

Worshipping a Flying Teapot? What to Do When Christianity Looks Ridiculous

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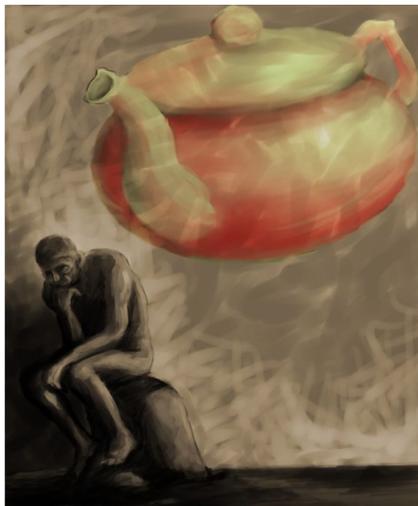
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Today, many Christian theologians treat arguments for the faith as passé, an embarrassing vestige of modernity.

Take, for instance, Robert Webber's book *The Younger Evangelicals*. According to Webber, the clash of arguments is not nearly as helpful in witnessing to the faith and furthering mutual understanding as the exchange of personal stories and lives of integrity. As he puts it, "In a pagan world where every person 'lives for himself,' the pagans don't cry, 'Look at the power of their rational arguments' but 'See how they love one another!'"¹

Based on these assumptions, Webber adopted a rather unorthodox approach when he was to engage in a public debate with an atheist:

In order to shift the discussion away from arguments for or against God's existence, I used my opening comments to inform my opponent and the listening audience that I would not discuss traditional arguments for the existence of God. When asked, "Well, how then shall we proceed?" I answered, "Let's talk about the reality of the communities of Israel and Jesus. Let's probe those stories to uncover what they tell us about the origin, meaning, and destiny of the world." In this way I shifted the discussion from propositions based on evidence to stories based on faith.²

To an extent, I sympathize with Webber's approach. Many people who come to these types of debates are fiercely angry at Christians and expect to encounter an intolerant, red-faced Christian fundamentalist to vindicate their prejudices. In that context, the sharper and more ruthless that debater, the more the audience is likely to be alienated and vindicated. Perhaps with that kind of prejudice operative, an individual humbly sharing his story might indeed be a more effective witness for Christianity.

At the same time, we must recognize the serious tradeoff entailed by Webber's approach insofar as it simply refuses to address any of the legitimate intellectual objections people have to belief. And with these obstacles not even being acknowledged, it is doubtful that people will be able to hear his story. (By comparison, if a Mormon missionary comes to my door, I don't want to hear about his burning in the bosom until I have heard him address the historical and philosophical problems with Mormonism.)

Webber's refusal to acknowledge that people have real intellectual obstacles to belief reminds me of the man who responded to a skeptic's challenge to the historicity of the resurrection by biting into an apple and asking: "Does this apple taste sweet or sour?" Predictably the skeptic replied that he had no

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idea because he had not tasted the apple, to which the man predictably replied: "Neither have you tasted my Jesus." Is that *really* all that we are obliged to say to the skeptic?

In fact, I know that it is not because of Antony Flew. In 2003, one of the world's leading academic atheists for fifty years, "came out of the closet" to confess his conversion to theism (though not yet any particular religion). Although many atheists were quick to dismiss Flew's conversion as that of an old man confronting his mortality, according to Flew himself, his conversion was forced by the cumulative intellectual weight of various arguments of philosophical theology.³

While it is clear that argument remains important in "contending for the faith," Webber is correct that people bring a lot more to debates than seminar room quandaries. Some years ago, when I was living in London, England, I attended a debate on the existence of God at the local academic bookshop. As I entered the room, I was greeted by a young smiling representative of the British Humanist Association who welcomed me warmly (Campus Crusade for Christ style) and handed me some BHA literature. Over the next couple hours, I was deeply impacted not by the arguments for or against theism, but rather the clearly antireligious atmosphere of the room.

The atheist debater (Nigel Warburton) was a witty fellow who had the audience in his pocket as he made disparaging comments about God and religion. Indeed, I was taken aback by the deep level of hostility and derision toward Christianity, and theism generally, within the audience. I left that evening with a new appreciation for the depth of unbelief and how much more than a skilled theistic debater would be required to get Christianity a serious hearing. Many of the audience members may as well have been attending a debate over the existence of Santa Claus. No matter how clever the pro-Santa debater would have been, he would not have increased the plausibility of his hypothesis among the audience one iota, for they had written off the fat man long ago.

If Antony Flew's conversion illustrates the continuing need for rational argument, the rise of the so-called "new atheism" illustrates the deeper problem with the basic plausibility of Christianity. The leaders of new atheism, writers like Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, have all written bestsellers repudiating Christianity, religion, and theism.⁴ What is interesting is that the new atheists appear unaware of the revolution in Christian philosophy of religion over the last forty years.⁵ To be frank, the sophistication of their respective critiques is closer to the level of the crude village atheist or the curmudgeonly troll who emerges from under his bridge to throw stones at passing parishioners. The new atheism is notable not for the power of its argumentation, but rather for the heightened intensity of its rhetoric.

What we learn from this growing list of bestsellers is that people take seriously in their mockery of theism that religious commitment is tantamount to belief in a "celestial teapot" or "Flying Spaghetti Monster." The teapot analogy, suggested originally by Bertrand Russell, was taken up with some relish by Richard Dawkins: "To borrow a point from Bertrand Russell, we must be equally agnostic about the theory that there is a china teapot in elliptical orbit around the Sun. We can't disprove it. But that doesn't mean the theory that there is a teapot is on level terms with the theory that there isn't."⁶ In 2005, Bobby Henderson updated Russell's analogy by inventing the "flying spaghetti monster" along with a parody religion that worships the "spaghedeity."⁷

While Christian philosophers could deftly dispense with this trite comparison by pointing out disanalogies between God and these fantastical posits of the atheologian,⁸ there is a trap lying in the bushes of the classic "damned if you do; damned if you don't" variety. In short, the Christian apologist finds herself in a sort of quicksand of implausibility such that the more she lashes out in defense, the quicker she sinks. The situation is put well by Sam Harris:

Atheism is not a philosophy; it is not even a view of the world; it is simply an admission of the obvious. In fact, "atheism" is a term that should not even exist. No one ever needs to identify himself as a "non-astrologer" or a "non-chemist." We do not have words for people who doubt that Elvis is still alive or that aliens have traversed the galaxy only to molest ranchers and their cattle. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs.⁹ It hardly matters if what Harris says is erroneous, for he adeptly captures a widespread sentiment that theism is now widely considered guilty until proven innocent while the very attempt to prove it innocent appears to undermine one's credibility!

This dilemma brings me to the heart of my thesis: restoring Christianity's place as a live intellectual option requires not simply superior rational argumentation, but the restoration of a background framework in which Christian claims seem minimally plausible. As such, we should think of the project in both a long-term and short-term view. In the long-term, we should seek a deepened Christian contribution to culture with the understanding that this will produce the by-product of restoring the background plausibility of Christianity. And within the short-term, we should argue for the faith in a way that applies arguments with a consideration of their background plausibility within specific contexts. In the remainder of the paper, I will first provide an expanded account of how the current implausibility of theism marginalizes rational defenses of belief. Next, I will develop an overview of what is required in the long and short-term to restore the plausibility of theism generally and Christianity specifically.

God and the Flying Spaghetti Monster

Not surprisingly, the new atheists frequently raise the logical problem of evil,¹⁰ while apparently unaware that Alvin Plantinga's free will argument definitively answered this problem thirty years ago. According to Plantinga, it may be that in any possible world where God creates free creatures at least some of those creatures choose to sin, and thus there is no logical contradiction between God being perfectly good and omnipotent and evil existing.¹¹

But while this argument explains the existence of moral evil, it does not explain the existence of natural evil, that is, evil which arises from the natural world (e.g., earthquakes and tsunamis). Plantinga thus sought to explain the origin of natural evil by reducing it to moral evil: namely, the evil actions of demonic beings.¹² While the proposal was offered to address a specific logical problem, Plantinga's proposal earned him a place in Daniel Dennett's facetious "Philosophical Lexicon" (a book of pseudo-technical terms that are humorous word plays off the names of famous philosophers). The Plantinga entry, the verb "alvinize," was defined as follows: "To stimulate protracted discussion by making a bizarre claim. 'His contention that natural evil is due to Satanic agency alvinized his listeners.'"¹³ This example illustrates the fact that logically valid arguments for theism do not necessarily increase the perceived plausibility of Christian belief.

A plausible religious system is, to use William James' terminology, a live option for belief; that is, it is one that, even if we do not accept it, we still take seriously; that is, we do not immediately consider it ridiculous. By contrast, a credible religious system is one that we consider to have requisite rationality, evidential support and internal coherence. Christian apologists have often focused on establishing the narrow credibility of Christianity, without due concern for its background plausibility. Such is arguably the case when Plantinga explains natural evil by invoking demons: though he may have won a logical battle, the overall war for Christian plausibility is hampered. That is, while this argument might remove one more defeater to Christianity, it also makes it look more ridiculous than ever.

In *The Gravedigger File*, Os Guinness makes the point that Christianity could be undermined at this

level of basic plausibility.¹⁴ As Guinness observes, "Roman Catholicism is more likely to *seem* true in Eire than in Egypt, just as Mormonism is in Salt Lake City than in Singapore, and Marxism in Moscow than in Mecca. In each case, plausibility comes from a world of shared support."¹⁵ Thus, once the emerging consensus among elite and popular culture views Christianity as ridiculous, it becomes that much more difficult to sustain one in belief. C.S. Lewis recognized the significance of this shift as he commented on the difficulty of defending the Apostles' Creed in a world that dismissed biblical cosmology as absurd:

When once a man is convinced that Christianity *in general* implies a local "Heaven," a flat earth, and a God who can have children, he naturally listens with impatience to our solutions of particular difficulties and our defenses against particular objections. The more ingenious we are in such solutions and defenses the more perverse we seem to him.¹⁶

In this reference to the perversity of a defense, one might well have been talking of Plantinga's invocation of demons creating earthquakes. As a result, even as Christian philosophers and theologians develop logically tight defenses of the faith, the whole enterprise begins to appear increasingly *ridiculous* with belief in God being compared to belief in flying spaghetti monsters and celestial teapots.¹⁷

The Long View: Arguments and Christian Cultural Renewal

If plausibility comes from a world of shared support, then we should work at constructing that world. But how does one do that? Perhaps we might begin by identifying some of the non-rational factors that presently act to make Christianity look ridiculous. Here is a smattering of examples from a North American context:

1. Church roadside signs with trite captions like "This church is prayer-conditioned"
2. Pedophile priests and white-suited televangelists with impeccable hair
3. "Christian" bumper stickers with captions like "My boss is a Jewish carpenter" and "I believe in the Big Bang. God said 'Bang!' and it happened"
4. Low tithing rates and a disinterest in social justice
5. The unabashed marketing of the gospel as a consumer item and the reduction of pastors to life coaches who offer motivational speeches
6. Attempts to get creation (or intelligent design) into the public school system through litigation
7. Blind nationalism and the identification of Christianity with one political party
8. Insipid, limp-wristed examples of Christian kitsch from Thomas Kinkadee to Bible action figures

Factors such as these conspire to make Christians look comical, dangerous, innocuous, irrelevant, and generally unpleasant. As a result, they serve to marginalize the Christian voice as irrelevant and make it much easier to project the same absurdity and irrelevancy upon the deity that Christians worship.¹⁸

Of course, more is required than merely rooting out the most embarrassing products of Christian culture. In addition to minimizing the implausibility of the faith, one must also seek positively to build the plausibility of the faith, and one crucial factor to that end is found in the fostering of Christians who make leading contributions to the broader culture, rather than as sub-par members of a Christian ghetto. In this regard, few have equaled the clear vision of Pope Nicholas V who outlined a specific program to transform Rome from a backwater collection of medieval villages to the cultural center of Europe:

[in order] to create solid and stable convictions in the minds of the uncultured masses, there must be something that appeals to the eye: a popular faith, sustained only on doctrines, will never be anything but feeble and vacillating. But if the authority of the Holy See were visibly displayed in majestic buildings, imperishable memorials and witnesses seemingly planted by the hand of God himself, belief

would grow and strengthen like a tradition from one generation to another, and all the world would accept and revere it.¹⁹

While our context, aim, and means all differ radically from that of Renaissance Rome,²⁰ Western culture needs Christianity as a revitalized cultural force, both for the intrinsic benefits that this would bring, as well as for the proximate goal of restoring Christian plausibility. Nicholas was exactly right that belief is fostered from within a cultural context, though he was wrong to think this is limited to the "uncultured masses"; indeed a world of shared support would increase Christian plausibility among intellectuals as well.

So what might this look like in today's terms? Here we can briefly consider two areas: music and architecture. Throughout history, Christians have witnessed to their faith through innovative and inspiring music, from Handel's "Messiah" to John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" and more recently the eclectic offerings of indie rocker Sufjan Stevens. Unfortunately, these days much of the more challenging work is drowned out by the nauseating and banal offerings of the CCM mainstream.

A similar problem is evident with church architecture. Consider Burton Cummings' song "I'm Scared," in which Cummings describes his experience of walking into a cathedral in New York and being overcome by a transcendent presence of otherness.²¹ It is not that one could not have a mystical experience upon walking into a contemporary pastel, theatre-style sanctuary replete with ferns and dove-emblazoned banners . . . it's just that it seems so unlikely.

Intuitively we know that while churches built today are marvelously functional, they are also typically devoid of character or religious sensibility, let alone transcendence. Just how far we have fallen is evident when we consider the Sagrada Familia Church, the magnificent vision of that mad genius Gaudi which has been under construction for the last one hundred years. When it is finally completed (which, with current estimates could be as early as 2026) its eighteen massive towers, including the 170-meter tower of Jesus Christ, will dominate Barcelona.

Each time a Christian contributes positively to culture, he or she is unwittingly expanding the space of the Christian universe, and brick by brick reconstructing the vibrancy, and so plausibility, of the Christian worldview. We can expect that the building of a formidable Christian culture to match the glories of antiquity will, like the Sagrada Familia, take decades to construct. But as Christian politicians, artists, community planners, musicians, architects and the rest all contribute to the reformation of Western society, they are indirectly contributing to the plausibility of the Christian worldview itself, and thus making the efforts of the Christian apologist that much more likely to find success.²² And if someone were to object that this is too idealistic and that our world needs evangelists and social workers, not cultural and intellectual ambassadors, I would direct them to C.S. Lewis's important address "Learning in War-time."²³ Just maybe we could have both.

The Short-View: The Role of Arguments

As important as the broad cultural project is, we should also continue to pursue excellence in philosophical argumentation while recognizing that the effectiveness of arguments must be assessed on broader criteria than logical validity and soundness alone. I was brought to consider this point a few years ago when I brought a seminary class to hear William Lane Craig speak at Mill Woods Pentecostal Assembly in Edmonton, Alberta. In about thirty minutes, Craig charged through five arguments for God's existence (or, rather, four arguments and a testimony).

Although my students had to work to keep up to the pace, they managed to grasp most of what Craig said. But as I looked around the auditorium it was clear that most people were *not* tracking with the

arguments. And this is hardly surprising. After all, it seems a bit unrealistic to expect someone without philosophical training to grasp the impossibility of traversing an actual infinite in five minutes. But then, what was the point of the talk if not to give people arguments?

And then it occurred to me that perhaps the primary point of this talk was not to inform the laity of the kalam and cosmic fine-tuning arguments, but rather to let them know that there *are* powerful arguments for Christianity *and* impressive intellectuals who can articulate them. Perhaps for many people knowing this alone is enough. One could understand this in terms of credibility/rationality,²⁴ but one might also find this information as contributing to the overall plausibility of the faith.

In short, Christianity does not seem so ridiculous when you realize that there are academics like Craig who can cogently articulate reasons to believe in the existence of God and resurrection of Christ. Indeed, the plausibility of Christianity is increased simply by knowing that many leading philosophers are Christians (e.g. Alasdair MacIntyre, Alvin Plantinga, Michael Dummett, William Alston, Marilyn McCord Adams). One might thus surmise that the more Christians succeed in reestablishing themselves as leaders in their respective academic fields, the more they will contribute both to the wider cultural renewal and with it the background plausibility and credibility of the Christian faith.

Thus far we have focused on the question of plausibility. Within this context, we have treated arguments as cultural furniture that contribute to a space of plausibility within which Christianity is considered to be a live option. Still, as I noted above with the conversion of Antony Flew, arguments continue to play a crucial role in providing a rational ground for Christian faith. However, the conventional assessment of an argument's success in terms of validity and soundness²⁵ is clearly too narrow.

By analogy, it is too narrow to assume as many have, that the worth of a biblical translation is measured by the extent to which it reproduces the words of the original languages. On such a criterion, translations that sacrifice nuance for a simplified vocabulary (Good News Translation), or which are highly idiomatic (*The Message*) are necessarily inferior. But as Gordon Fee and Mark L. Strauss point out, this simple criterion misses the important place of the reader in translation assessment:

One reader picks up a formal equivalent version and reads Paul's letter to the Romans, understanding about 50 percent of what he reads. Another person picks up a children's version like the NIrV and reads the same letter, comprehending about 95 percent of what she reads. One might well ask, who walks away with a greater knowledge of God's Word? The point is that whatever inadequacies an idiomatic version may have are far outweighed by the benefits of hearing and comprehending God's Word.²⁶

If we take Fee and Strauss seriously, then it is worth asking whether the Gideons ought to replace the fossilized edition of the KJV that sits unread in thousands of hotel rooms with a translation more likely to be picked up. Granted *The Message* sacrifices words like "propitiation," but the tradeoff is that people at least crack the spine.

The same observation can be made with respect to argument. Though validity and soundness are important, if you are concerned to convert others to your viewpoint, then this is clearly not enough. In short, what good is a sound argument that nobody understands, or one that invokes derision because it appears ridiculous? George Mavrodes thus recognized in his classic *Belief in God* that it is inadequate to assess arguments for God's existence in terms of validity and soundness alone.²⁷ As he puts it, arguments are *person relative*, and thus we ought to consider the value of an argument with respect to a particular audience. As such, he proposes a focus that looks beyond validity and soundness to including other considerations as well with the end of winning adherents as well as arguments.

Mavrodes develops this line of thought further in his essay "On the Very Strongest Arguments"²⁸ in which he considers the properties of a good argument. In addition to the standard criterion that an argument be compelling (based on validity), he adds that the best arguments are *accessible* (for what good is a compelling proof if only the logician who originally devised it is able to understand it?) and *attractive*. Though C.S. Lewis may not have matched a contemporary philosopher like Elizabeth Anscombe for logical prowess, he was head and shoulders above his peers in crafting arguments of accessibility and attractiveness.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to argue that Christian philosophers occasionally win battles at the expense of the war over the plausibility of the faith in Western culture. As such, in order to return Christianity to the place of being a live intellectual option, we need to recognize that the rational discussion is intricately interwoven with a broad range of non-rational factors (e.g. psychological, sociological and hamartiological).²⁹ As such, this involves a shift from focusing on arguments to persons within the context of a broad cultural renewal and the strategic use of arguments within that renewal.

But thus far we have focused on the persons who are skeptical of the faith and thus remain to be convinced. Equally important are the persons who are to share the gospel, and this brings me back to Webber's emphasis on love. To take one example, though I find myself irritated by comparisons between the Christian God and the flying spaghetti monster, I recognize nonetheless that bearing up under the barbs of scathing parody, and even adding a self-deprecating note to the chorus, contributes in its own modest way to the plausibility of Christianity. Indeed, it may be precisely in those moments when the rhetoric is most intense and the derision most palpable, that a soft answer which turns away wrath will manifest the most persuasive argument of all.

Notes

1. Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 95. Similarly Dave Tomlinson writes: "Part of the rub with post-evangelicals is that most evangelicals rely on apologetics to explain their faith. But apologetics can't satisfy the postmodern appetite for mystery, paradox, and imagination. People are desperate for myth, art, and story." *The Post Evangelical*, rev. North American ed. (El Cajon, CA: emergentYS; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 83.

2. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 83.

3. See "My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism. A Discussion between Antony Flew and Gary Habermas," *Philosophia Christi* 6, no. 2, (2004): 197-211; cf. Antony Flew, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

4. See for instance Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

5. But academic atheists, particularly those concerned with naturalism and atheism certainly are, and they are troubled by it. See Quentin Smith, "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism," *Philo* 4, no. 2, (2001).
6. Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science and Love*(New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 149; cf. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*(New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 74-75.
7. The parody religion has grown enormously popular. See the official website of the "church" at <http://www.venganza.org/>.
8. See, for instance, Alvin Plantinga's discussion of "The Great Pumpkin Objection" to theistic belief in "Reason and Belief in God," *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IL: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), 74-78.
9. Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 51.
10. For instance, Harris, *Letter*, 55.
11. See *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977). While Plantinga's work was significant, it does not address either the inductive problem of evil (that is, the problem that God's existence seems unlikely given the amount and distribution of evil) or the pastoral problem of evil (how one can believe in/trust God in light of the personal experience of evil).
12. Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 58.
13. Daniel Dennett, ed., "The Philosophical Lexicon," 1987, <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/lexicon/>
14. Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File: Papers on the Subversion of the Modern Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 36.
15. *Ibid.*, 35.
16. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (1947); Reprint: (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 109.
17. Guinness observes, "If secularization provides inviting snow conditions and tempts people to buy a new ski outfit, it makes religious beliefs seem as unseasonal as swimwear in a blizzard." *The Gravedigger File*, 57.
18. One can only speculate to what extent these types of factors prevent Antony Flew from moving beyond a minimal deism to a Christian faith.
19. Cited in Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*(Italy: Yale University Press, 1997), 139.
20. And need it be said that we should hardly wish to emulate the renaissance popes in our pursuit of this goal?
21. Although Cummings has described this church in concert as the "Cathedral of St. Thomas," in

point of fact he was probably in St. Patrick's Cathedral, the largest neo-gothic cathedral in North America.

22. It should be stressed that in my view the project of revitalizing a Christian culture is not undertaken simply for an apologetic gain but also with the expectation that the best aspects of culture serve as preparatory adornments for the New Jerusalem. In that broader sense the apologetic benefit is merely a natural byproduct.

23. C.S. Lewis, "Learning in War-time," *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 43-54.

24. For instance, we could have a communal form of "warrant transfer" in which one might hold a belief despite prima facie defeaters for the belief based on the fact that someone else within one's epistemic community is aware of a defeater for the defeater. Stephen Wykstra proposes something like this in "Toward a Sensible Evidentialism: On the Notion of 'Needing Evidence,'" *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright, 2nd ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 426-37.

25. A valid argument is one where the conclusion follows logically from the premises while a sound argument has both validity and truth.

26. *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 41.

27. Interestingly, Mavrodes points out that one could have a valid and sound argument and yet have gained nothing by way of knowledge. *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion* (New York: Random House, 1970), 29-31.

28. George Mavrodes, "On the Very Strongest Arguments," in *Prospects for Natural Theology*, ed. Eugene Thomas Long, *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, ed. Jude P. Dougherty, vol. 25 (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 81-91.

29. See John Calvin's description of the noetic effects of sin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.2.10.