

## West Gate Church Debate, August 24, 2018, San Jose, California

### Michael Shermer vs. Frank Turek

#### *What Better Explains Reality: Theism or Atheism?*

“How many of you here tonight are theists, that is, you believe in God?”

- I was once a Born Again Christian (door-to-door, Amway with Bibles)  
Cross Jehovah Witness & Atheist? Knocks on door for no reason at all
- Born Again Atheist (door-to-door, sorry, I was wrong)
- Militant Agnostic bumper sticker: “I don’t know and you don’t either”  
Now...
- Theism simply means *belief in God*.
- Atheism simply means *without belief in God*.  
Strong vs. Weak variations

So the proposition before us tonight makes no sense either way because by itself “belief” or “without belief” in anything isn’t an explanation.

By the way, there are other positions as well:

- Agnostic*: Huxley: unknowable as a statement about the universe  
Stephen Colbert: Agnostic is an “atheist without balls”
- Deist*: God created the universe, set it in motion, then retired.
- Apatheist*: “I don’t care if there’s a God or not.
- Nontheist*: Assume no God: statement of personal belief

These words, theism and atheism, are really proxies for:

#### *What Better Explains Reality: Religion or Science?*

**Religion**: The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines religion as “the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods.”

Religion can’t “explain” anything because “the belief in and worship of” anything isn’t an explanation. Maybe you mean “God”

**God**: *an all powerful (omnipotent), all knowing (omniscient), and all good (omnibenevolent) entity; who created out of nothing the universe and*

*everything in it; who is uncreated and eternal, a noncorporeal spirit who created, loves, and can grant eternal life to humans.*

You could argue that “*God*” *explains things*, but simply saying “**God did it**” isn’t an explanation. We still need to know *how* God did it.

**God of the Gaps.** “Then a Miracle Happens” cartoon: “I think you need to be more specific here in step 2.”

*Science is a set of methods designed to describe and interpret observed or inferred phenomena, past or present, and aimed at building a testable body of knowledge open to rejection or confirmation.*

In other words, science is a specific way of analyzing information with the goal of testing claims to understand the cause of things. For example:

3 According to UNICEF:

*About 29,000 children under the age of five die every day, mainly from preventable causes. That’s 21 dead children each minute, 10.6 million a year. That’s the equivalent of almost 2 Holocausts a year.*

*By the time I finish this sentence a couple more children will have died.*

3 More than 70% of these 10.6 million child deaths every year are attributable to six causes: diarrhea, malaria, neonatal infection, pneumonia, preterm delivery, or lack of oxygen at birth.

3 Science’s Explanation: These are all preventable deaths by known causes.

3 Religion’s Explanation: these are all part of “God’s Plan”

REALLY? What sort of God would make a plan like this? An all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good god? A less-than-powerful, not-so-good-god?

***Or no god at all?***

**THE PROBLEM WITH EXPLAINING EVIL FOR RELIGIOUS PEOPLE IS WHAT I CALL *THE IRREFUTABLE GOD PROBLEM*:**

1. When good things happen, who gets the credit? God.
2. When bad things happen, who gets the blame? Not God!

So...no matter what happens the God hypothesis is confirmed.

3 What would disconfirm the God hypothesis?

3 Good things happen so God is.

3 Bad things happen so God is.

What would have to happen to refute this causal explanation of evil? In the Christian worldview, nothing can refute it. It is irrefutable. It's true by assertion, and as the late great Christopher Hitchens said:

*“That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.”*

### **Science and Sagan's Dragon**

**What's the difference between an invisible and irrefutable Dragon/God and a nonexistent Dragon/God? None! No difference.**

This is like playing baseball...without the bases...or the ball.

The problem is that, unlike science, religion has no systematic process and no empirical method to employ to determine the verisimilitude of its claims and beliefs, much less right and wrong.

If you are explaining reality using science and reason, that's not religion.

Religion is based on *Faith: belief without sufficient reason or evidence.*

Since faith, by definition, is belief without sufficient reason or evidence, faith cannot justify belief.

“But I have faith that my spouse/boyfriend/girlfriend loves me!”

No you don't: you have evidence.

*Do you know what you call love without evidence? Stalking!*

Faith might generate belief; but it cannot provide justification for what you believe.

Consequently, faith and religion cannot generate knowledge either—because

*knowledge is justified true belief.*

**Example:** Two centuries ago religion claimed that the Earth is 6,000 years old. Today scientists have calculated that the Earth is 4.6 billion years old. One of these claims is wrong. How do we know? Science, not religion.

**Isaac Asimov's *The Relativity of Wrong*:**

*“When people thought the Earth was flat, they were wrong. When people thought the Earth was spherical, they were wrong. But if you think that thinking the earth is spherical is just as wrong as thinking the earth is flat, then your view is wronger than both of them put together.”*

Now, in case you're thinking “science is your faith” or “you believe in science like I believe in religion” let me note:

We don't *believe* in science and reason. We *use* science and reason. Science and reason are *tools* for getting at the truth about the world.

If you argue that it takes faith to believe that science and reason are reliable, you've already lost the argument because you're using science and reason to refute science and reason!

How do we know science and reason work? Internal coherence and correspondence with reality:

- If you want to get a rocketship to Mars you use astronomy not astrology.
- If your child is sick you can pray for her or you can give her 500mg of tetracycline.

**Witch Theory of Causality**

If your theory of evil is that your neighbor cavorts with the devil at night, flies around on a broom inflicting people, crops, and cattle with disease, and that the proper way to cure the problem of evil is to burn her at the stake, then you are either insane or you lived in Christian Europe 400 years ago.

This was religions' theory of evil. *Exodus 22:18*: “*Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.*” Today, no one in their right mind believes this. Why? Because science debunked religion's witch theory of evil.

From the weather to the cosmos to human behavior, science has consistently proved itself to be the superior means of understanding, reducing religious

arguments for God's existence to two. In Immanuel Kant's poetic phrase, they are: "the starry heavens above and the moral law within."

In modern language they are:

1. *How did the Universe begin? Why is there something rather than nothing?*
2. *How did matter in the Universe become alive? / Origins of Life*
3. *How did living matter become conscious? Origin of Consciousness*
4. *How did conscious living matter develop morality?*

Religion's answer to all these questions is: ***God did it.***

Science has answers. Even if we have yet to achieve a consensus on the best explanation doesn't mean religion has the answer.

### **What is Reality or Truth? 2 types of Propositions:**

#### OBJECTIVE/EXTERNAL:

There are 697 people in this room tonight. True or false by counting.

Dinosaurs went extinct 65 million years ago.

Our universe began in a Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago.

#### SUBJECTIVE/INTERNAL:

Dark chocolate is better than milk chocolate.

Stairway to Heaven is the greatest rock song.

The meaning of life is 42.

#### DIFFERENCE: SOMETHING I CAN POINT TO

Meditation makes me feel better vs. Meditation works.

Ayahuasca trip to the spirit world.

Jesus existed and was crucified vs. Jesus died for your sins.

In between these is Jesus's resurrection, which is not impossible but would be a miracle if it were true. Is it?

*The principle of proportionality demands extraordinary evidence for extraordinary claims.*

Of the approximately 100 billion people who lived before us all have died and none returned, so the claim that one (or more) of them rose from the dead is about as extraordinary as one will ever find.

Is the evidence commensurate with the conviction?

Evidence for the resurrection is nowhere near as complete or convincing as the evidence on which historians rely to justify belief in other historical events such as the destruction of Pompeii.

Because miracles are far less probable than ordinary historical occurrences like volcanic eruptions, the evidence necessary to justify beliefs about them must be many times better than that which would justify our beliefs in run-of-the-mill historical events. *But it isn't.*"

What about the eyewitnesses?

Maybe they were superstitious or credulous and saw what they wanted to see.

Maybe they reported only feeling Jesus 'in spirit,' and over the decades their testimony was altered to suggest that they saw Jesus in the flesh.

Maybe accounts of the resurrection never appeared in the original gospels and were added in later centuries.

Any of these explanations for the gospel descriptions of Jesus's resurrection are far more likely than the possibility that Jesus actually returned to life after being dead for three days.

The principle of proportionality also means we should prefer the more probable explanation over the less, which these alternatives surely are.

Perhaps this is why Jesus was silent when Pilate asked him (John 18:38) "What is truth?"

By “true” I mean in the sense that the evidence is so substantial it would be unreasonable to withhold one’s provisional assent

### **NEGATIVE TRUTHS:**

Null hypothesis in science: the nonexistence of something is the truth. For example, it is telling that among the tens of thousands of government emails, documents, and files leaked in recent years there is not one mention of a UFO cover up, a faked moon landing, that 9/11 was an inside job by the Bush administration, that the Sandy Hook massacre was a false flag operation, or that Hillary Clinton was running a pedophile ring in the back of a pizza parlor.

—Here the absence of evidence is evidence of absence.

—The absence of evidence of God is evidence of the absence of God.

### **5 Minute Closing Statement**

I have devoted my entire career to the study of science and religion, from both sides.

I was once an evangelical born-against Christian. I matriculated at Pepperdine University, a Church-of-Christ institution. I studied theology. I took courses in the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Gospels and the life of Christ, and even an entire course on the writings of C.S. Lewis, whom I loved.

When I was in the religious bubble, belief in God made complete sense to me. That worldview is internally consistent and logically coherent, as long as you stay in the bubble and don’t examine the claims too closely.

When you step outside the bubble, however, and bring to bear on the claims for God’s existence the illuminating methods of science, it becomes clear that God is the last superstition left standing after centuries of science replacing

—magical thinking with scientific thinking

—subjective beliefs with objective claims

—dogmatic dogmas with testable hypotheses

—supernatural forces with natural laws

I have made the case tonight that science and reason are the best tools we have for explaining reality, and that religion is not even in the explanation game.

I wish to end by noting in an Age of Science not only is there no evidence for God, and not only is there evidence that we created the god concept in our minds, there cannot be a God, at least not a supernatural God.

If God is supernatural—outside of nature—then by definition he is outside of any form of reliable knowledge.

If God is supernatural but reaches into the world to stir the particles (to, say, answer prayers), his actions should be measurable by science, because it is science that studies the actions of moving particles. But to date there is none.

If God is natural, then he can be nothing more than an extra-terrestrial intelligence of great power and knowledge—think of a merger of Apple and Google on steroids.

Any sufficiently advanced extra-terrestrial intelligence, in fact, would be indistinguishable from God, and so the entire enterprise of trying to fit the square peg of religion into the round hole of science is doomed to fail.

Thus, if you agree that the arguments and evidence I have presented tonight is compelling that theism and religion cannot be an explanation for anything, and if God is a supernatural being he is not knowable to us in any way, ***then I urge you to vote for my side on the proposition that...***

***Science Best explains reality.***



## **EXTRA MATERIAL**

As a back-of-the-envelope calculation, I estimate that over the past 10,000 years humans have created about 100,000 different religions and about a 1,000 different gods.

What is the probability that Yahweh is the one true god, and Amon Ra, Aphrodite, Apollo, Baal, Brahma, Ganesha, Isis, Mithras, Osiris, Shiva, Thor, Vishnu, Wotan, Zeus, and the other 986 gods are false gods?

Most of you here tonight are, just like me, atheists of these 999 gods.

***What I would like to ask of the audience tonight is that you vote with me in going one god further.***

There is, I believe, compelling scientific evidence that humans created God and not vice versa that comes out of the study of the ***anthropology of religion***, the ***psychology of religion***, and the ***biology of religion***.

If you happened to be born in the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, there is a very good chance that you are a Christian who believes that Yahweh is the all-powerful and all-knowing creator of the universe who manifested into flesh through Jesus of Nazareth.

If you happened to be born in India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is a very good chance that you are a Hindu who believes that Brahman is the unchanging, infinite, transcendent creator of all matter, energy, time, and space and who manifests into flesh through Ganesha, the blue elephant god who is the most worshipped divinity in India.

Even within the three great Abrahamic religions, who can say which one is right?

- Christians believe the Bible is the inerrant gospel handed down from God
- Muslims believe that the Koran is the perfect word of God.
- Christians believe that Christ was the latest prophet.
- Muslims believe that Muhammad is the latest prophet.

- Mormons believe that Joseph Smith is the latest prophet.
- Scientologists believe that L. Ron Hubbard is the latest prophet.

***Lacking any scientific method for determining which is the right god and religion all such beliefs come down to social and psychological forces of belief.***

### ***Which God?***

3 As a back-of-the-envelope calculation within an order-of-magnitude accuracy, we can safely say that over the past 10,000 years of history humans have created about 10,000 different religions and about a 1,000 different gods.

3 What is the probability that Yahweh is the one true god, and Amon Ra, Aphrodite, Apollo, Baal, Brahma, Ganesha, Isis, Mithras, Osiris, Shiva, Thor, Vishnu, Wotan, Zeus, and the other 986 gods are false gods?

3 As skeptics like to say, everyone is an atheist about these gods; some of us just go one god further.

3 Even if theists could prove the existence of a God it doesn't mean it is Yahweh, or that he had a son named Jesus, or any of the other characteristics of the God Christians worship.

3 It could be one of the other 1000 gods. It could be an advanced Extraterrestrial Intelligence capable of creating universes out of collapsing black holes, generating stars and planets out of gravitational engineering, creating life out of genetic engineering...

### **Important Point of Logic:**

3 The burden of proof is on the believer to prove God's existence, not on the nonbeliever to disprove God's existence.

3 Although we cannot prove a negative, I can just as easily argue that I cannot prove that there is no Isis, Zeus, Apollo, Brahma, Ganesha, Mithras, Allah, Yahweh, or even the Flying Spaghetti Monster. But the inability to disprove these gods in no way makes them real or legitimate objects of belief (let alone worship).

3 ETI & the Null Hypothesis.

### ***Who Created God?***

3 A being capable of designing particles, atoms, molecules, DNA, protein chains, cells, organisms, planets, stars, universes cannot be simple.

3 Such a being would have to be as complex as or more complex than her

creations.

3 Thus, by all theistic arguments for God's existence, there must be a God's god who created the Christian God, and therefore there must necessarily be a God's god god who created God's god, *ad infinitum*.

3 But God is not an event but an agent: Even if God is not an event but an agent, agents have causes, even free agents.

3 Both events and agents have multiple causes, and many different causal chains.

3 The universe could be created from many first causes, committee of gods!

3 Even if the universe had a single cause, and that cause was God, this doesn't show that God is conscious, moral, or worthy of worship and prayer.

### ***Creator or Sustainer?***

3 God is defined, in part, as a creator and sustainer of the universe.

3 Even if the universe was created by a God, there is no evidence that something needs at every moment to sustain the universe.

3 Once created, universe may exist on its own.

3 After God created the universe He could cease to exist or be uninvolved.

### ***Finite vs. Infinite Universe***

**Argument:** The universe had to begin because if it is infinitely old, it would take an infinite time to reach the present.

**Refutation:** If the universe is infinitely old, then it had no beginning—not a beginning infinitely long ago.

### ***Infinity***

3 Disagreement in philosophy: whether it can exist as something complete or is a process of becoming.

3 Mathematicians and scientists show that infinity is extremely counter-intuitive and misleading.

3 There is nothing logically incoherent about an infinite number of events having already occurred in an infinite past.

3 The possibility of a universe with no beginning has been and still is being considered by scientists.

3 Zeno's Paradox: the hare can never catch the tortoise...

### ***Paradox of Omnipotence:***

3 If God can create a stone so big that he cannot lift it, then he is not

omnipotent.

3 If God cannot create a stone so big that he cannot lift, then he is not omnipotent.

3 Therefore, God is not omnipotent.

3 Therefore, God is either just another flawed being or God does not exist.

***Paradox of Perfection:***

3 If God exists, then he is perfect.

3 If God exists, he is the creator of the universe.

3 Perfect beings must create perfect things.

3 The universe is not perfect.

3 Therefore, the universe was not created by a perfect being.

3 Therefore, there is no God.

***Paradox of a Personal / Physical God:***

3 If God exists, then he is nonphysical.

3 If God exists, then he is a personal being.

3 A personal being needs to be physical.

3 Therefore, God is nonphysical & nonpersonal, or is physical & personal.

3 Or, God does not exist.

Consider additional scientific evidence that comes from the anthropology and psychology of religion:

**Flood myths.** Predating the biblical Noahian flood story by centuries, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was written around 1800 B.C. Warned by the Babylonian Earth-god Ea that other gods were about to destroy all life by a flood, Utnapishtim was instructed to build an ark in the form of a cube that is 120 cubits (180 feet) in length, breadth, and depth, with seven floors, each divided into nine compartments, and to take aboard one pair of each living creature.

**Virgin birth myths.** Among those alleged to have been conceived without the usual assistance from the male lineage were: *Dionysus, Perseus, Buddha, Attis, Krishna, Horus, Mercury, Romulus* and, of course, *Jesus*.

Consider the parallels between *Dionysus*, the ancient Greek God of wine, and *Jesus of Nazareth*. Both were said to have been born from a virgin mother, who was a mortal woman, but were fathered by the king of heaven;

both allegedly returned from the dead, transformed water into wine, introduced the idea of eating and drinking the flesh and blood of the creator, and to have been liberator of mankind.

### **Resurrection myths.**

—**Osiris** is the Egyptian god of life, death, and fertility, and is one of the oldest Gods for whom records have survived.

—Osiris first appears in the *pyramid texts around 2400 B.C.*, by which time his following was already well established.

—Widely worshipped until the compulsory repression of pagan religions in the early Christian era, Osiris was not only the redeemer and merciful judge of the dead in the afterlife, he was also linked to fertility, most notably the flooding of the Nile and growth of crops.

—*Kings of Egypt* were inextricably connected with Osiris in death such that *when Osiris rose from the dead so would they* in union with him.

—By the *New Kingdom*, not only Pharaohs but *mortal men believed that they could be resurrected by and with Osiris at death* if, of course, they practiced the correct religious rituals.

—Osiris predates the Jesus messiah story by at least 2,500 years.

### **Resurrection Reconsidered:**

1. God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omnibenevolent—all knowing, all powerful, all present, and all good, who created the universe and everything in it including us.
2. We were originally created sinless, but because God gave us free will and Adam and Eve chose to eat the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, we are all born with original sin—a principle that goes against all Western jurisprudence of blaming someone for something they didn't do.
3. God could just forgive the sin we never committed, but instead...He sacrificed his son Jesus, who is actually just himself in the flesh because Christians believe in only 1 god—monotheism—of which Jesus & the Holy Spirit are just different manifestations.
4. The only way to avoid eternal punishment for sins we never committed from this all-loving God is to accept his son—who is actually himself—as our savior. So...

*God sacrificed himself to himself to save us from himself. Barking Mad!*