientific, economic, and military predominance, America must necessarily lead the way out of these dangers. To do so will call for the best efforts of all elements of society, with science and technology leading the way by providing creative solutions and with business leaders and politicians implementing these solutions by uncharacteristically putting the commonweal ahead of their own selfish interests.

Unfortunately, while American science continues to predominate, it has begun slipping in many vital areas as the government has changed its funding priorities. The abysmal performance of American students in science and mathematics compared to other advanced nations does not bode well for the future.

As I write this, the world is in the middle of the worst economic crisis in years and promising drastic change. An African-American born in Hawaii with the unlikely name of Barack Hussein Obama has been dramatically elected President of the United States. Most of the world, myself included, have high hopes that they and we, working together with Obama, will be up to the task of solving the many problems we face. As Winston Churchill said, "You can always count on America to do the right thing . . . after they have exhausted all other possibilities."⁶

Whether or not we do the right thing remains to be seen. Let us take a look at the record of the policies of the past three decades that put us in the current situation. As we will find, the folly of faith played an important role. And while the promoters of so-called failed faith-based initiatives are now out of power, we have a new, devoutly religious president who says he will continue some of these initiatives. Furthermore, a sizable, organized religious right remains with huge financial resources, radio and TV stations, and publishing houses that will enable it to continue to influence events for years to come.

The Neocons

In the decades since the Nixon administration, American business and government at the federal level have been strongly influenced, and in the George W. Bush administration eventually dominated, by an unholy alliance of neoconservatives or *neocons* and fundamentalist Christians that author Damon Linker has dubbed theoconservatives or *theocons*.⁷

Neoconservatism is a right-wing political movement that traces to the writings of political philosopher Leo Strauss and the economic theories of Milton Friedman. It was adopted in the 1960s by anti-communist liberals who became disenchanted with the excesses of the left-wing counterculture of the time. Few, if any, liberals remain in the movement today. Neocons support most conservative values but differ from traditional conservatives in allowing big government and big deficits, and in promoting a more aggressive, go-it-alone foreign policy to protect and advance U.S. interests. They have no qualms about

seeing the development of an American empire that would not have to worry about world opinion. The neocon-theocon alliance helped keep an increasingly dogmatic Republican party in power in Washington for all but twelve of the last forty years. Notable neocons in the Bush administration included Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Pearl, Douglas Feith, Lewis Libby, John Bolton, Elliot Abrams, and Robert Kagan.

Historian Irving Kristol is regarded as the founder of Neoconservatism.⁸ His son is William Kristol, editor of the political magazine *The Weekly Standard*. In 1997, the younger Kristol and Robert Kagan founded the Project for the New American Century, a neoconservative think tank based in Washington, D.C. In June, 2008, William Kristol actively promoted Alaska governor Sarah Palin as the Republican Vice Presidential candidate.

The influence of neoconservatives on the Bush administration became clear when their foreign policy ideas were adopted after the attacks of September 11, 2001, and renamed the *Bush Doctrine*. This doctrine led to the Iraq War and a general decline of U.S. influence abroad as the need for international support for our actions was ignored and even scorned.

The collapse of the U.S. economy in fall 2008 can also be attributed at least partially to neocon policies, although traditional conservatives, liberals, and both political parties can share the blame. Under the ideology of (faith in) unfettered free markets, many of the regulations that were installed during and after the Great Depression as part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal were dismantled. In

the absence of regulation, greed for money, and lust for power overwhelmed any sense of public good. And the people who suffered the most were those blue collar Christians who had been bamboozled into voting Republican as the “party of values.”

One of the most unfortunate developments with Neoconservatism was the cynical political move on its part to turn people away from a respect for education and rational thought. In this they fed off the anti-intellectualism that marked modern America in recent years.⁹ Where once conservatives had a base among the highly educated, the neocons and their partner theocons decided to trade that base for the support of rural and working class whites. In order to get them to vote against their own best economic interests these groups were convinced that the intellectual elites, concentrated on both coasts, were not like them and did not understand their problems. Of course, the wealthy neocons didn't either, nor did they care. In the meantime, the resulting tax policies saw the richest 1 percent of American taxpayers receive a \$1000 per week tax reduction, while the bottom 20 percent received \$1.50 per week. Hopefully anti-intellectualism has been derailed with the election of Barack Obama.

The Theocons

In the red¹⁰ states of the middle and south there was no longer any room for erudite coastal conservatives such as the late William F. Buckley, who spoke in complete sentences, his nose in the air, with a high-class accent. A Catholic in the Jesuit mold, he championed reasoned dialogue. There was certainly no room for

scientific thinking in the administration of an inarticulate born-again Christian from Texas who believed he was doing the work of God and based his decisions on faith rather than reason. Let us now see how these led America into disasters both home and abroad.

The theocons are influential figures from the religious right who share most neocon values but are more interested in social issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage than economics and foreign policy. They have the stated goal of pulling down the wall of separation between church and state, or simply claiming it does not exist, and converting America into a Christian theocracy. Their most important contribution to the unholy alliance is to rally Christians to go to the polls and support conservative candidates. (Three out of four white evangelicals voted for John McCain and Sarah Palin). Often this political activity crosses the legal and constitutional line that forbids churches and other nonprofit organizations from supporting individual candidates. This is yet another example of the special treatment given religion in America. It is even allowed to break the law.

A number of books have documented the theocon trend. Kevin Phillips, the highly respected author of the 2004 bestseller *American Dynasty*,¹¹ reported in his 2006 book *American Theocracy* on the way the Bush administration allowed itself to be controlled by the coalition of neocons and theocons or, as he calls the latter, “religious zealots.”¹² Phillips pretty much predicted the outcome we experienced with the economy in 2008:

If left unchecked, the same forces will bring a preacher-ridden, debt-bloated, energy-crippled America to its knees.¹³

In her lively 2006 book *Kingdom Coming*, reporter Michelle Goldberg refers to the movement to convert America to a Christian Theocracy as *Christian Nationalism*.¹⁴ Journeying around America visiting classrooms, megachurches, and federal courts she demonstrated how *dominionism*, the doctrine that Christians have the biblical-based right to rule nonbelievers, is threatening the foundations of democracy. Goldberg reports that members of the Christian Nationalism movement occupied positions throughout the federal bureaucracy during the Bush years, “making crucial decisions about our national life according to their theology.”¹⁵ In those positions they allowed “knowledge derived from the Bible to trump knowledge derived from studying the world.”¹⁶

In his 2006 book *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, journalist Chris Hedges told how the Christian Right pumps a warped version of a Christian America into tens of millions of homes through television, radio, and the curriculum of Christian schools.¹⁷ As he says,

The movement’s yearning for apocalyptic violence and its assault on dispassionate, intellectual inquiry are laying the foundation for a new, frightening America.¹⁸

Hedges likens the theocon movement to that of the young fascists in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and ‘30s.

In *The Theocons*, Linker shows how the Catholic church joined hands with right wing fundamentalist Protestants to work for three decades to inject their radical religious ideas into American politics – and how they succeeded. As an editor of the Catholic journal *First Things*, Linker was a witness to these developments first hand.

Linker tells the story of how the neocons and theocons began to forge an alliance as early as the 1970s, motivated largely by the massive cultural changes of the times. The key figures on the theocon side were clergyman Richard John Neuhaus, who began as a left-wing political radical and gradually converted to the neocon view, and Catholic philosopher Michael Novak, who followed a similar path.

Originally an ordained Lutheran minister from Canada, Neuhaus saw the Catholic Church as a greater source of discipline and authority and so converted to Catholicism in 1990.¹⁹ He was ordained a priest the following year. In 1990 Neuhaus founded *First Things*, which promoted much of the neocon-theocon agenda. He became a close, unofficial advisor to President George W. Bush.

Novak has written numerous books on capitalism and religion and was the winner of the 1994 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. He served as U.S. chief ambassador to the United Nation's Commission on Human Rights in 1981 and has performed other diplomatic functions.

Novak's review of the new atheist literature appeared in the *National Review* in 2007.²⁰ Other than extolling the virtues of religion and voicing the usual

complaint that Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett do not understand theology, Novak offers no meaningful counters to the new atheist arguments. He has followed this up in 2008 with a book, *No One Sees God: The Dark Night of Atheists and Believers*.²¹ There he dismisses Harris, Dennett, Dawkins, and Hitchens as “difficult to engage” on religion since “all of them think that religion is so great a menace that they do not show much disposition of dialogue.”²² This enables him to make sure the dialogue is on his terms.

Under the spell of the theocons, George W. Bush relied for eight years on faith rather than reason to make decisions, such as invading Iraq, that affect every person on Earth. He used dogma rather than data to make policy. His administration ignored or rewrote scientific evidence to suit the demands of the Christian right who had convinced Bush that he was doing God’s work. I will mention just a few examples. More can be found in *The Republican War on Science* by journalist Chris Mooney²³ as well as the books I have already referenced.

The Bush administration was noted for its “faith-based” initiatives. Billions of dollars annually in federal funds were awarded directly, unconstitutionally, and without congressional approval to churches and other religious organizations.²⁴ Those organizations were allowed to break the law (and Constitution) and hire only those of the same faith. Independent studies have shown that faith-based organizations do no better than secular ones and often use the money unlawfully for religious purposes such as proselytizing. President Obama has said he would continue the program while curbing its abuses.²⁵

Perhaps more than any other, the Bush administration ignored the advice of those who disagreed with its ideology. In May 2004, the Food and Drug Administration refused to approve over-the counter sales of the “morning after” pill Plan B, ignoring a 23-4 recommendation from its scientific advisers.²⁶ Main opposition came from W. David Hager, an obstetrician and gynecologist who blends religion and medicine, endorsing the alleged healing power of prayer and prescribing Bible readings for the treatment of pre-menstrual syndrome.²⁷

Some Christian preachers claim that abortions cause breast cancer. In 2002 the National Cancer Institute was forced to remove a fact sheet from its web site that said there was no connection.²⁸

These are just two specific examples. In 2004 the Union of Concerned Scientists issued a report charging the Bush administration with “manipulation of the process through which science enters into its decisions.”²⁹ This report was signed by 12,000 scientists including Nobel laureates and other eminent scholars. It included detailed documentation of specific instances of abuse. I will just list the general findings:

- There is a well-established pattern of suppression and distortion of scientific findings by high-ranking Bush administration political appointees across numerous federal agencies. These actions have consequences for human health, public safety, and community well being.

- There is strong documentation of a wide-ranging effort to manipulate the government's scientific advisory system to prevent the appearance of advice that might run counter to the administration's political agenda.
- There is evidence that the administration often imposes restrictions on what government scientists can say or write about "sensitive" topics.

Toward the Apocalypse

If this is not sufficiently alarming, an influential element of the religious right have managed to convince a large segment of the American people that we are heading toward the end times with the Second Coming of Christ prophesied in the Book of Revelation, the final book in the New Testament. As Phillips describes them:

The rapture, end-times, and Armageddon hucksters in the United States rank with any Shiite ayatollah, and the last two presidential elections mark the transformation of the GOP into the first religious party in U.S. history.³⁰

Millions of Americans take seriously the end-times scenario proposed by Hal Lindsey in his 1970 bestseller *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which has sold over 30 million copies.³¹ More recently, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins in their *Left Behind* series of novels, which first appeared in 1995 and by 2005 had sold no less than 65 million copies.³² The series begins with three prequels to the "Rapture," an event that does not appear in

Revelation and is apparently based on a poetic reference by Paul in Epistle 1 to the Thessalonians:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (1 Thessalonians 4: 16-17 KJV)

The Rapture described in *Left Behind* is not part of traditional teaching in Christianity. In the novel, airline passengers suddenly disappear from their seats and cars veer driverless down the streets as good Christians are whisked off to heaven so they need not suffer the upheaval to follow. I am sure you have all seen the bumper stickers, "In Case of Rapture This Car Will Have No Driver" and the counter "In Case of Rapture, Can I Have Your Car?" It's all fiction, of course, but then so is most of the Bible. Two thousand year old mythical tales are no more reliable than those written today. Indeed, less.

The Book of Revelation was written on the tiny Greek island of Patmos by an exile usually identified as John the Apostle, who was almost certainly not the disciple John or the author of the Gospel of John. (They are also unlikely to be the same person).

In a series of imaginative visions termed the *Apocalypse*, John of Patmos details the second coming of Jesus in which Christ leads the fight against Satan, also known as the Antichrist and the Beast, culminating in the great battle at Armageddon (Megiddo in Israel, the site of many historical battles) where Satan and his forces are annihilated.

After Armageddon Jesus and the Saints rule his kingdom on Earth for a thousand years. Satan somehow reappears and starts more mischief, but his armies are defeated by a judgment of fire from heaven. That final judgment is applied to all who have ever lived, with the evil cast into the “Lake of Fire” that is the new hell. Then begins the renewal of the entire Creation—a new heaven and a new Earth.

See, the tabernacle of God is among humans!

He will make his home with them,

and they will be his people.

God himself will be with them,

and he will be their God.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

There won't be death anymore.

There won't be any grief, crying, or pain,

because the first things have disappeared.(Revelation 21:1-4.

International Standard Version.)

Although apocalyptic thinking is not common in Catholicism and mainline Protestantism, biblical historian Bart Ehrman argues that it is the most significant idea in the development of both Judaism and Christianity.³³ Ehrman claims the evidence indicates that Jesus (if he existed at all) was one of many apocalyptic preachers in the ancient world who promised that suffering and death would end when some agent of God would come down from heaven—Jesus called him the “Son of Man” —and institute the Kingdom of God on Earth.³⁴ Jesus is recorded as saying “. . . there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”(Matt 16:28 KJV). He makes similar predictions in four other places in the gospels.(Mark 9:1; Mark 13:30; Matt. 24:34; Luke 9:27). When the Coming did not happen within the lifetimes of his disciples, as Jesus prophesied, Christianity changed its emphasis to the Resurrection and promise of eternal life.

Still, throughout history Christians have expected the imminent coming of Christ (assumed to be the Son of Man). Every failed prophecy of a specific date was followed by yet another prophecy. Many predictions of the end occurred approaching special years such as 1000 CE, 1500 CE, and, we can all recall, 2000 CE. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a rise in *millennialism* in which a final battle between good and evil takes place ushering in the millennium of Jesus’ rule. The Seventh Day Adventist church was founded by William Miller,

who predicted the Second Advent of Jesus in or around 1844. The church has survived the failure of this prophecy by continually recalculating it.

Other Christian sects that preach an approaching apocalypse include the Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Rastafarians. Modern evangelicals are taught a form of apocalypticism called *dispensationalism* that differs from the traditional millennialism in including the Rapture. Outside Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Bahá'í Faith, and the Hopi, Lakota, Mayan and other Native American religions all speak of an end to the world, as we know it to be followed by a purified world of harmony and spiritual peace.

Obviously, a transition to a better world, one without death or suffering, has great appeal. And the fact that it can be found in virtually all ancient and modern religious traditions gives the notion the veneer of sacred authority.

But there is nothing under that veneer to provide any basis for such hopes. Once again it is faith without evidence. Indeed, the complete failure of any of the dated prophecies of the Second Coming, notably those prophecies attributed to Jesus himself, provides solid evidence that an ultimate heaven on Earth is not going to happen anytime in the future.

Yet many Americans actually believe the Apocalypse is going to happen, and happen soon. A 2006 Pew survey found that 79 percent of all Christians believe in the Second Coming, with 20 percent believing they will see it in their lifetimes. The latter includes 33 percent of all white evangelicals, 34 percent of all black

Protestants of all sects, 7 percent of white mainline Protestants, 12 percent of all Catholics, and 8 percent of all white non-Hispanic Catholics.³⁵

Given that apocalyptic thinking is so widespread in the U.S., the voters may someday give us a president who thinks that the world is coming to an end in her administration. Such a president would see no reason to worry about global warming or other environmental problems, or even nuclear holocaust, since these would be part of the events leading to the Second Coming. She might even stir up violence in the Middle East to get things moving along toward the Final Judgment.

If you think this is far-fetched, just consider the last presidential election. In the last weeks of the campaign, some Christians were so desperate to change the trend for Obama that they tried every dirty trick in the book to convince people that he was too dangerous to put in office. (Good Christians, all). On one conservative website called "News By Us," Rev. Michael Bresciani wrote:

I can't fight off the inclination to believe that if their [sic] was a person alive today that looks more like the false prophet spoken of in the Bible; it is Barack Obama.³⁶

While the Bush administration is now out of power and Barack Obama has a mandate to overturn Bush policies, the Christian Right still remains a major force in America with its huge financial resources and thousands of media outlets. While the new president has stated his strong support for the separation of church and state, we cannot forget that the Republican candidate for Vice

President in 2008, Governor Sarah Palin. A practically announced 2012 presidential candidate, Palin is a member of the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal Christian Church. In their statement of beliefs, numbers 14-16 read:³⁷

14. WE BELIEVE . . . in The Millennial Reign of Christ when Jesus returns with His saints at His second coming and begins His benevolent rule over earth for 1,000 years. This millennial reign will bring the salvation of national Israel and the establishment of universal peace.
15. WE BELIEVE...A Final Judgment Will Take Place for those who have rejected Christ. They will be judged for their sin and consigned to eternal punishment in a punishing lake of fire.
16. WE BELIEVE...and look forward to the perfect New Heavens and a New Earth that Christ is preparing for all people, of all time, who have accepted Him. We will live and dwell with Him there forever following His millennial reign on Earth. "And so shall we forever be with the Lord!"

All these Christians looking forward to the End of Days should pick up their Bibles and read the prophecies of John a little more carefully. The first thing that will happen is that 144,000 male Jews will be raised from the dead and have YHWH branded on their foreheads:

Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an

hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel. (Revelation 7:3-4)

Then come the locusts:

And there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power.

And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads. (Revelation 9:3-4)

My guess is that all women, who never get a break in the Bible, are wiped out as well, so only 144,000 Jewish males remain. Then Jesus appears in the form of a lamb:

And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty [and] four thousand, having his Father's name written in their foreheads. (Revelation 14:1)

And these are not a representative sample of Jewish men:

. . .the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins (Revelation 14:3-4).

Well, this does not much resemble the *Left Behind Scenario*. According to the Bible not a single living human is saved, only 144,000 male Jewish virgins resurrected from the dead.

Faith and Evidence

Several Christians have told me personally that Christianity does not teach the wisdom of “blind faith” but always associates faith with evidence. But then when I ask them to give me an example of such evidence they say things like, “Well, there was the empty tomb.”

There is not a single piece of independent historical evidence for the existence of Jesus or the veracity of the events described in the New Testament.³⁸ Even the much-touted statement by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus is now accepted by almost all scholars as a forgery. The paragraph in *Antiquities* that mentions Christ, his “wonderful works,” death on the cross, and appearance three days later does not appear in earliest copies of that work and not until the fourth century.³⁹

A number of scholars have made the case for the non-historicity of the Jesus, and it is becoming more and more convincing every day.⁴⁰ As I keep saying, absence of evidence is evidence of absence when the evidence should be there and is not. In the case of Jesus, there were several historians living in or near Judea at the time who reported on all kinds of events there, but never mention Christ.

One example is Philo-Judaeus, also known as Philo of Alexandria. In *The Christ*, John E. Remsburg writes:

Philo was born before the beginning of the Christian era, and lived long after the reputed death of Christ. He wrote an account of the

Jews covering the entire time that Christ is said to have existed on earth. He was living in or near Jerusalem when Christ's miraculous birth and the Herodian massacre occurred. He was there when Christ made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He was there when the crucifixion with its attendant earthquake, supernatural darkness and resurrection of the dead took place – when Christ himself rose from the dead and in the presence of many witnesses ascended into heaven. These marvelous events which must have filled the world with amazement, had they really occurred, were unknown to him.⁴¹

David Marshall gives the oft-heard argument that Christ gave sufficient evidence to his disciples that they were willing to die for him.⁴² But that's a story that could easily be pure fiction.

Early Christianity was not the only time in history that people have died for a cause. Consider the Japanese and their code of Bushido. I do not doubt that many followers of the myth of Jesus gave up their lives for it – even if he didn't exist. But that does not prove he is God. Many German soldiers sacrificed their lives for Hitler in World War II and that did not make him God. The Kamikaze pilots in World War II are perhaps analogous to Christ's disciples. To them the Emperor was God but we know, and he admitted, that he was a human just like the rest of us.

Marshall tries to argue that that evidence from the Bible is no less credible than evidence in science:

Almost everything we know – not just about first-century Palestine, but about dwarf stars, neutrinos, state capitals, vitamins, and sports scores – we believe because we find the person telling us the information is credible.⁴³

Yes, but the stories of the Bible are *incredible*. Isn't it incredible that someone rose from the dead? To believe that requires far more evidence than a ball score in the newspaper. And, as someone who labored for thirty years to learn the properties of neutrinos, I can tell you that the evidence for their existence far exceeds any evidence that someone rose from the dead.

Marshall tries to elaborate the meaning of faith:

Faith involves a continuum of four kinds of trust. First, we trust our minds. There's no way to prove our minds work – this is often forgotten by people who uncritically praise the scientific method. Even to do math or logic, which are more basic than science, we have to take our brains more or less for granted. How could we prove them? Any proof would depend on what it assumes: the validity of that endless electrical storm in the brain.⁴⁴

We trust scientific method, logic, and mathematics because they work. They give us answers that we can independently test against objective observations. They give us electric lights, computers, and cell phones.

Science flies us to the moon. Religion flies us into buildings.

Marshall keeps to the same line of reasoning:

The second level of faith is trust in our senses . . . Again there's no way to prove your eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin are giving you the real scoop about the outside world.⁴⁵

True we can't prove our senses are giving us the "real scoop." But we have plenty of personal experience that our senses do a good job of alerting us to oncoming cars, warn when something on the stove has caught fire, and tell us that the baby needs to be fed.

Marshall turns to testimonial evidence:

Third, to learn anything we accept "testimonial evidence" from parents, teachers, books, street signs, Wikipedia, and "familiar" voices transmitted as electronic pulses over miles of wire and electromagnetic signals, then decoded into waves in the air. Almost everything we know comes from other people one way or another.

This is true in science.

Yes, but we don't just take anyone's word for it. We test it against independent observations. If I went up to a colleague and told him I solved some major physics problem, do you think he would simply accept that without insisting I prove it to him?

Of course we don't have time to independently test everything we hear, so we take the word of credible people. But that's because these people have

already demonstrated their credibility by proving to be reliable in the past. That's why scientists and scholars of all kind work so hard to maintain a good reputation. No one pays any attention anymore to Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann, the chemists who announced to the world in 1989 that that had discovered Cold Fusion.

It also depends on what is the message. If an airline pilot flying over Yellowstone National Park reports seeing a forest fire, we have no reason to doubt her. But if she reports seeing a flying saucer whose pilot waved a green tentacle at her, I would demand more evidence.

Besides, much testimonial evidence is highly unreliable, as demonstrated by the hundreds of death row inmates convicted by eyewitness testimony who have been exonerated by DNA evidence in recent decades. Physical evidence is what matters the most.

That reminds me. I think it was Richard Dawkins who suggested that should the bones of Jesus be discovered and found to lack a Y chromosome, this would provide evidence for the Virgin Birth (while, of course, disproving the bodily resurrection). It wouldn't be a final proof, though, since rare XX males are found. Unsurprisingly, they are invariably gay.

Marshall goes on to accuse scientists of hubris:

The problem is that hubris about the "scientific method" often masks an almost childish naiveté about what constitutes a good argument in nonscientific fields.⁴⁶

This is not naiveté at all but an objective evaluation of the relative success of science and non-science. Marshall does not give one example of a nonscientific argument that has the same power as a typical scientific argument.

Finally we get to God:

In fact, scientific evidence is based on faith—exactly the same sort of faith as informed Christians have in God.⁴⁷

Scientific evidence must pass tests. As I detailed in my books *Has Science Found God?* and *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, evidence for a God such as the Abrahamic God fails all tests.⁴⁸

Marshall then gets to the fourth level of faith:

The fourth level of faith is religious . . . Faith must “precede” reason, Augustine said, because there are some truths that we cannot yet grasp by reason.⁴⁹

Marshall does not name one truth obtained by faith that has been verified by independent, objective means. And that is not an impossible requirement. We can easily imagine some truth about the world obtained by spiritual revelation telling us something about the world that can be observed. For example, suppose such a truth is that only one religion is correct and the rest false. Then the prayers of the true religion should be answered while other prayers are not.

Next we get to the hidden God: “God could choose to remain hidden.”⁵⁰

Sure, but such a God would never be known to anyone, as Marshall admits when he says:

But Christianity says God hasn't remained hidden. He reveals himself in creation, our hearts, and in history.⁵¹

Then why are there any non-Christians?

I discussed the hiddenness of God question in some detail in *God: The Failed Hypothesis*.⁵² Philosophers John Schellenberg⁵³ and Theodore Drange⁵⁴ have independently shown how a moral God who deliberately hides himself from anyone open to evidence for his existence cannot logically exist. The God of Evangelical Christians and several other sects, which is based on the teachings of John Calvin, permits only his special favorites to join him in heaven and damns everyone else no matter how saintly. This is a possible God, just not a moral God. Indeed, an evil God is fully compatible with the data.

Theologian John Haught has also objected to the new atheist treatment of faith as irrational. He tries to argue that religious faith is no different from what is assumed in other areas of discourse. He refers to the statement made in the 1960s by the eminent biochemist and atheist Jaques Monod:

Monod claimed that the "ethic of knowledge" must be the foundation of all moral and ethical claims . . . it is unethical to accept any ideas that fail to adhere to the "postulate of objectivity." in other words, it is morally wrong to accept any claims that cannot be verified in principle by "objective" scientific knowing. But, then, what about the precept itself? Can anyone prove objectively that the postulate of objectivity is true?⁵⁵

Once again we see a theologian demonstrating his misunderstanding of science. The validity of the postulate of objectivity is not to be proven by some philosophical, deductive argument. Its validity is proved beyond a reasonable doubt by the empirical evidence of its methodological success.

Haught continues to show his bias against science:

At some foundational level all knowing is rooted in a declaration of trust, in a “will to believe.” For example, we have to trust that the universe makes some kind of sense before we begin the search for intelligibility. Unacknowledged declarations of faith underlie every claim the atheist makes as well, including the repudiation of faith.⁵⁶

This is not the way it works at all. What Haught calls “trust” is what scientists call a “working hypothesis.” If that hypothesis leads to a theory that gives the wrong answers, then it is discarded. By contrast, the blind trust of religious faith continually leads to the wrong answers but is never discarded.

And, once again we hear a scientifically-challenged theologian say that science is based on faith:

There is no way, without circular thinking, to set up a scientific experiment to demonstrate that every true proposition must be based on empirical evidence rather than faith . . . The claim that truth can be attained only by reason and science functioning independently of any faith is itself a faith claim.⁵⁷

On the contrary, every successful scientific experiment that results in a practical application demonstrates the utility of basing our theories on empirical evidence. As explained above, whether or not it is “true” in some metaphysical sense is irrelevant, as long as it works.

Haught makes an unwarranted claim about faith:

Theology thinks of faith as a state of self-surrender in which one’s whole being, and not just the intellect, is experienced as being carried away into a dimension of reality that is much deeper and more real than anything that could be grasped by science and reason.⁵⁸

How does he know that this is not simply a delusion? It is an experience easily, and more reliably, produced by certain drugs. And why can’t a “deeper dimension of reality” be grasped by science and reason?

And, again science is belittled:

Scientific method by definition has nothing to say about God, meaning, values, or purpose.⁵⁹

By whose definition? I will have a lot more to say about science and God in this book. But for now let me comment that science and reason can be applied to anything and everything that involves some sort of observation. This includes the “inner” observations we make in our minds.

We then move on to whether we can explain faith in Darwinian fashion, as suggested by Dawkins⁶⁰ and others:

If Darwinian theory were exclusively explanatory of religious faith, there would be little reason to complain about it. Religion in that case would be just one more instance of the clumsy creativity of nature, no more objectionable than vestigial organs. But for Dawkins's religious faith is in every respect an ethically despicable development, so the blame must not fall on blind and morally innocent Darwinian mechanisms. For Dawkins, evolution itself is not evil but merely indifferent. The evil in religion must then be extraneous to the life process, and therefore out of the scope of biology to account for it.⁶¹

But evolution does produce evil, such as all the gratuitous suffering in nature. So why shouldn't it be capable of producing the evil of religion?

Haught admits that religions are capable of evil. He calls it "idolatry": "The antidote to idolatry . . . is not atheism but faith."⁶² Faith is the source of idolatry in the first place.

The Follies of Ted Haggard and the New Life Church

A living example of the folly of faith can be found in the story of Ted Haggard, the disgraced founder and former pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado. New Life Church is a non-denominational evangelical Christian megachurch with 14,000 members. Haggard was also founder of the Association of Life-Giving Churches and president of the National Association of Evangelicals from 2003 to 2006. He was listed by *Time* magazine as one of the

most influential preachers in the nation. In 2005 he talked to President Bush or one of his advisors every Monday.⁶³

Haggard's career came crashing down in 2006 when he was accused by a male prostitute named Mike Jones of paying for sex and ingesting methamphetamines on a regular basis. Haggard was dismissed by the church and left Colorado with his wife and two of his five children.

In an apparently unrelated incident on December 9, 2007, a former missionary-in-training from a deeply Christian family named Matthew Murray, age 24, opened fire in New Life Church killing two people and wounding two. After being wounded himself by a security officer, he committed suicide. Murray was bitter over being expelled from missionary school and over several months became increasingly deranged and hateful towards Christianity, blaming it for most of the problems of the world.⁶⁴

In January 2009 a young male church member named Brant Hass came forward and admitted a long time homosexual relationship with Haggard.⁶⁵

That same month, Home Box Office aired a documentary by Alexandra Pelosi (daughter of the current Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi) called "The Trials of Ted Haggard," which sympathetically describes his life since leaving the church. It portrays him working on menial jobs and moving from place to place in Arizona with his faithful wife and children. The documentary fails to mention that he left Colorado with gifts and a financial settlement with the Church of over a million dollars. Although he still

had his \$700,000 house on Colorado Springs, he apparently agreed to exile from Colorado. That exile ended in June, 2008.

As I indicated, the Ted Haggard and New Life Church stories are examples of the folly of faith. As an evangelical pastor Haggard had spoken often against homosexuality. Even now he still follows the Christian dogma that homosexuality is not natural but a sin that one can “pray away.” Why? Because the Bible says so. The Bible also says we should stone disobedient children and kill anyone who works on the Sabbath. This is an example of how Christians pick and choose what they take from the Bible as God’s word and allow those choices to override reason. All the data points to homosexuality as a sexual preference one is born with. Yet along with abortion the most important political issue to millions of Americans is not the economy or terrorism but same-sex marriage.

If you think about the problem reasonably, without the interference of irrational faith, you easily come to the conclusion that same-sex marriage brings with it the possible amelioration of at least two social problems that Christians and others, including nonbelievers, feel strongly about. First, it provides for stable relationships for gays whose lifestyles are dangerous and unhealthy to themselves and society. Second, it can help reduce abortions by making it easy for gay and lesbian couples to adopt unwanted children.

Imagine no religion. Ted Haggard would be a successful, openly gay self-improvement lecturer. Mike Jones and Brant Hass would be happily married, perhaps to each other. Matthew Murray would be still alive and perhaps having

his life put together in the U.S. Marine Corps. And the money that the 14,000 members of New Life Church dropped in the collection plates each Sunday would be used support orphans and unwed mothers.

Notes

¹ *The End of Faith*, p. 13.

² *Ibid.*

³ Hebrews 11:1.

⁴ *God is Not Great*, p. 71.

⁵ *The End of Faith*, p. 29.

⁶ There are several versions of this quotation. Source unknown.

⁷ Damon Linker, *The Theocons: Secular America Under Siege* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

⁸ Irving Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978);
Neoconservatism : The Autobiography of an Idea (New York: Free Press, 1995).

⁹ Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008).

¹⁰ U.S. media color Republican states red and Democratic states blue. This is opposite to the European convention where red is the color associated with the left wing. This was probably done to avoid any suggestion that either party was communist.

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- ¹¹ Kevin Phillips, *American Dynasty : Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush* (New York, N.Y: Penguin Books, 2004).
- ¹² Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy : The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking, 2006).
- ¹³ Ibid, book jacket.
- ¹⁴ Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006).
- ¹⁵ Ibid, p. 16.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 127.
- ¹⁷ Chris Hedges, *American Fascists : The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York: Free Press, 2007).
- ¹⁸ Ibid, book jacket.
- ¹⁹ *The Theocons*, p. 82.
- ²⁰ Michael Novak, "Lonely Atheists of the Global Village," *National Review* (March 19, 2007).
- ²¹ Michael Novak, *No One Sees God: The Dark Night of Atheists and Believers* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).
- ²² Ibid, p. 31
- ²³ Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
- ²⁴ *Kingdom Coming*, p. 108.
- ²⁵ Rob Boston, "Faith-Based Flare Up," *Church & State* 61, no. 8 (2008): 4-6.
- ²⁶ *The Republican War on Science*, p. 22

²⁷ Ibid, p. 216.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 207.

²⁹ Union of Concerned Scientists, "Investigation of the Bush Administration's Abuse of Science," http://ucsusa.wsm.ga3.org/scientific_integrity/interference/reports-scientific-integrity-in-policy-making.html (accessed October 11, 2008).

³⁰ *American Theocracy*, p. vii.

³¹ Hal Lindsey and Carole C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

³² T.F. LaHaye, and J.B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Tyndale House Publishers, 1995).

³³ Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question--Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), p. 201.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 201-25.

³⁵ Pew Research Center, "Many Americans Uneasy With Mix of Religion and Politics," <http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/religion-politics-06.pdf> (accessed November 7, 2008).

³⁶ Michael Bresciani, "Just another Election or a Fight for the Soul of the Nation," *News By Us* (October 12, 2008), <http://newsbyus.com/index.php/article/1770> (accessed October 18, 2008).

³⁷ General Council of the Assemblies of God, "Our 16 Fundamental Truths Condensed,"

http://www.ag.org/top/Beliefs/Statement_of_Fundamental_Truths/sft_short.cfm (accessed October 12, 2008).

³⁸ *Godless* (Barker), pp. 261-76.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 254-59.

⁴⁰ Earl Doherty, *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin With a Mythical Christ* (Ottawa: Canadian Humanist Publications, 1999); George Albert Wells, *The Jesus Myth* (Chicago, Ill: Open Court, 1999); Robert M Price, *Deconstructing Jesus* (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 2000) rank R. Zindler, *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew: Sepher Toldoth Yeshu and the Quest of the Historical Jesus in Jewish Sources* (Cranford, NJ: American Atheist Press, 2003).

⁴¹ John E. Remsburg, *The Christ: A Critical Review and Analysis of the Evidences of His Existence* (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1994).

⁴² David Marshall. *The Truth Behind the New Atheism: Responding to the Emerging Challenges to God and Christianity* (Eugene, Or: Harvest House Publishers, 2007), p. 17.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*. pp. 27-28.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 29.

⁴⁸ *Has Science Found God?; God: The Failed Hypothesis*.

⁴⁹ *The Truth Behind the New Atheism*, p. 30.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 31.

⁵² *God: The Failed Hypothesis* pp. 237-41.

⁵³ J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

⁵⁴ Theodore M Drange, *Nonbelief & Evil : Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God* (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1998).

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⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 11.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 13.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 18.

⁶⁰ *The God Delusion*, pp. 163-66.

⁶¹ *God and the New Atheism*, p. 59.

⁶² Ibid. p. 76.

⁶³ Jeff Sharlet, "Soldiers of Christ: I. Inside America's most powerful megachurch," *Harper's* 310 (2005): 41-54.

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