



AN ANSWER

A PERSONAL WRESTLING OF THE
ISSUES IN CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

BY AMY GREY

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have | 1 Peter 3:15

*Dedicated to Jordan and Guillaume,
who asked me for an answer as to why I believed,
but I no longer have a way of contacting them.*

This work is only an overview.
It is intended as a summary of my processing of complex issues and an
introduction to people who have influenced my thought.

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Fundamental Reasons

I have a memory from when I was playing alone around the age of six or seven where I began to question reality. How could I be sure that anything existed other than what I could see with my own eyes? What kept things intelligible, what kept things in existence when no one was there to witness them? Was anything real except my own mind? Was it all an illusion? My only knowledge and experience of the world moved with me wherever I went. I started to wonder if even my own siblings could be shadowy figments of my imagination. Then I thought of my mom and her love for me. It was a love I knew to be real, not something I could have invented, not something that could have originated within my mind, but something that came from without, entirely from “other”. It was love that pierced my little world of sensorial experience. In that moment, I had considered love to be the most real thing in my life, and so I trusted my loving mom to be a fellow witness to this world I found myself in. And I could be convinced everything I touched, tasted, smelled, heard, and felt was not just a product of my own mind.

I still find myself continuously [questioning my experience of everyday reality](#). I watched my two-year-old draw in the sand this summer, and I ran my own fingers through that sand, still trying to grasp the nature of matter, still wondering to myself, *this is real?* And the thought of things existing as they are, without an eye to view them, still fascinates me. How could it be that things are intelligible even when no one is there to witness them? While thinking through a similar line of questioning as my younger self, I recently had an experience that almost startled me. I can only liken it to putting my hand up to a glass window, and then suddenly and unexpectedly seeing a hand move towards mine from the

darkness on the other side. It was as if I was on this side of the window, of the created order, looking at it in all its intelligibility, and being met by Someone, not from within it, but from the other side of it. It was the hand of Someone who did witness all things and so kept them existing, who brought them to existence and who made them intelligible. Though I knew of arguments for God as ground of all being, the [God of philosophy](#) can often feel impersonal and distant. But this hand to the glass— this was a knowledge of a different kind, a personal movement which left an imprint on my heart.

Simone Rizkallah, summarizing Josef Pieper, wrote about two kinds of knowledge in her article “[Leisure in the Life of a Christian](#)” in the *Catechetical Review*:

For Kant, even intellectual work has to be exclusively discursive. It consists essentially in the act of “comparing, examining, relating, distinguishing, abstracting, deducing, demonstrating—all of which are forms of active intellectual effort.”^[3] Therefore, the work of knowing is activity, and it is this characteristic of activity that justifies intellectual work and makes it credible.

However, this interpretation of the act of knowing, of intellectual work, is not the only one. The ancient Greek and Medieval philosophers believed that the discursive use of the intellect (ratio/reason) is only one way of knowing. The other way of knowing is through the intuition (simplex intuitus/simply looking). Pieper explains the distinction by using the example of knowing a rose. A rose can be known discursively by taking it apart, observing it, studying it, and, therefore in a sense, “possessing” it.^[4] Or it can be known by

simply gazing upon and absorbing its beauty. The defining characteristic of the intuition is receptivity, rather than activity.

For the ancients and later the Christians, the work of knowing involves both the activity of reason and the receptivity of intuition.

Being raised in a Christian household, from a young age I pieced together that this love from my mother was a love she had first received and a love she imitated. I recognized my mother's love as a sign of the even more perfect love of God. And so this heart piece of my faith, this knowledge that is love received, will always be my primary reason for believing in God. I remain convinced that my experience of love is more real, more fundamental than any other reality I've experienced.

Early Difficulties in Literalistic Interpretations

Yet the analytical side of me has always had questions. I remember examining my cartoon Noah's ark Sunday school artwork once, questioning if I really had to believe these things about Noah and Jonah and all the rest. I immediately distanced myself from the validity of those questions by relegating these stories to the "time of long ago."

Though it was not the primary reason for my conversion, upon entering the Catholic Church I found myself relieved of the intellectual burden of ignoring certain topics that had become sources of cognitive dissonance for me. One of these was the problem of a literalistic interpretation of the Bible. Catholicism, which holds a more nuanced understanding of biblical inerrancy than that of

strict fundamentalism, guided me through a literal understanding of many difficult Old Testament biblical passages without being literalistic. In other words, genre and literary elements, author's intentions, and culture were all considered when determining the meaning of a passage, rather than taking each sentence as being factually true in itself. (Even early theologians like Origen and [Augustine](#) criticized strict literalistic interpretations, particularly in regards to Genesis). At the time of my conversion, I wasn't particularly interested in the scientific details. I was just glad that evolution and other discoveries no longer presented an obstacle to my faith.

Many years later I read a [collection of homilies](#) on the theology of Creation by then Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, which answered a question I hadn't fully accepted was lurking in the back of my mind: If Genesis isn't a science book, what is it supposed to be saying? Why is it relevant? While I was no longer trapped under the weight of needing to defend the literalistic interpretation, my subsequent categorization of Genesis as "*not*" (as in *not* a textbook) revealed itself as the underdeveloped and altogether unconvincing intellectual placeholder it was. It was through Ratzinger's brilliant exegesis that I was able to see for the first time the *positive* meaning of the Creation narrative. Guided through the literary elements in the text, I was completely taken by the real depth of its message and its complete relevance to modern society. Thus began my utter fascination with Genesis— and with Ratzinger's thought.

Christianity and Myth

While it would be impossible to present an exegesis of the first chapters of Genesis here, there is an aspect that continuously strikes me about Christianity's relationship to myth. One often hears of similarities of the first chapters of Genesis with countless other pagan creation myths. The theoretical physicist Stephen Barr made a point in *The Believing Scientist* which has remained with me. As early as page four, he writes:

I think we would all agree that most forms of belief in the supernatural are superstitious. However, we must remind ourselves of a vital historical fact, which is that many of these forms of supernaturalism were attacked, and at least partially overthrown, by biblical religion long before the advent of modern science. The Book of Genesis itself was in large part intended, scholars tell us, as a polemic against pagan superstition. For example, whereas the sun and moon were the objects of worship in pagan religion, the Book of Genesis taught that they were nothing but lamps set in the heavens to give light to day and nights: not gods, but mere things, creatures of the one true God. Nor were animals and the forces of nature to be bowed down to by man as in pagan religion; rather man, as a rational being made in the image of God, was to exercise dominion over them.

It is true that the Bible is overwhelmingly supernatural in its outlook and literary atmosphere. However, what is critically important is that the Bible's supernaturalism is concentrated in a God who is outside of Nature, and radically distinguished from the world He has made. Therefore the world of nature is no longer seen as populated by capricious supernatural beings, by fates and furies, dryads and naiads, gods of war or goddesses of sex and fertility. The natural world has been "disenchanted." But whereas many give credit to science for this, the distinction belongs in the first instance to the

monotheism of the Bible, which in depersonalizing and desacralizing the natural world helped clear the ground for the eventual emergence of modern science.

I find it interesting to note, that despite being on radically different sides of the “scientific” spectrum, there are certain principles that pagan creation myths actually bear in common with philosophies underlying atheistic Neo-Darwinism, empiricism/rationalism, and the like. Generally speaking, both pagan superstition and atheism tend to view the natural order as the highest order of being, time and creation as being undirected or unguided, man’s existence as mere “accident”, and more. Taken to heart, these shared principles of ancient pagan superstition and modern atheist rationalism would actually lead a man to live and think about his life in a similar way, in his search for any inherent meaning of his own existence. It is Genesis that stands alone in its mention of love, order, intention, and meaning in regard to creation.

I find that Judaism’s stance against myth parallels a similar movement of early Christianity against the cult of the Roman emperor. Let me refer to Pope Benedict XVI/Joseph Ratzinger in *Introduction to Christianity*, p112, where he writes about what it meant for early Christians to profess faith in the one God:

For whoever assented to this creed renounced at the same time the laws of the world to which he belonged; he renounced the worship of the ruling political power, on which the late Roman Empire rested, he renounced the worship of pleasure and the cult of fear and superstition that ruled the world...

Christians rejected even the most harmless forms of the cult... and were ready to risk their

lives by such an action... It is important to realize that this refusal was far from being a piece of narrow-minded fanaticism and that it changed the world in a way in which it can only be changed by the readiness to suffer. Those events showed that faith is not a matter of playing with ideas but a very serious business: it says no, and must say no, to the absoluteness of political power..."

...the renunciation of the first few Christian centuries has turned out to be so effective historically that the gods have disappeared irrevocably. To be sure, the powers expressed in them have not disappeared, nor has the temptation to regard them as absolutes. Both facts are part of the basic human situation and express the enduring "truth", so to speak, of polytheism; we are threatened no less than the people of ancient times to make absolutes of power, bread, and Eros. But even if the gods of those days are still "powers" that try to claim absoluteness, they have irrevocably lost the mask of divinity and must now show themselves unmasked in their true profanity. Here we have a fundamental difference between pre-Christian and post-Christian paganism, which bears the stamp of the Christian rejection of the gods and its power to alter history.

In a subsequent chapter, on page 137, he says:

It was in the wake of this whole series of events that early Christianity boldly and resolutely made its choice and carried out its purification by deciding for the God of the philosophers and against the gods of the various religions. Wherever the question arose as to which god the Christian God corresponded, Zeus perhaps or Hermes or Dionysus or some other god, the answer ran: To none of them. To none of the gods to whom you pray but solely and alone to him to whom you do not pray, to that highest being of whom your philosophers speak...

The choice thus made meant opting for the logos as against any kind of myth; it meant the definitive demythologization of the world and of religion.

We have then, a strong Christian rejection of the gods of myth in favor of the God of reason, even under threat of persecution. On the same theme, René Girard's theory of mimetic desire also juxtaposes Christianity with myth in a somewhat controversial but interesting way. Girard's theory believes mimetic desire, unique to humans, plays a role in how culture has developed. In short, he believes human desires are modeled after others' desires, and that we subconsciously place value on things based on how much other people desire them. This leads to jealousy, rivalries, and building tension within a community, reaching a certain boiling point. This results in what he calls a scapegoat mechanism, where a community unites against a single individual or group, who is then blamed and becomes a victim of violence. In the Greek myths, Girard says, the victim's innocence is concealed and the reality of the violence masked. When the tension is released after death of the victim, the pacifying effect on the community results in the deification of the victim. Girard believes the Greek myths are based on real events and real victims. He says the gospels of Jesus follow on a similar theme with one striking difference: the innocence of Christ is maintained and the violence is seen for what it is. In other words, the Christian message flips myth on its head and exposes it. He recounts the story of the "Horrible Miracle of Apollonius of Tyana," where Apollonius cures a city by inciting a violent mob to stone an innocent victim, and contrasts it with the near-stoning of the adulterous woman, where Jesus dispelled the impending mob with the words, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." This myth of Apollonius originated post-Christianity and the victim within it was super

naturalized to an extent, as a demon, but never deified. Girard uses this as evidence that any reconciling or transforming effect of violence on the community was weakening and that the force of myth was unraveling in the wake of Christianity.

Christian Practices with Pagan Roots

I do not find it necessary for Christianity to reject all that is true in other religions, nor do I decry outright the incorporation of certain pagan rituals as new cultic expressions of Christianity. John Henry Newman summarizes it this way in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (bolded emphasis mine):

“The use of temples, and those dedicated to particular saints, and ornamented on occasions with branches of trees; incense, lamps, and candles; votive offerings on recovery from illness; holy water; asylums; holydays and seasons, use of calendars, processions, blessings on the fields; sacerdotal vestments, the tonsure, the ring in marriage, turning to the East, images at a later date, perhaps the ecclesiastical chant, and the Kyrie Eleison, are all of pagan origin, and sanctified by their adoption into the Church.

[...]

The phenomenon, admitted on all hands, is this: That great portion of what is generally received as Christian truth is, in its rudiments or in its separate parts, to be found in heathen philosophies and religions. For instance, the doctrine of the Trinity is found both in the East and West; so is the ceremony of washing; so is the rite of sacrifice. The doctrine of the Divine Word is Platonic; the doctrine of the Incarnation is Indian; of a divine kingdom is Judaic; of angels and demons is Magian; the connexion of sin with the

body is Gnostic, celibacy is known to Boze and Talapoin; a sacerdotal order is Egyptian; the idea of a new birth is Chinese and Eleusinian; belief in sacramental virtue is Pythagorean; and honours to the dead are a polytheism. Such is the general nature of the facts before us; Mr. Milman argues from it, - 'these things are in heathenism, therefore they are not Christian: we, on the contrary, prefer to say, 'these things are in Christianity, therefore they are not heathen.'

That is, we prefer to say, and we think Scripture bears us out in saying, that from the beginning the Moral Governor of the world has scattered the seeds of truth far and wide over its extent; that these have variously taken root, and grown up as in the wilderness, wild plants indeed but living; [...] So far from her creed being doubtful because it resembles foreign theologies, we even hold that one special way in which Providence has imparted divine knowledge to us has been by enabling her to draw and collect it together out of the world.

[...]

The distinction between these two theories is broad and obvious. The advocates of the one imply that Revelation was a single, entire, solitary act, or nearly so, introducing a certain message; whereas we, who maintain the other, consider that Divine teaching has been in fact, what the analogy of nature would lead us to expect, 'at sundry times and in diverse manners', various, complex, progressive, and supplemental to itself."

Christianity Among World Religions

Following [Ratzinger](#), it is in the nature of cultures to be mutually transformed by encounter with each other. But there is also a necessary element of purification of cultures and religions when they encounter Christ. I believe that what is true in other religions, is true only insofar as it prepares one's heart for an encounter with Christ. I think that there are many examples of certain truths in other religions which do find their ultimate meaning and deepest fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ, which I may write about at a later date and link back here. Being united in truth does not preclude diversity of expression or presuppose uniformity of a religion. Whether on the cultural or individual level, there will exist various ways of expressing a single reality in all its wholeness.

For more an in depth treatment of the topic of Christianity's relationship to other religions, I can only recommend Ratzinger's [Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions](#), which covers topics like the interactions and mutual influence of Hellenism and Judaism, the problem of Christian imperialism, assessment of Christianity as a Eurocentric religion, and much more.

I believe the truth is compelling and enduring by nature and will attract people merely by virtue of being true, in spite of the hardships that can accompany it, and in so doing, [effect change](#) in a significant way. Despite historical moments of unpopularity or discomfort (or worse) that it brings, I think truth is a real force in the world, with a marked ability to withstand cultural change, scientific discovery, and human corruption— even when that corruption is within religion's own human elements. For this reason, in studying comparative religion, I find

myself focusing on those belief systems which have had greater historical and cultural impact, such as Eastern mysticism/Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, or the breadth of religions that fall under Hinduism, and of course Christianity. Though there are true elements to be found in many folk religions, I believe many of those elements can be synthesized with reason and articulated with greater clarity upon incorporation into Christianity.

Due to my complete [disenchantment with empty humanism](#), mere human knowledge, or mere human effort as any sort of longstanding solution to anything, I think that, on historical and experiential grounds, I think I will always find any way of thinking that focuses on or leads to human “solutions” wholly unconvincing. Ultimately, apart from Christianity, apart from God, I think any other response to the problem of evil would lead me to total despair, as I will discuss later on. I believe Christianity places humanity squarely where it should be: broken and ultimately incapable of fixing itself and its destructive tendencies. At the same time, I appreciate Christianity’s emphasis on creation, human life, and being itself as “good” things. Earthly goods and passions are not completely rejected or something to be entirely “detached” from, but are rather placed in their proper context and proper order, which will require some level of self-discipline without going to extremes. Christianity, particularly Catholicism with its sacramental worldview, is “incarnational” without being carnal. That is to say, it does not reject the material world or sensuality altogether, but rather embraces the senses and directs them toward a reality that lies beyond their strictly material aspects.

Another thing I find compelling about Christianity is that it teaches the truest identity of the individual is found in and through relationship, rather than being totally absorbed into a singular whole. Personal identity does not “disappear” after death but is rather more fully revealed in the diversity of wholeness. In a similar vein, Christian anthropology can also identify the issues of hyper-individualism in the same breath that identifies the issues of worldviews that eliminate individual rights for the sake of the whole or of the state. Instead, it grants the individual the level of agency that is his by nature and so gives cause for his individual rights; yet, it does not treat him as completely autonomous, as though those rights were unlimited.

Neither does Christianity give equal ontological status to moral evil, as if it was a dual force opposite goodness, justice, etc., or as an extreme side on a spectrum of reality. Rather, Christianity describes moral evil as a *privation* of reality, of truth. Evil is completely parasitic on “being” itself, similar to the way adultery does not exist in its own right but is only made possible through a distortion of marriage. In Christianity, what is true is what is real, and what is true is what is good. Moral evil does not exist opposite goodness as if existing on the same plane of reality, but is instead a kind of a “sub”-reality, a corrupted reality.

Christianity and Reason

As mentioned earlier, while reason is not the primary reason for my faith, it is necessary for me to be able to logically support my beliefs if I want to remain intellectually honest as a Christian. For that, I seek a sense of coherence between physics, biology, theology, ethics, and philosophy.

There are many different “ideas” of God, and I would fall under the umbrella of a [classical theist](#). Aristotelian-Thomist (A-T) philosophy makes a logical argument for [divine simplicity](#), which retains the personal nature of God (as he has intellect and will), but is opposed to *personalistic*, anthropomorphic conceptions of God. A “complex”, disembodied Zeus-type persona raises more questions than answers. This is one reason I have a strong personal aversion to depictions of God the Father in art and appreciate the 1667 Orthodox prohibition of His depiction in iconography. (I also think depicting God the Father as a human person lends itself to a conception of Jesus as a demi-god or physical offspring of God, rather than the image of God who is a *fully divine* Person who took on a *fully human* nature.) Of course, due to the limitations of human language, anthropomorphic language is often necessary to metaphorically and analogically convey realities that are beyond human comprehension. Divine simplicity understands God not as a “being” alongside other “beings” but “being itself” - the very ground of everything that exists. He does not “have” existence as other realities do, but is existence. In the words of Brett Salke, God is not “somewhere or someone else, but somehow else.” (*Transubstantiation*) For this reason, we can only speak of God analogically.

There are also the A-T arguments from motion or cause as a logical reason to believe in God. Most [major objections](#) to these arguments refer to event causality (a causal series ordered *per accidens*) rather than substance causality (causal series subordinated *per se*). Event causality is linear in nature and refers to a physical relationship of events. Aristotelian substance causality is hierarchical in nature and refers to an order of causal power rather than a causal sequence. Event causality refers to separate events, where *event X* (cause) precedes *event Y* (effect); Aristotelian causality refers to a **singular event** in which the cause and effect occur *at the same time*. Event causality references the past; substance causality refers to the present moment. I also want to briefly note that some of the atheist philosophers of religion, e.g. Graham Oppy, acknowledge Thomism as a reasonable position, even if they do not find it fully worked out or believe it answers all possible objections.

Despite the large ratio of atheist-to-believing physicists, I would wager that among those who study both physics *and* philosophy, the disparity would be nowhere near as great. (I also think the imbalance is due in part to the modern bias toward the Kantian view that *ratio* is the only way of acquiring knowledge, and that the sciences in particular attract those who spend more time analyzing than cultivating the receptivity required for *simplex intuitus*, described above).

One of those who studies both physics and philosophy is the theoretical physicist Dr. Nigel Cundy. In his book *What is Physics?: A Defense of Classical Theism*, he makes a strong case for the validity of Thomism— which is strongly relied upon in Catholic intellectual tradition— and even describes it as one of the few philosophies left standing in light of quantum physics. Likewise Stephen Barr, in

his numerous works, has emphasized the compatibility of modern physics with faith. Indeed, even Heisenberg noted certain similar concepts in quantum physics and Aristotle in his *Physics and Philosophy*:

The probability wave of Bohr, Kramers, Slater... was a quantitative version of the old concept of “potentia” in Aristotelian philosophy. It introduced something standing in the middle between the idea of an event and the actual event, a strange kind of physical reality just in the middle between possibility and reality. (p. 15)

It is remarkable to me how similar I find the underlying concepts of physics and theology, as if they are two different modes of describing a single reality.

Whether I listen to a Great Courses lecture on quantum physics or watch PBS Space Time on YouTube, I find it quite striking how many of the concepts have already been imparted to me through theology, particularly Trinitarian theology, with its symmetries, paradoxes, and often counterintuitive notions of reality and time. They are both bizarre, but in the same way. I think these similarities are the very reason St. Augustine could come up with a [relativistic theory of time](#) 1600 years before Einstein.

It is impossible for anyone to avoid “doing” philosophy, whether they realize it or not. Without a study of the history of philosophy or an intentional engagement with different thoughts, one will simply blindly inherit the philosophical presuppositions of his age. For those of us alive today, that is likely going to be nominalism or conceptualism. Without going too much into the details (I can only recommend Ed Feser’s *Aquinas* for this), under the [hylemorphic conception of matter](#), together an immaterial “form” and physical “matter” make up a “substance”. Nominalism rejects the notion that universals like form have any

existence apart from mind, and so often the modern understanding of “substance” collapses into its merely physical aspects. However, Dr. Cundy in *What is Physics?* notes that the Pauli Exclusion Principle seems to indicate that nature itself recognizes the existence of at least some universals, particularly the form of the electron. The Thomist understanding of form is “moderate” realism, which is distinct from Plato's thought that forms (of physical objects) have an existence of their own. Rather, moderate realism holds that forms must be instantiated in real, physical objects. So while Thomists are “dualists” of a sort, Platonic dualism or Cartesian dualism (as seen in Descartes, for example) are rejected.

Where this becomes most relevant for me is that a major objection to Christianity, the fact/value distinction or the is/ought gap, does not exist on this conception. (And as an aside, neither does the mind-body problem). Rather it argues that— and I cannot summarize the argument here (see *Aquinas!*)— what is true is what is good. By extension, human moral ethics in Thomism is connected to the understanding of [four causes of things](#). I will grossly oversimplify by saying that the more closely that substances, including humans, are aligned with their final causes, the greater degree of perfection they reach. Natural law has of course had objections, [many of which have been answered](#). It should be said that accepting [natural law](#) does *not* mean that one believes what happens in “nature” or “naturally” is always ideal, or that one must reject whatever does not occur naturally. Also, a distinction needs to be made between natural objects and artifacts. For natural objects, causality (or teleology) occurs organically. It is inherent to the thing itself and is immanent in nature. In man-made objects or artifacts, on the other hand, the final cause is imposed from outside the matter

and not intrinsic to it. This distinction becomes important when discussing Intelligent Design arguments à la William Paley (e.g. watchmaker argument), as these kinds of arguments presume extrinsic teleology for natural objects. Many Thomists reject the philosophical presuppositions of Intelligent Design, but on the whole would be fine [accepting facts of evolution](#), though of course without the conceptualist presuppositions that usually accompany those facts.

Morality then, for the Christian, is objective. Note that believing in objective morality is a far different thing than believing it is always applied or understood objectively by humans, even within Christianity. Rather, it is that humans have a subjective understanding of an objective reality. Similarly, while morality does not change, circumstances do. [Personal culpability](#) can also be subjective. All people, religious or not, have a natural capacity to attain a certain level of morality by way of their reasoning ability, though that capacity is often stunted by a clouded judgment. God's laws, far from being arbitrary, are a revelation of truth and always correspond with reality. The Christian is not asked to follow them blindly, but should rather seek to understand them through a reason rooted in faith. It is because man is capable of reason that he can be held accountable for his actions. And as Christianity requires man's *free* cooperation, but also accurately grasps the reality of man's weak condition, I deeply appreciate the patience and wisdom of God in dealing with us as we are, asking of us to grow in ways that are challenging but also correspond realistically to our limited intellect and limited capacity for change. Development in religion is not all that dissimilar to development in science— which also grows progressively and builds on previous knowledge.

Difficulties with the Problem of Evil

The first time I started to read through the entire Bible intentionally was extremely difficult for me. When I reached the story of Hagar's pregnancy, I had to close my Bible and pace the room. I knew how blessed Abraham and Sarah would be. In reading of their mistreatment of Hagar, I was angry and deeply unsettled. It seemed to me a great injustice that God would give them such a place of prominence in salvation history and yet leave her sidelined. Eventually I worked up the courage to pick up my Bible up again and continued reading in Genesis 16 about Hagar's encounter with God in the desert:

So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "Thou art a God of seeing"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?"

It became a great comfort to me that Hagar felt the love of the God who saw her and revealed himself to her in her pain and in her suffering. Though [arguments regarding the problem of evil](#) may be logically strong, the language my heart speaks finds them wanting. This story of Hagar thus became the basis of my own heart response to the problem of evil. In those moments where I am deeply troubled by injustice, I pray and cling to the God Who Sees. I can only trust that his perfect justice will eventually be carried out in ways I cannot always understand.

There was a period last year where I had become deeply affected by the horrific reality of war. I had just received the Eucharist and was kneeling in my pew with tears streaming silently down my cheeks, asking "Where are You in war? Where are

you in injustice?” And this is one of the few times in my life where I have “felt” any response to my prayer. This response was not in words nor images, but I describe it as though a distant figure was calling to me across a deep chasm. *I am here, in suffering.* I knew then, that this distance that I felt was because He had already entered into that chasm of suffering, and I was only on its periphery. In the face of the feelings of forsakenness and doubt and anguish that accompany suffering, I look to the cross with Jesus nailed to it and say to myself: *He is there, in its midst.*

Difficulties with the Old Testament

Of course, that was not the only difficult encounter I had with the Old Testament. For this, I have often relied upon [Catholic exegesis of the Old Testament](#). In [Verbum Domini](#), we read in paragraph 42 (bolded emphasis mine):

*In discussing the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments, the Synod also considered those passages in the Bible which, due to the violence and immorality they occasionally contain, prove obscure and difficult. **Here it must be remembered first and foremost that biblical revelation is deeply rooted in history. God’s plan is manifested progressively and it is accomplished slowly, in successive stages and despite human resistance.** God chose a people and patiently worked to guide and educate them. Revelation is suited to the cultural and moral level of distant times and thus describes facts and customs, such as cheating and trickery, and acts of violence and massacre, without explicitly denouncing the immorality of such things. This can be explained by the historical context, yet it can cause the modern reader to be taken aback, especially if he or she fails to take account of the many “dark” deeds carried out down the centuries, and also in our own day. In the Old Testament, the preaching of the prophets vigorously challenged every kind of injustice and violence, whether collective or individual, and thus*

became God's way of training his people in preparation for the Gospel. So it would be a mistake to neglect those passages of Scripture that strike us as problematic. Rather, we should be aware that the correct interpretation of these passages requires a degree of expertise, acquired through a training that interprets the texts in their historical-literary context and within the Christian perspective which has as its ultimate hermeneutical key "the Gospel and the new commandment of Jesus Christ brought about in the paschal mystery."

In short, the Bible describes a real history of a perfect God working in and through imperfect people. He "condescends" to the reality of our human condition in order for us to have a real, free participation in his Divine Plan. In order to accomplish this, he is patient with humanity and accompanies it throughout thousands of years, guiding it more and more deeply into truth, ultimately culminating in the Incarnation of his Word who is Jesus, the fulfillment of all the law.

While not all-encompassing, the main way I make sense of the violence is that it was only permitted due to the weakness of Israel, of humanity. Israel, after being enslaved in Egypt for 400 years and steeped in idolatry, desperately needed its own identity, its own culture, its own law. Surrounded by cultures who sacrificed children, Israel (indicative of all humanity) was prone to corruption by influence. One can even see how the horrors of child sacrifice had touched Israel in the book of Judges. The destruction of surrounding nations was, in essence, the preservation of Israel. Through this preservation of Israel, God entered history, fulfilled the law, and became the Light *for all nations*. I can only trust that God, the author of human life, sees and loves each individual soul of these other

cultures, used these circumstances to curb their propensity toward sin, knew what was best for their souls on judgment day, and was with each of them in their suffering.

Because God is unchanging, the God of the Old Testament cannot be literally “angry”, as if prone to passions. (The doctrine of divine simplicity holds this to be a logical impossibility.) But this emotional imagery captures how human relationship with God is strained when humanity acts in a way that is incompatible with Truth/Love itself, which is how we define God. Humanity puts itself in a position of danger when it ceases to live in accordance with truth, as it falls prey to the sub-reality that is evil. God’s love for us and his truth do not change; rather, humanity experiences his love differently when we have chosen something other than truth, other than love. It is a mercy to experience this “wrath” of God, which is his unrelenting truth and love chasing after us even into lies and brokenness. Rather than shielding us from the horror of our actions or enabling us to commit evil without cost, God uses the natural consequences of our free choices as a call to come back to his enduring truth, his faithful love. Rather than being compiled by one man in one time period by way of revealed dictation, the Bible is written over thousands of years, in various genres, by the hands of many different inspired authors who experience God working in and through real historical events. Christianity is rooted in *real* history. It must be noted that sometimes non-literal language can be used to describe real events in order to emphasize the greater spiritual realities of these historical events rather than flattening them to mere historical “fact”, similar to the way substances are not to be reduced to their physical aspects. As an example, a Catholic is required to hold that our first human parents (I speak about my challenges with the

historicity of Adam and Eve later) committed a real sin in history— yet we believe figurative language, such garden, serpent, etc., is used in describing this truly historical event to convey the spiritual significance of that moment in time to the many subsequent generations.

While St. Augustine was tempted to throw the Bible across the room upon first reading it after being accustomed to Cicero's eloquence, there is such a beauty for me in seeing how God works in and through unlearned and unwise men, giving us insight into the fact he who is truly wise is he who trusts in the Lord. While many an atheist today finds greater "wisdom" in the works of Marcus Aurelius, it is the simple language of often unimpressive men that God chose to convey His enduring truth. The smallness of Israel, the weakness of men— these are who God has used to change the world. This is the one of the grandeurs of God: to make himself small, to stoop, to accomplish such a grand thing through unqualified people. And the typological elements and the Jewish connection with Catholic liturgy reads like a poem, the same backwards and forwards, written across thousands of years. What man could have authored that? Who could have even conceived such a thing?

Discontinuity?

In Ratzinger's first book in the *Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy, Ratzinger distinguishes between two kinds of law in Exodus. The first is casuistic law written by Moses, which is not directly divine, but is rather juridical and emerges from common practice. He notes how divine law guides these laws, and that they are subject to criticism and require further development and correction in different historical

situations. The second kind of law is apodictic law, which is divine law. Rather than giving specific rules as with juridical law, apodictic law consists of unchanging principles or “metanorms.” (e.g. “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan, Ex. 22:21”) He mentions how Olivier Artus and others have demonstrated how Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah critiqued casuistic law when it became opposed to those divine principles. Jesus, then, was in keeping with both the prophets and the law when he said his “But I say to you...”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks with authority over the Torah— which is in itself a claim to divinity. Far from breaking away from the Law or destroying a culture, he universalizes their inner principles for all nations and all cultures. The juridical aspects of the Law are thus done away with, and man is left to his reason to apply judicial laws appropriate for different times and cultures, aligned with the underlying principles.

From page 124:

Within the Torah itself, then, there are quite different levels of authority. As Artus puts it, the Torah contains an ongoing dialogue between historically conditioned norms and metanorms. The latter express the perennial requirements of the Covenant.

Fundamentally, the metanorms reflect God’s option to defend the poor, who are easily deprived of justice and cannot procure it for themselves...

Jesus does nothing new or unprecedented when he contrasts the practical, casuistic norms developed in the Torah with the pure will of God, which he presents as the “greater righteousness” (Mt 5:20) expected of God’s children. He takes up the intrinsic dynamism of the Torah itself, as further developed by the Prophets, and— in his capacity as the

Chosen Prophet who sees God face-to-face (Deut 18:15)— he gives it its radical form. Obviously, then, these words do not formulate a social order, but they do provide social orderings with their fundamental criteria— even though these criteria can never be purely realized as such in any given social order. By giving actual juridical and social ordinances a new dynamism, by removing them from the immediate purview of the divine and transferring responsibility for them to enlightened reason, Jesus reflects the internal structure of the Torah itself.

In the antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stands before us neither as a rebel nor as a liberal, but as the prophetic interpreter of the Torah. He does not abolish it, but he fulfills it, and he does so precisely by assigning reason its sphere of responsibility for acting within history. Consequently, Christianity constantly has to reshape and reformulate social structures and “Christian social teaching.” There will always be new developments to correct what has gone before. In the inner structure of the Torah, in its further development under the critique of the Prophets, and in Jesus’ message, which takes up both elements, Christianity finds the wide scope for necessary historical evolution as well as the solid ground that guarantees the dignity of man by rooting it in the dignity of God.

Miracles

In classical theism, the idea that a miracle is a sort of intervention in the natural world is to be rejected. The earlier clarification regarding cause and effect is relevant again on this point; cause and effect do not precede each other but rather occur simultaneously in a singular event. The philosophy professor [Ed Feser writes](#) on his blog:

The theistic personalist also generally takes God's miraculous activity to amount to a kind of "intervention" in a natural order that would otherwise operate without him, like that of a machinist who steps in to alter the workings of a machine he had earlier set in motion but which was, before the intervention, carrying on independently of him. For the classical theist, that is simply not the right way to think about miracles, since there is no such thing as the world otherwise carrying on apart from God, given that He is already the sustaining cause of the ordinary course of events itself. If we pursue the musician analogy a bit further, we can say that for the classical theist, the world's regular operations are like the music a musician plays according to a score he has before his mind, and a miracle is like the musician's momentary improvisation or departure from that score. It is not an intervention in a course of events that would otherwise have carried on without God, but rather the suspension of the normal ordering of a course of events that would not in any case have carried on without Him.

The classical theist believes that the natural order as a whole has a supernatural cause. So I don't think it is enough to define miracles as events which have a supernatural cause. While the Scholastics might have a more nuanced view, in general I tend to think of miracles as existing on a spectrum of "statistical likelihood" from the purely temporal dimension. There are those miracles that are directly and only divine, events where eternity and time are intertwined in some way, e.g. the creation of time and matter itself or major suprahistorical, eschatological events like the Resurrection and Ascension. I think as eternal moments, eschatological events, even when occurring "later" in sequence, are actually higher in the causal order and so the natural world and time itself bends to them much like an arrow reaching its target. I believe eschatological events are

the first cause, pulling all other miracles in line with itself, almost like an energy flow through time, like the trajectory of the arrow.

The physicist Jeremy England's book [*Every Life is On Fire*](#) on thermodynamics gave me a new way of thinking about miracles from this “natural” side of the created order. (It must be said I only take a rough concept— the details of this are by no means worked out!). England was put on my radar by an atheist who had claimed his work on abiogenesis was the final nail in the coffin for belief in God. Ironically enough, I found out upon reading the book that England himself is an Orthodox Jew.

In his book, England frequently, and humorously, illustrates his points for the reader by placing a frog in different situations. Here's the part that stuck out to me, p72:

The corresponding frog scenario would be to take our hapless amphibian and put it in a closed container that only allowed heat to flow in or out, and then immerse the container in a bathtub at a constant temperature for a trillion times a trillion years or more. The question now is: What would we expect to find if we opened up the box again after all that time?

After giving some more scientific details, he says:

Since we are talking about probability here, there is always an inconceivably tiny chance that we could open up the box and still see a live frog— but only if the freak influence of

numerous thermal fluctuations conspired to spontaneously assemble a new one right before we opened the box.

While not a one-for-one scenario by any means, England's description gives me a rugged conception for how certain miraculous events present in their strictly natural aspects: theoretically *possible* for the matter to arrange that way but so extremely statistically unlikely it would be impossible by anyone's standard. Since reading this, I tend to think of all the miracles Jesus performed as a sort of intentional energy flow that rearranges matter according to divine command in order to heal the sick and multiply the loaves and calm the sea. Of course, the material aspect is secondary to the causal power of God, but I do not pit the natural against the supernatural as if it must be one or the other. Instead I try to think about how the two orders might intersect. Certain events might appear too incredulous to believe on a natural level, simply because— going back to the arrow/target metaphor— we have presupposed there is no Archer. Without considering the possibility of an archer with intellect and aim, our statistical probability calculations alone, or a retracing of the arrow's trajectory up to— but not before— the release of the string, will not clue us in to the real answer of how the arrow landed in that exact spot. (Please note this is a metaphorical arrow and target; for some reason, people I have conversed with in the past do not understand my analogies very well, and I am not sure if it's me or them.) Much more to say and clarify on this but let's save that for another time and go ahead and move on, lest one starts to question my sanity and all I've written up to this point.

Historical-Critical Method in Regards to the New Testament

Ratzinger, again in *Jesus of Nazareth*, notes that historical-criticisms presented by modern scholarship must be taken seriously if we are to take the Incarnation seriously. Jesus entered *real* history, and so we must examine real history in this regard. In [*Jesus, Interpreted*](#), Matthew Ramage puts Benedict XVI in conversation with Bart Ehrman and discusses how each interprets the available data. Rather than avoiding or skirting around the issue, Benedict XVI plows right through it. While they both accept the historical findings, Ratzinger is able to rather brilliantly incorporate them while remaining true to Patristic exegesis with a high view of Scripture. He offers a “critique of the critique,” noting that the presuppositions in analyzing the data are ultimately what determine how the differing conclusions are made.

I won’t get into the details of how particular biblical events line up, and how each is viewed by Ratzinger and Ehrman here. I only recommend Ramage’s book above for that or perhaps Brant Pitre’s *Case for Jesus*. But I would like to say that many doubts about the historicity of the Gospels seem to have *sola scriptura* in mind. A large amount of secular criticisms actually reinforce the Catholic understanding that the Bible does not stand alone, but is to be read in the context of liturgy. To the extent that historical analysis shows that the Bible was written in and through the deposit of lived faith, the importance of liturgy and tradition is emphasized to an even greater degree because it shows the New Testament was even authored in this context! The Catholic view of Scripture does not lose credibility in the face of historical facts of this kind, because Scripture has

already been understood in this way. In Catholicism, Liturgy and Scripture are intertwined so inseparably that one cannot have one without the other. As Sofia Cavalletti writes in *The Religious Potential of the Child*, p49:

There does not exist a Bible that we read and a Liturgy that we live; there is a Bible that we live with the whole of our life and especially so in the Liturgy” (RPC, 49).

The heartbeat of Catholic faith is the Eucharistic sacrifice. In an [interview with Gaudium Press](#), Dr. Scott Hahn says about his conversion:

In sacred Scripture you have the inspired Word of God. I just did not know that in the Holy Eucharist you have the Incarnate Word of God. Both are fully human and divine, but clearly the book is ordered to the sacrament. I wanted to be a New Testament Christian all of my life, but at one point I came to discover that the New Testament never refers to itself as the New Testament. The only time Jesus ever uses the phrase the New Testament or the New Covenant is in Luke 22:20 where He says, ‘This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new testament, the blood of the new covenant’. The only time He uses this phrase, He says, ‘Do this in memory of me’— He does not say, ‘Write this.’ This is the Eucharist, the Eucharist is the New Testament! So I discovered that the New Testament was a sacrament long before it started to become a document. So the document of the New Testament led me to the sacrament, which is what Jesus called the New Testament. He never said ‘Write this’; He did not write anything. Most of the twelve never ended up contributing a single book to what we call the New Testament. Not because they were unfaithful or disobedient but because He said, ‘Do this’, and they did that. They proclaimed the Gospel, and they celebrated the Eucharist, and they obeyed what He was doing.

Eschatology

A common secularist charge is that the early church, believing Christ would come back in their lifetimes, started to “spiritualize” the fulfillment of prophecies as regulation strategy due to cognitive dissonance upon the “delay” of Christ’s return only continued to grow.

Ratzinger gives this topic a thorough treatment in *Eschatology and Jesus of Nazareth* trilogy. Matthew Ramage published an essay on this issue called [*The Problem of Imminent Parousia*](#) in *Josephinum Journal of Theology*. The entire article deserves a read but to summarize:

...[T]he nucleus of Jesus’ prophecy is concerned not with the outward events of war and destruction, but with the demise of the Temple in salvation-historical terms, as it becomes a “deserted house.” It ceases to be the locus of God’s presence and the locus of atonement for Israel, indeed, for the world.

...

The bottom line is that the Bible does not formally assert the precise time of the Second Coming. Although we find indications of what individual apostles expected concerning the matter, Benedict understands that for them this was “ultimately a secondary consideration.” Whether they thought the world was going to end within a day or a decade or a millennium, he tells us that the “essential point” they were asserting concerned the need for spiritual preparation, for mission, and for endurance in the face of persecution. It turns out that these are realities that must govern Christians’ lives regardless of the epoch in which they live and how much time remains in their earthly

pilgrimage. They are the core message, the true key, to understanding the Bible's parousia passages.

I also think it's interesting that a Christian is accused of "spiritualizing" away the return of Christ, because from the liturgical point of view, things actually become more concrete. We have in the Old Testament, the Holy of Holies as a sign of God's presence among his people, or his dwelling with them in the cloud. In the New Testament, we have God incarnate: Jesus! In liturgy, we believe bread and wine become the signs of Christ's body and blood in which Jesus is substantially present. This seems to demonstrate to me that Christianity does not imagine prophetic events being fulfilled only at a spiritual level, occurring where God is and not where we are; rather we imagine incarnational events where God has made himself present to us, not strictly symbolically, within Creation. The Eucharist is an eschatological moment, a true "miracle", and liturgical language surrounding this is often apocalyptic.

"Substantial" change in regard to transubstantiation is *not* annihilation of physical material or a kind of change occurring within the physical dimension. Remember from earlier that the Catholic understanding of the term substance is not reduced to the physical aspects of a thing. Rather, it refers to a higher ontological change where the **substances** of bread and wine are elevated to a greater plane of reality at their deepest level of being. The *physical aspects* of bread and wine remain, but those aspects no longer indicate the presence of mere bread and wine; rather, the physically intelligible aspects of the bread and wine become signs of the body and blood of Christ, who is truly, sacramentally and substantially, present in the Eucharist. When the physical aspects are no longer

intelligible, they cease to be a sign. In Catholic theology, "sign" is not separated from the deeper signified reality, and as such cannot be understood to mean a mere symbol, isolated from the reality. Rather, the sign and the signified are truly, albeit mysteriously, linked in reality.

There is also the element in which eschatological events already occur, in the *adventus medius*. God comes to us in the Eucharist of course. His Kingdom comes to us in many more moments as well. Ratzinger, *God is Near Us*:

Present and eternity are not, like present and future, located side by side and separated; rather, they are interwoven. That is the real difference between utopia and eschatology. For a long time, we have been offered utopia, that is, the hope of a better world in the future; in the place of eternal life. Eternal life is supposedly unreal; it is said to alienate us from real time. But utopia is a real goal toward which we can work with all our powers and abilities. Yet this idea is a misapprehension that leads us to the destruction of our hopes. For this future world, for the sake of which the present is being used up, never comes to us ourselves; it is always only there for some future generation, as yet unknown...

Utopia always seems quite close but never arrives... We should finally bid farewell to the notion of working to build the ideal society of the future as being a myth and should instead work with total commitment to strengthen those factors that hold evil at bay in the present and that can therefore offer some guarantee for the immediate future.

But that happens at the very moment when eternal life becomes effective in the midst of time. For that means that God's will is done "on earth, as it is in heaven".

Earth becomes heaven, becomes the Kingdom of God, whenever God's will is done here as in heaven. We pray for this because we know that it does not lie within our power to draw heaven down here...

The Kingdom of God is much closer than the Tantalus-fruit of utopia because it is not a chronological future, does not come chronologically later, but refers at all times to the wholly other, which for that very reason is able to embed itself within time, so as simply to take it up within itself and make of it pure presence. Eternal life, which takes its beginning in communion with God here and now, seizes this here and now and takes it up within the great expanse of true reality, which is no longer fragmented by the stream of time.

Hell

As I wrestle with hell and salvation, I find that I think it relates to the “delay” of Christ's coming. In Catholicism, there is also a communal element of salvation, in which we are all called to truly participate in God's saving plan. In paragraph 14 of [Spe Salvi](#), we read:

...salvation has always been considered a “social” reality. Indeed, the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of a “city” (cf. 11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14) and therefore of communal salvation. Consistently with this view, sin is understood by the Fathers as the destruction of the unity of the human race, as fragmentation and division. Babel, the place where languages were confused, the place of separation, is seen to be an expression of what sin fundamentally is. Hence “redemption” appears as the reestablishment of unity, in which we come together once more in a union that begins to take shape in the world community of believers.

In "In the Beginning," Benedict XVI speaks in greater detail about the relational aspect of original sin:

"It must be stressed that no human being is closed in on him or herself or can and that no one can live of or for himself alone... To be truly a human being means to be related in love, to be of and for another. Sin is rejection of relationality because it wants to make the human being a god. Sin is loss of relationship, disturbance of relationship, and therefore it is not restricted to the individual... Consequently, sin is always an offense that touches others, and alters the world and damages it. To the extent that this is true, when the network of human relationships is damaged from the very beginning, then every human being enters into a world that is marked by relational damage. At the very moment that a person begins human existence, which is a good, he or she is confronted by a sin-damaged world. Consequently, each person is, from the very start, damaged in relationships and does not engage in them as he or she ought. Sin pursues the human being, and he or she capitulates to it."

Salvation from sin then, is restoration of relationship with God, of course. But this reuniting with God also leads to a reuniting of humanity more generally. Same book, p75-77:

Jesus Christ goes Adam's route, but in reverse. In contrast to Adam, he really is like God. But this being like God, this similarity to God, is being a Son, and hence it is totally relational. 'I do nothing on my own authority' (John 8:28) Therefore the One who is truly like God does not hold graspingly to his autonomy, to the limitlessness of his ability and his willing.

He does the contrary: he becomes completely dependent, he becomes a slave. Because he

does not go the route of power but that of love, he can descend into the depths of Adam's lie, into the depths of death, and there raise up truth and life. Thus, Christ is the new Adam, with whom humankind begins anew. The Son, who is by nature relationship and relatedness, reestablishes relationships.

His arms, spread out on the cross, are an open invitation to relationship, which is continually offered to us. The cross, the place of his obedience, is the true tree of life. Christ is the antitype of the serpent, as is indicated in John 3:14. From this tree there comes not the word of temptation, but of redeeming love, the word of obedience, which an obedient God himself used, thus offering us his obedience as a context for freedom. The cross is the tree of life, now become approachable...

Therefore the Eucharist, as the presence of the cross, is the abiding tree of life, which is ever in our midst and ever invites us to take the fruit of true life... To receive it, to eat of the tree of life, thus means to receive the crucified Lord and consequently to accept the parameters of his life, his obedience, his 'yes,' the standard of our creatureliness. It means to accept the love of God, which is our truth -- that dependence on God which is no more an imposition from without than is the Son's sonship. It is precisely this dependence that is freedom, because it is truth and love."

This is deeply related to Catholic understanding of the meaning of the Eucharist. Brett Salked, Transubstantiation, p173:

In Thomas' schema the (accidents of the) bread and wine are the sacramentum tantum, the sign. They signify Christ's body and blood, really present under them. But, because Christ's body and blood signify something further, they are not only res but res et

sacramentum. The final end of the Eucharist signified by Christ's body and blood, the res tantum, is the communion of the Church, head and members.

So the Eucharist is the center of our faith, where God breaks down barriers of individuality to reunite each of us with Himself body and soul, but not stopping there— rather He is concerned with drawing all men into Himself, where the whole of humanity can be restored. In the sense that salvation involves a unity of humanity, we see that this involves humanity's own cooperation with God's plan of salvation in linear time, and so... takes time. I would like to go into more detail on this in the future.

Hell, then, is not an external state that God imposes on us, but as the Catechism of the Catholic Church defines it, a “state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed.” Or in the words of C.S. Lewis, “The gates of hell are locked from the inside.” Ratzinger, *God is Near Us*:

But that [true happiness] is exactly what is meant when we say “eternal life”, which is not a matter of lasting a long time; rather, this expresses a certain quality of existence, in which duration, as an endless sequence of moments, disappears. That does of course mean that the longing for eternity becomes an act of defiance— a defiant assertion of finitude— whenever anyone is so identified with injustices, with lies, with hate, that the coming of justice, truth, and love would be a negation of his entire existence, so that he feels threatened by it at the inmost level of his being. Where there is such an existence, we have to describe it as damnation. Where lies and injustice have become the identifying characteristics of someone's life, then of course eternal life is the denial of this negative

identity. Salvation becomes a punishment, because man has made a pact with destruction, and his whole life has fallen into negation.

While the threat of Hell is a real one, Catholicism also allows one to at least *hope* that all will be saved. I can hold truths in tension, like the Good Shepherd who seeks for the lost sheep *until he finds it*, with the story of the ten bridesmaids whose time ran out. I must reject universalism, which guarantees the salvation of all men and de-emphasizes the communal and participatory aspect of salvation; but I do not have to reject the possibility that everyone can be saved, where the importance of human participation in God's saving plan is readily apparent and urgent. The basis for this hope is that because Jesus descended into the depths of "hell", he has brought his saving presence to all men, including those who went before. Only those who reject Christ, who knowingly reject truth and love, will remain in hell. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*:

[The descent of Christ into Hell] thus asserts that Christ strode through the gate of our final loneliness, that in his Passion he went down into the abyss of our abandonment. Where no voice can reach us any longer, there is he. Hell is thereby overcome, or to be more accurate, death, which was previously hell, is hell no longer. Neither is the same any longer because there is life in the midst of death, because love dwells in it. Now only deliberate self-enclosure is hell, or as the Bible calls it, the second death.

[Lumen Gentium](#) also reminds us in paragraph 16 of how people are judged according to their own level of knowledge and understanding, and by the inner disposition of their hearts towards the truths they do know:

Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things,(Mk. 1:15; cf. Mt. 4:17.) and as Saviour wills that all men be saved.(1 Tim. 2:4.) Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.(Mk. 4:14) Nor does Divine Providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel.(Lk. 12:32) She knows that it is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life.

In God is Near Us, Ratzinger says:

Eternal life is not an endless sequence of moments, in which we would have to try to overcome boredom and anxiety in the face of what cannot be ended. Eternal life is a new quality of existence, in which everything flows together into the “now” of love, into that new quality of being that is freed from the fragmentation of existence in the accelerating flight of moments. In this, our mortal life, on one hand, every moment is too short, because life itself seems to pass away with the moment before we can catch hold of it; at the same time, each moment is too long for us, because the great number of moments, each always the same as the other, becomes too laborious for us. Thus it becomes clear that eternal life is not simply what comes afterward, something about which we can form no notion at all. Because it is a new quality of existence, it can be already present in the midst of this earthly life and its fleeting temporality as something new and different and greater, albeit in an imperfect and fragmentary fashion. But the dividing line between

eternal and temporal life is by no means simply of a chronological order: so that the years before death would be temporal life; the endless time afterward would be eternal life— as we generally think. But because eternity is not just endless time but another level of being, such a merely chronological distinction cannot be right.

Eternal life is there, in the midst of time, wherever we come face to face with God; through the contemplation of the living God, it can be something like the firm base of our soul. Like a great love, it can no longer be taken from us by any change or chance; rather it is an indestructible heart in which the courage and the joy to go on, even when exterior things are painful and hard. In Psalm 73 (72), we can vividly see how we should picture this, where, in the midst of the struggling and suffering of a believing man, that kind of experience breaks through and with a stunning power.

Christian Counterwitness

There is a long list of failures of the Catholic Church, from forced conversion to sexual abuse, that will likely be addressed in a future post. Additionally, I think of many instances where Catholic and other Christian individuals have become an impediment to Christ. I would like to spend more time on this in a future work, but for now I will use this quote from Ratzinger in *Principles of Catholic Theology*:

But Christian penance means, not self-rejection, but self-discovery... The inner precondition for penance is precisely the affirmation of oneself; of reality as such... Radical irreconcilability with oneself that rages against oneself or in others is no longer penance; it is arrogance. Wherever the fundamental Yes to being, to life, to oneself, ceases to exist, penance disappears and turns into arrogance. For penance presumes that man is permitted to affirm himself. By its very nature, it is a penetration to the Yes in the

hidden places of whatever obscures the Yes. This is why true penance leads to the gospel, that is, to joy-- even to joy in oneself.

I do also want to briefly make the point that in Christianity, the moral life is, or should be, an imitation of the love that one has received. So often in “Christian messaging” this essential message is completely distorted, where one responds to an “external law” out of fear of punishment, rather than as a free response to the radical love that one has experienced. While I believe rules of faith do act as guideposts towards truth and freedom, and can be further understood with reason, these rules lose their meaning if the inner meaning and content is not grasped. One cannot speak of truth without first placing it in the context of this radical love of God. Too often, well-meaning Christian communities further isolate those on the margins by demanding adherence to “rules” when they may not have ever truly experienced unconditional love. Sofia Cavalletti in *Religious Potential of the Child* writes the following about young children, but I believe it to be true for all people:

Nevertheless, morality does not concern only actions. By morality we mean above all a certain orientation of the whole person in life, the leaning forward of the being toward a point; we could compare this to heliotropism, that movement whereby plants turn toward the sun. The multiplicity of actions arise from this one, fundamental orientation, which involves the whole person...

In early childhood the child’s greatest need and capacity is for relationship: to be loved, and to have someone to love. The satisfaction of this most vital need is the foundation on

which the moral life is based. It remains fundamental to the older child's choice of behaviors...

In fact, what is morality in the Christian view if not the response to God's love, our reaction to our encounter with God? ...Falling in love is the "plane of development" on which the older child's life is founded, and it is only in love, and not in fear, that one may have a moral life worthy of the name. The older child will not be a slave who abstains from doing certain things for fear of punishment, but he or she will be a person who is free and empowered by love.

Struggles with Doubt In Regard to Human Origins

I've saved one particular challenge for last because it is the very thing which hurtled me into my first experience of what Ratzinger describes near the beginning of *Introduction to Christianity*:

"In a situation like this [doubt], what is in question is not the sort of thing that one perhaps quarrels about-- the dogma of the Assumption or the proper use of confession-- all this becomes absolutely secondary. What is at stake is the whole structure; it is a question of all or nothing. That is the only remaining alternative; nowhere does there seem anything to cling to in this sudden fall. Wherever one looks, only the bottomless abyss of nothingness can be seen.

*Paul Claudel has depicted this situation in a most convincing way in the great opening scene of the *Soulier de Satin*. A Jesuit missionary, brother of Rodrigue, the hore of the play (a worldling and adventurer veering uncertainly between God and the world), is shown as the survivor of a shipwreck. His ship has been sunk by pirates; he himself has*

been lashed to a mast from the sunken ship, and he is now drifting on this piece of wood through the raging waters of the ocean. The play opens with his last monologue:

“Lord, I thank thee for bending me down like this. It sometimes happened that I found thy commands laborious and my will at a loss and jibbing at thy dispensation. But now I could not be bound to thee more closely than I am, and however violently my limbs move they cannot get one inch away from thee. So I really am fastened to the cross, but the cross on which I hang is fastened to nothing else. It drifts on the sea.”

Fastened to the cross-- with the cross fastened to nothing, drifting over the abyss. The situation of the contemporary believer could hardly be more accurately and impressively described. Only a loose plank bobbing over the void seems to hold him up, and it looks as if he must eventually sink. Only a loose plank connects him to God, though certainly it connects him inescapably, and in the last analysis he knows that this wood is stronger than the void that seethes beneath him and that nevertheless remains the really threatening force in his day-to-day life.”

I first felt this not long after I began to research the historicity of Adam and Eve. As mentioned earlier, a Catholic is required to hold they were real people and that the effects of original sin are real. While I did not feel evolution *per se* presented a problem, when I began to look more closely at the origin of human species in particular, I started to feel a more serious strain between my faith and the available evidence. While I could technically “make it fit” with theology, the fact is that I felt like I was forcing a puzzle piece where it didn’t belong.

One night in particular marks my sort of “descent” into doubt. Because I truly find such a freedom in my life when I best live Catholic principles, I had often thought that even if I thought God didn’t exist, I would still choose to live life the

same way. On this night, I consciously decided to allow myself to truly “take on” the viewpoint of an atheist and try to examine how such a worldview might really change how I live my life. I was truly unprepared for what I would experience. As I followed atheism best I could to its logical conclusion, I found myself, as a mother of three, needing to justify my reasons for bringing children into the world. I was unable to do so. I had not realized how deeply my desire for children, how my view of children as a gift, was rooted in Christian faith and hope. I mentioned previously that I take no stock in mere humanism or man-made utopias, which meant that I found myself entirely without hope of any kind. Rocking my youngest to bed, I felt my stomach drop, wondering what I had done by bringing future generations into untold suffering without lasting meaning. My immense love for my children, instead of being informed by faith and hope, took on a new form: total despair for their future. I wondered whether it was good for anyone to live.

I allowed myself to feel like this for two days. After that, I found it became extremely necessary to “snap out of it” so I could function properly as a mother. Yet for weeks and months, the experience lingered with me. Even now, years later, I feel as though I escaped some harrowing experience, but not without losing my outer garments to its teeth.

Cognitive dissonance was strong in those following weeks. I forced myself forward, as was practically necessary. But bit by bit, I began to make more and more sense of things. I doubt anyone who has stuck with my thoughts this long will be surprised to find that it was Ratzinger, in *Dogma and Preaching*, who first

helped answer the question, from faith's perspective, of what it means to be human:

The statement that man is created in a more specific, more direct way by God than other things in nature, when expressed somewhat less metaphorically, means simply this: that man is willed by God in a specific way, not merely as a being that "is there," but as a being that knows him; not only as a construct that he thought up, but as an existence that can think about him in return. We call the fact that man is specifically willed and known by God his special creation.

From this vantage point, one can immediately see that an adam emerged in history at that moment when a human being was first capable of forming, however dimly, the thought "God." The first 'thou' that—however stammering—was said by human lips to God marks the moment in which spirit arose in the world. Here the Rubicon of anthropogenesis was crossed.

With this as a starting point, I could now separate out strictly biological definitions of man from the understanding of humanity in the context of faith. I found it blended well with [Noam Chomsky's Merge theory](#) that the capacity for human language developed from a single person or at most two. Human language is different from peripheral animal language in that it involves syntax. His theory is certainly controversial, but not ruled out:

Well, mutations take place in a person, not in a group. We know, incidentally, that this was a very small breeding group — some little group of hominids in some corner of Africa, apparently. Somewhere in that group, some small mutation took place, leading to the great leap forward. It had to have happened in a single person.

There are also various studies (such as [here](#) or [here](#)) showing that while *genetically* there must have been cross-breeding with Neanderthals, *genealogically* it remains theoretically possible for all humans to have descended from a single pair. Let me be clear: I do not believe the studies show in any definitive way that there was a single pair, nor is that within the scope of these studies; I only mean to say they show that it is not entirely unreasonable to believe so. The [“The Historicity of Adam and Eve”](#) essays by Rev. Nicanor Austriaco also helped answer some questions in this area.

At this point, the historicity of Adam and Eve was becoming increasingly viable. And yet I still could not understand why God would design things this way. Why the animal suffering? How could it be that it was Adam who introduced human death into the world when death has already been thoroughly stamped into all prior evolution? Could I really believe that the first human death was a result of sin? (I should note that Ramage goes into Benedict XVI’s thoughts on evolution in [From the Dust of the Earth](#); from what I understand, he paints the idea that all of Creation bears the Paschal mystery, but surprisingly I have not read this one yet.)

I spent a few months tossing around some ideas of Ratzinger’s from *Introduction to Christianity*, alongside [John Wheeler’s delayed choice experiment](#), alongside Aquinas’ philosophical arguments. One night, I was sifting through Charles Darwin’s autobiography. Something Darwin said was like the final lens bringing everything else to focus, painting a single image:

But passing over the endless beautiful adaptations which we everywhere meet with, it may be asked how can the generally beneficent arrangement of the world be accounted for? Some writers indeed are so much impressed with the amount of suffering in the world that they doubt, if we look at all sentient beings, whether there is more of misery or of happiness; whether the world as a whole is a good or bad one. According to my judgment happiness decidedly prevails, though this would be very difficult to prove. If the truth of this conclusion be granted, it harmonizes well with the effects which we might expect from natural selection. If all the individuals of any species were habitually to suffer to an extreme degree, they would neglect to propagate their kind; but we have no reason to believe that this has ever, or at least often occurred. Some other considerations, moreover, lead to the belief that all sentient beings have been formed so as to enjoy, as a general rule, happiness.

Now an animal may be led to pursue that course of action which is most beneficial to the species by suffering, such as pain, hunger, thirst, and fear; or by pleasure, as in eating and drinking, and in the propagation of the species, or by both means combined, as in the search for food. But pain or suffering of any kind, if long continued, causes depression and lessens the power of action, yet is well adapted to make a creature guard itself against any great or sudden evil. Pleasurable sensations, on the other hand, may be long continued without any depressing effect; on the contrary, they stimulate the whole system to increased action. Hence it has come to pass that most or all sentient beings have been developed in such a manner, through natural selection, that pleasurable sensations serve as their habitual guides. We see this in the pleasure from exertion, even occasionally from great exertion of the body or mind, (in the pleasure of our daily meals, and especially in the pleasure derived from sociability, and from loving our families). The sum of such pleasures as these, which are habitual or frequently recurrent, give, as I can

hardly doubt, to most sentient beings an excess of happiness over misery, although many occasionally suffer much.

The key phrase for me was “pleasurable sensations serve as their habitual guides.” We often hear that evolution is unguided, and I think from a strictly “natural” perspective that would be true. The concept of “pleasurable sensation” seems to me more or less interchangeable with the philosophical “desirable good”, and in that sense it reminded me of a line from Aquinas’s Fourth Way: “It follows that if anything is good, there must be something that is most good.” Drawing upon an earlier concept of eschatological events acting analogously as a “target” towards which the Archer aims, I began to think of these “habitual guides” as, in a sense, stemming backwards in time from the “future,” leading them towards the most desirable good in Creation. What is the most desirable good within Creation? The Incarnation. The Incarnation was the “target” of Creation, the most desirable good towards which all matter arranged itself. And Ratzinger’s thought came to me again:

But this step [anthropogenesis], through which logos, understanding, mind, first came into this world, is only completed when the Logos itself, the whole creative meaning, and man merge into each other. Man’s full “hominization” presupposes God becoming man; only by this event is the Rubicon dividing the “animal” from the “logical” finally crossed forever and the highest possible development accorded to the process that began when a creature of dust and earth looked out beyond itself and its environment and was able to address God as “You.” It is openness to the whole, to the infinite, that makes man complete. Man is man by reaching out infinitely beyond himself, and he is consequently more of a man the less he is enclosed he is in himself, the less “limited” he is. For... man is

most fully man... who not only has contact with the infinite— but is Infinite: Jesus Christ. In Him, “hominization” has truly reached its goal...

So if Jesus is called “Adam”, this implies that he intended to draw the whole creature “Adam” in himself.

While I don’t think “going backward” in time is tenable, I do wonder if the sequence of time, arrangement of space, and individuation— or at least the way these things are processed in the human mind— are determined by certain factors “higher” in the causal order. I got the idea from the delayed-choice experiment of John Wheeler. I remain open to the possibility that the “heart” of Christ in some way interacted with the “heart” of Adam prior to time, and that it was in the blending of the two potencies (“wavefunctions” of a sort) of Adam and Jesus that the “actual” sequence of time, as we process it, came to be. So in a sense, in this conception, it was the sin of Adam that opened the pathway to a suffering that would only ever end in total death and destruction, whereas the choices of Jesus made a pathway through such death, making life possible. It would explain, to my mind, why evolution is a story of life fighting its way through death. On this conception, the question is no longer “Why suffering?”, which would be expected on Adam’s choices, but “Why beauty?”, in which the symmetries of the universe are explained by the Incarnate Son’s perfect return to the Father.

I don’t take myself too seriously on this, but I really do feel like there’s a real “concept” underlying these thoughts, even if I haven’t articulated them well or if they need major corrections. But it gives me a way of thinking about the universe that seems to blend well with all the things I believe in, think about, and am

interested in. (Note: I have since expounded on this in my short concept work: *Harebrained*)

I will say there are things I would find intellectually challenging about an atheist worldview as well. Most notably, I don't think I could reduce reality to brute fact, that logic and order came from non-reason. Often atheists ask me what "reason" I have to believe in God's existence. This is a reasonable request, but I do find it a bit ironic considering the atheist worldview basically states that everything that does exist, exists for no reason. It doesn't seem to me that reason could come from non-reason. A hardline naturalistic perspective, which is what I would probably be most drawn to, basically forces one to believe in lack of free will, multiverse theory, and that morality evolved as utility. I know I would have difficulty accepting these.

While I do find myself quite firmly planted as a Catholic Christian, though I have experienced the immense love of God, it should have become obvious by this time that I too wrestle with doubt occasionally. I have wondered what part confirmation bias or other psychological factors have played into my beliefs. It was the words of Simone Weil (*Love in the Void*, p61) that brought me some comfort, as she so perfectly captured the moments of my deepest doubt:

In the period of preparation the soul loves in emptiness. It does not know whether anything real answers its love. It may believe that it knows, but to believe is not to know. Such a belief does not help. The important thing is that it announces its hunger by crying. A child does not stop crying if we suggest to it that perhaps there is no bread. It goes on crying just the same.

The danger is not lest the soul should doubt whether there is any bread, but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry. It can only persuade itself of this by lying, for the reality of its hunger is not a belief, it's a certainty...

It does not rest with the soul to believe in the reality of God if God does not reveal this reality. In trying to do so, it either labels something else with the name of God, and that is idolatry, or else its belief in God remains abstract and verbal...

At a time like the present, incredulity may be equivalent to the dark night of Saint John of the Cross if the unbeliever loves God, if he is like the child who does not know whether there is bread anywhere, but cries out because he is hungry.

When we are eating bread, and even when we have eaten it, we know that it is real. We can nevertheless raise doubts about the reality of the bread. Philosophers raise doubts about the reality of the senses. Such doubts are, however, purely verbal; they leave the certainty intact and actually serve only to make it more obvious to a well-balanced mind. In the same way, one to whom God has revealed his reality can raise doubts about this reality without any harm. They are purely verbal doubts, a form of exercise to keep one's intelligence in good health. What amounts to criminal treason, even before such a revelation and much more afterward, is to question the fact that God is the only thing worthy of love. That is a turning away of our eyes, for love is the soul's looking...

Electra did not seek Orestes, she waited for him. When she was convinced that he no longer existed, and that nowhere in the whole world was there anything that could be Orestes, she did not on that account return to her former associates. She drew back from them with greater aversion than ever. She preferred the absence of Orestes to the presence of anyone else.... She did not want wealth and consideration unless they came through

Orestes. She did not even give a thought to such things. All she wanted was to exist no longer, since Orestes had ceased to exist...

Anyone who has had the same adventure as Electra, anyone whose soul has seen, heard, and touched for itself, will recognize God as the reality inspiring all direct loves, the reality of which they are, as it were, the reflections.

Even in my greatest moments of doubt, I still cry out for God like a hungry child cries for bread. I cannot be convinced there is some final good here below. I can truly know I believe when I pray with the Psalmist:

Whom have I in heaven but thee?

And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.