

GOD

AND BARRIERS TO BELIEF

by Ron Talarico

GOD

I DON'T KNOW IF YOU EXIST
OR IF YOU DON'T EXIST
BUT EVEN IF YOU DON'T EXIST
YOU'RE STILL THE BEST IDEA
ANYONE EVER OFFERED ME,
THE BEST I EVER PONDERED

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About the Author

Prologue

The goal of this reflection is twofold. First, to challenge several common barriers that many people posit as justification for why they do not or can not believe in God. Second, to discuss a few aspects of one's belief or not in the existence of God that are not actually barriers but have long intrigued me and may intrigue you the reader as well. The goal is most definitely not to entice one to believe in God.

For the limited purpose of this writing, and in order to advance the narrative, "God" is here defined generally, hesitatingly, admittedly simply, yet hopefully adequately, as the creator-being or creator-spirit responsible for the creation of the universe and all that exists – a supreme being, a higher power, a being superior in all ways to human beings. A being considered commonly by many to be omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and eternal. A being as in the Abrahamic God of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, or the God of North American First Peoples or of Zoroastrianism or of Sikhism; or concepts of God as found in various African and Eastern religions. A definitive and universally acceptable definition of God is likely impossible to determine, much less to agree upon; it is certainly beyond my humble abilities and should not be considered essential to the arguments regarding God that are offered in the present writing. Another and simpler way of putting all this might be that God in this writing is defined however the reader defines and uses the term "God."

This writing was conceived originally with those individuals in mind who do not or no longer believe in the existence of God, are unsure, or have never really given much thought to the subject, for many due to one or more barriers that they might say prevent them from believing or considering belief. I have identified and will discuss as many of those barriers of which I am currently aware. Over the years, however, my thoughts have evolved to include other than simply barriers regarding the question of whether God exists, and these thoughts are included as well. Even those individuals who have never doubted the existence of God may find the read worthwhile.

Challenging the barriers identified in this writing is an effort to eliminate as many distractions as possible from the truth or not of people's arguments and beliefs against the existence of God, and, in the process, to hopefully facilitate their own analysis of their own processes regarding this. The challenging on my part is also, and to a very real extent, an intellectual pursuit of truth, and, as part of this, a questioning of reasons I have often heard given against belief. Referring back to the opening paragraph, it merits repeating that my goal with this reflection is not to proselytize or otherwise convince people that God exists or to believe in God.

The concept of truth is, I believe, one of the most important inspirations in life. As such, this author spends much time attempting to strip away aspects of just about any argument that, upon close examination, appear false, or useless to the topic and, therefore, only deny, minimize, or distract from truth, and so delay arriving at it or at least getting closer to it.

While my religious tradition is Roman Catholicism, this work is not about Christianity or the Catholic Church. It is about God, the God of all humanity, not some subset of it. Any apparent bias in favor of a specific religion that makes its way somehow into the narrative, while obviously possible, would be unintentional and without awareness on my part, and, for the sake of truth, it would also be undesirable. I state this at the start, openly and frankly, hoping that in so doing this public disclosure will serve as a personal challenge for me to pursue this part of my life's truth-journey as objectively as I am consciously able. Such a disclosure, however, does not mean that, in order to illustrate a point, a well-known example taken from a specific religion would be inadmissible or would by definition merit being labeled as bias.

In large part this reflection is opinion: my opinion, my take on the subject, the way I see things after many years of pondering life and meaning in relation to the existence of God. And while it claims no special

hold on truth, it *is* a sincere and disciplined attempt and commitment to force my thoughts, words, and feelings to be as one, identical, and integrated as possible. More of myself than this I cannot ask.

Finally, the reflection has developed in the company of the *assumption* – not a presumed fact – that God exists, that God created all that is, knows all there is to know, is supremely and uniquely all powerful, that he or she has tried and continues trying to get in touch with us and be in relationship with us, and that many of us resist those efforts or we experience barriers when considering them. It is this resistance and some of these barriers that are the primary exploration herein.

We ask for a sign that God exists, yet no sign given seems to satisfy many of us.

IA. God Tries To Get Through To Us In The Physical World

God tries to self-reveal and get through to us by giving us creation – the universe and everything that exists – a path of communication of intense physicality that we can see and hear, smell, touch, and taste. A path of communication of such complexity, variety, and vastness that no one person can possibly experience all of it, no one grow tired of it, no one fail to find amazement in it even throughout an entire lifetime.

A snow-capped range of mountains seen from close up; a rainbow; the thunder and crash of a huge waterfall hundreds of feet above; the endless number, variety, and complexity of plants and animals and their behaviors; the unimaginable and ineffable vastness of the galaxies and the cosmos; the staggering intricacy and magnificence of our own bodies – cannot all of these be signs sent to us from God that God exists? "Not really," some say. "They are nice but we know how they came to be; we can explain them." Well we certainly cannot explain them *all*. By no means all. Even so, does the fact that we can explain a wonder make it any less of a wonder or sign from God? What credible form of logic would exclude understanding from support of the proposition that creation is a sign that God is trying to communicate with us?

We have come to know and praise such artistic giants as Michelangelo, Mozart, Picasso *just through their works alone*, independently and separately from anything they ever communicated verbally or in writing. Can we not in the same way come to know God through *God's* works and praise him or her for them?

Some say the closest they ever come to God is in nature and that they love this experience – while hiking in the wild; walking along a beach to the sounds of crashing waves; standing atop a mountain with a view of the world below. Do they consider – *and pursue the consideration*: what if the situation gets even better? What if nature is only the beginning, the introduction, just the entrance door, the threshold, the first step, the ever-available backdrop against which even more ways that God might be trying to self-reveal to us are waiting to be discovered?

We are offered quite an ensemble of signs in the physical world that one could argue point to the existence of a supreme being. In addition, we are given minds that are able to ponder the signs, appreciate most of them, understand much of them. What to do about it?

IB. God Tries To Get Through To Us In Writing And Art

God sends God's written words to us – another form of self-revelation, another way to be aware of and engage in relationship. The Bible, Koran, Bhagavad Gita, Talmud, and Tripitaka are a few well-known and larger-scale examples.

God has communicated and continues to communicate to all peoples of all faith traditions (as well as no faith traditions) at all times throughout human history, including even now. To each and every person. These communications, which are innumerable, arrive to us through individuals from other time periods and various belief traditions and no belief traditions, through authors of world-famous and not so famous literature, and other good men and women, all of whose writings support one aspect or another of God's attempts to communicate with us, to get in touch, to make us think. These writings span from prehistoric cave drawings to the beginning of written records to this very day. And they can be forms of communication from God even in those cases in which the authors had no conscious intent or desire of being a channel for this, or in cases in which they might even abhor or reject such a thought. This is my sense of it, my take on it.

Many of us say that those words were written by only human beings like us, mere mortals, and so remain as coming from humans only, not from a God who communicates through us humans. Or, depending on specific writings or on our abilities at the time, we say they are difficult to understand, impossible to

understand, or boring. Yet how often do we fail to realize or note how little time we actually spend *trying* to understand their meaning? And perhaps worse, how often do we fail to translate the words into contexts that are relevant to us and for our times – contexts that can bridge the gaps between difficult-to-understand ancient texts or foreign languages and the meaning of our lives today?

In addition to the literary arts, art of all types can be a way that God communicates with us. Painting, for example, or drawing, sculpture, architecture, music, film, photography, theater, dance, and so on.

Again, so it seems to me.

IC. Return Reply

We can respond or not to the two forms of communication from God suggested in Sections IA. and IB. We can respond in ways that build up or tear down life and people, that ennoble or discount life and people. The possibilities for positive responses from us make themselves known in innumerable forms of affirming expression:

- by helping others;
- in our attitudes, beliefs, and laws;
- by good thoughts or by prayers;
- in our efforts to end discrimination, hatred, and intolerance;
- in freedom and anti-war movements, and social justice activities;
- in life-affirming advances in medicine, research, and technology;
- in the faith practices, rituals, and liturgies of the world's many religions;
- in poetry, plays, ballets, paintings, singing, festivals, movies, books;
- in inventions that contribute to the dignity and well-being of the individual.

These are only some of the many ways in which we humans are capable of demonstrating our capacity to respond in positive ways to God's communications with us.

II. Knowledge, Proof, And Belief

"You don't *know* whether God exists," you might say to me, "And you don't *know* whether this or that event in history really took place," I might say to you in reply. But "You can't *prove* that God exists," you might continue, "And you can't disprove it, nor can you *prove* that that event from the past actually occurred." "You just *believe* that God exists," you respond finally, to which I reply "And you just *believe* that that historical reference you mentioned is a fact."

How do we "*know*" that this or that historical event really took place if we weren't there? Do we know just because someone *said* so? Do we know just because the event has been recorded in one or more long-established and so-called "authoritative" works, which may, if arguably, give it more credibility? Do we know just because a very large number of people have said so, which many people would say gives weight to our knowledge of events? If the answer to these questions is "yes," then would we not "*know*" in the very same ways that God exists or does not exist?

What does doubting the truth about whether God exists say about the vast amount of information regarding other parts of our lives that we have also only read or heard about – the daily news to cite just one example – but which we accept as true nonetheless and incorporate into the decisions of our lives? Information received both today and from past millennia. Information that is based exclusively on the testimony of others, whatever the form of that testimony or the number of people offering it. People we don't know, never knew, never met, never saw, never will – people we might not have believed even if we *had* known them. Yet for some reason we seem to have no problem asserting, even confidently, that what *these* people tell and have told us is true.

Do we not in fact know most of what we know only because someone said so, whether this was handed down hundreds or thousands of years ago by means of cave paintings or other primitive communications;

or handed down by oral tradition or in writing; or whether it was communicated just a few minutes ago via radio, television, e-mail, newspaper, movie, social networking or some other aspect of the Internet?

And let us hope that that which we claim to know and believe does not turn out to be the result of information that has been manipulated, information that has been cleverly or without scruples edited or altered in an attempt to control or influence what we think. Have the online posts, the videos, photos, oral and written historical accounts that we have been exposed to been manipulated or stated in favor of a particular prejudice?

And while on the subject, why do we believe that this or that person loves us? Because he or she *says* so and is believable? Nothing more? Because they write it to us in a convincing letter? Nothing more? Because they buy us gifts or do us favors or have supported us when we have needed them? Nothing more? "*Because*" they are our spouse or partner, mother or father, and so *of course* love us? Nothing more? Because "I just know, trust me"? Nothing more? Because of some combination of all of these? *And-nothing-more?* These are neither proofs nor science in and of themselves. And if one says that this line of reasoning is absurd, what proof can be offered to the contrary – meaning proof that is *proof*? However, such statements *are* at least very strong *beliefs*, which many or most of us would quite possibly be willing to defend to the death, and without which we would neither feel happy or complete as human beings. It may be a scary thought, yet be true, that in the end our *beliefs* concerning just about anything and everything that is not hard science carry more weight than our so-called knowledge and proofs regarding them.

What have the writings and oral traditions about God *not* done to convince many of us of their veracity and authenticity that the *other* communicators of human events *have* done, such that we would believe the latter but not the former, even though both cases equally have not been possible for us to verify personally?

And if *belief alone* satisfies our desire to know or even to prove that this or that person loves us, or that this or that historical event actually took place, then why can't that same belief-principle be applied (or why isn't it applied) equally to the existence of God?

Have science and reason been allowed perhaps to hijack faith and belief from the human journey by convincing us to define all that we are and all that we know in terms of the physical and sensory world exclusively? Have science and reason themselves, despite the vastness of their self-admitted limitations and frequently revised positions – have science and reason managed to entice us to disconnect our brains from whatever they (science and reason) are not capable of grasping or explaining? At what point did many of us lose track of or abandon the notion that what it means to be human *includes and goes well beyond* just physical evidence?

Finally, if a reality like the cosmos can be a mystery as well, as it surely is, then could not a mystery like God be a reality as well? In other words, if the reality of the universe can lead us or can end up dead-ending us deep within its mystery, as it inevitably seems to, then cannot the mystery of God do the same, leading us into the *reality* of God? And if dogged human exploration through the millennia keeps discovering and sharing more and more about existence and the meaning of life, then why could this same process of exploration, if equally dogged, not lead as well to an increasingly more complete understanding of the existence of God?

III. Do Me A Favor/Let's Bargain

We say to God, "Get me through this bad time and I promise I'll – (do this or that)." Then God does, but we don't. Maybe we remember to thank God, maybe not; remember the deal, maybe not. But if we do remember, do we take the situation further by pondering what the *meaning* of the granting of the favor might be? Or do we conclude it was all just chance, really, rather than a deliberate act by God, and then quickly lose the memory of it as we hurry off to a busy schedule or turn on the TV to watch a much

anticipated ball game or soap opera or find some other way to experience the Land of Numb and Forgetfulness? And if we don't get through the bad time, then many will say, "See, God doesn't exist!"

Finally, have you ever wondered how it must feel to be so-called "loved" by someone because of what you (or in this case God) can *do* for them rather than for the value of who you *are* to them? To be "loved" by someone who in effect – knowingly or unknowingly – games you and bargains with you ad nauseam? And worse, by someone who thinks you can't see through it all?

IV. And Miracles?

We read hundreds of accounts of miraculous religious moments or events that people have told us about over the course of human history – people just like us – giving testimony to what they say they experienced, trying to let us know about it because they believed it had worth and might help future generations. But many say their imaginations or fervent beliefs got the better of them. After all, we today might say, they provided no bibliography, no research methodology, no citations, no certifications of veracity – which, by the way, neither are provided commonly by the offerings of television, radio, newspapers, movies, and the Internet, at least not if you take the time and exercise the discipline to very carefully scrutinize their actual words and verify for yourself their so-called or implied details.

V. Hear My Prayers Or Else. . .

God doesn't hear or answer my prayers, so how can I believe in someone like that? *Why* should I believe in God? He or she obviously either is not there or does not care about me.

But how can one possibly know whether or not God hears our prayers? How can we possibly claim to know the mind of an all-mighty, all-knowing God when we don't even and cannot even know the mind of the person sitting next to us? What if God's timing is simply not *our* timing (and who are we to say that it *should* be)? And what if God does give an answer but we simply don't like it and choose not to accept it? While you could say that this kind of reasoning is a sorry excuse for not responding in a favorable way to what you want, what if it isn't? What if instead *your* reaction is the true sorry excuse for not believing? And what would you say to a child who declares that you do not love him or her because you have not given them what they want?

Why would we – a rather powerless and fragilely arranged collection of dust, a mere puff of smoke or passing shadow in the scheme of things – why would we attempt to put to the test *God*, the supposed Prime Mover of all that is, telling God in effect, "Get down on your knees and *prove* that you love me, and do so according to my criteria or else I won't believe in you? Is not this strategy basically some sort of manipulative ploy to get what one wants? Do not children do the same with their parents, and adults with other adults?

VI. Like A Puff Of Smoke Or A Passing Shadow

So many of us basically minimize or doubt or nullify virtually every sign we have ever been given that God might exist and that those signs might be offering meaning and consequences that seek to involve us in relationship with that God. Like a puff of smoke or a passing shadow, the possibilities often seem to dissipate all too soon.

At the same time many of us seem to experience no difficulty asking for another sign (and even another). Why? Just in case?

VII. Mors Mortis

Why does it often seem to take a near-death experience or a health crisis before many of us think about God and last things and the most important things to us in life? Could it be that, because we keep so busy and distracted, momentous events like these may often seem to be actually *required* in order for us to take the time and achieve the calmness of mind and spirit that are necessary in order to focus adequately on re-evaluating and re-prioritizing that which is most important to us?

VIII. Back To The Opening

Even when we consider again the opening assumption in Section IA that God is trying to self-reveal to us via the physical universe, with its billions and billions of galaxies and stars that are billions and billions of miles away, above us, below us – surrounding us as a womb surrounds its precious life within – cradling us, filling us with an awe like no other awe, showing us unparalleled splendor and unfathomable power – to even *this* many still respond, "Not enough! Sorry! Another sign please!"

IX. Who's Who, Anyway?

To those of us who get frustrated in our attempts to understand or to get inside the mind of God, Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.) put it best perhaps when he said, "If you understood God, it would not be God." If God does exist, it cannot be much of an intellectual stretch to imagine the impossibility of knowing God's thoughts and will or why God does what he or she does. For if the thoughts and will of God, presumably the most supreme being of all beings, were knowable by us, which one of us then – God or we – would be supreme? Which the real God?

And since just about any reasonable concept of God would, by force of reason, need to include that God is omniscient while we ourselves gain knowledge as individuals, and collectively as a species, only as we journey through life and grow by means of our experiences, thoughts, and the lessons of history, then it seems likely we may never know why God does what God does.

X. Implacable Before The Proposition

Why are we so difficult to please? What can we reasonably expect when it comes to knowing whether God exists?

Even if God were to make a special apparition, standing before us as plainly as we could ever want, and say, "Hello! It's me. God," then take us by the hand and say, "Let's walk a bit," would we not almost immediately start having doubts about what we were experiencing? Would we not later convince ourselves or let ourselves be convinced by others that we had been only dreaming or letting our imagination get away from us? Would we not surrender to the gradual erosion of details of our memory and conclude that what we had experienced must have been something other than what we thought initially?

If we say God should come to us looking like God, what exactly would we be expecting? What if God, in fact, looks like a mountain or a waterfall or like one of us or an invisible spirit? What if he looks like one of your friends or someone you don't care much for? What then?

God can't win, it would seem.

XI. Control

Is it possible that for some of us the apparent inability to be satisfied with arguments that God exists is simply an unconscious way of expressing our near-insatiable need to be in control of our lives and of the lives of others? After all, given our free will is it not *we* who call the shots with respect to accepting or declining any invitation that might be sent our way from God? The decision is ours alone, not that of God who appears to be powerless in the matter.

Or is that apparent inability due to arrogance? To pride? To fear of a power that is greater than we are? To fear of being vulnerable and powerless again – one more loathsome time – as we so clearly were in childhood for example or at many other moments in our lives?

All told, will that inability to be vulnerable and defer to a power or an authority higher or greater than ourselves turn out to be the ultimate loss for many "Me First" attitudes in the world? Attitudes which time and again seem to fail to consider the broader picture of the meaning of existence? Attitudes of self-

absorption and self-consumption in the body and in material goods which for many people have blocked, clouded, or numbed the ability to see and ponder beyond the present moment?

And should God, the preeminent force according to the definitions of quite likely most of us, should God jump to attention to the proof-demands of each one of the billions of humans who have every existed? Are we today, for example, asking for seven billion versions of him, one per current inhabitant, and rejecting any version that is not "satisfaction guaranteed" or "new and improved" according to seven billion definitions of it? Can we realistically expect a Creator to allow *us*, the Created, to put him or her on some sort of leash, or be made to dangle as a marionette awaiting its operator's next hand movement? Would this be a God? Or would it be just another one of *us*, just one more trophy to add to our collection of conquests, just another control issue to bring up in our next therapy session?

XII. Take Another Look At Those Crutches

Some say that belief in God is merely a crutch, something we do not appear able or willing to live without. Something without which we could not get through our lives happily or feeling satisfied or fulfilled. One implication of this would seem to be that somehow such people are weak, not strong enough to live without this crutch, not strong enough to live life without belief in God.

But what does this say about what are obviously crutches in other areas of our lives: crutches or aids like eyeglasses, hearing aids, medications, wheelchairs, walkers, canes, and similar? And if one believes that life would not be as much worth living without these and other crutches or aids, and if such is acceptable, then how, honestly, could one's belief in God be viewed any differently?

Ridiculous though it might sound initially, do not people *themselves* often serve, in effect, as crutches for us, helping us to journey through our lives, to self-actualize, and to experience as little pain as might otherwise be the case? In the end, is not one of the most important tasks performed by human beings on behalf of other human beings to help "crutch us" through life as it were (referring back to the opening words of Section XII), to help us navigate the journey, achieving or maintaining as much wholeness and dignity as possible – even to help us deal with and get through death itself?

A crutch gets you from one place to another place, physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. From a given state to a state you judge to be better and more desirable.

So what is the big problem even *if* God were a crutch for us?

XIII. What? I've Been Brainwashed?!

Many people say that those who believe in the existence of God do so because they have been brainwashed. But what is brainwashing, anyway?

Most parents care about their children and want to share with them the tools they will need to live happy, safe, productive lives. As a result, in many and widely varied ways, they share their values with their children, instilling in them their own identities, what is important to them, who they are, who they believe themselves to be. They share their work ethic, their sense of responsibility and duty, their patriotism and culture, as well as their considerations regarding the welfare of others. They share their attitudes toward authority, their thoughts on education. They impart training on critical thinking skills and on ways to live morally and ethically. Similarly they share their faith and religious beliefs. In short, they share and attempt to instill *whatever* it is that they believe is important for their children's healthy development, well-being, success in life, and happiness.

When countries, societies, nations, governments, education systems and so on hold themselves morally accountable to making the well-being of their citizens their highest priority and duty, then they also generally share their values, attempting to instill those values in their citizens, for whom they are responsible or regarding aspects of whose lives they have legitimate authority. And they do so in basically

the same ways and for basically the same reasons as parents share what parents share. Again, this regards entities that hold themselves morally accountable, for less than this may well be or become forms of brainwashing.

Brainwashing, by contrast, involves essentially the directly or indirectly forced indoctrination of individuals to adopt beliefs and/or ways of acting or thinking that are contrary to what those individuals otherwise would believe or do or think – or that *would be* contrary if they were aware of what is being done to them by those doing the brainwashing. Brainwashing involves a certain deliberate manipulation of individuals by propaganda or threats or punishment or intimidation, or the blocking of incoming information that is contrary to the efforts of those doing the brainwashing. Is what has been stated in the above three paragraphs to be labeled fairly as brainwashing? Common sense would seem to indicate it is not.

The arrival of one's belief in God is in no significant way *more* the result of brainwashing or *less* the result of brainwashing than is any other example of sharing and instillation of values stated in this section.

This may be as good a place as any to add the idea that, as far as we know, God does not and can not force us to believe in or love God. Because of this, it would appear that to some degree God has turned over his or her will to us. To *us*, creatures of the creator. Of what value would it be to us or to God to believe through force, threats, or being scared into it – without a choice? None. Instead, regarding belief in God, we have been left free to say yes, no, or anything in between and for whatever short or long term we choose.

XIV. I Can't Believe In A God Who Allows Destruction To Happen To People, In A God Who Lets Bad Things Happen To Good People

XIV. A. Introduction

This section argues that the overwhelming cause of the super-grand majority of destructive acts and situations experienced by human beings throughout history has been and still currently is humanity itself rather than any deity or other factor. After using the Internet to locate a considerable quantity and variety of easily accessible and public data in order to examine a sampling of those destructive acts and situations in human history, and after comparing the accessed information across multiple web sites, it would seem irrational not to conclude that we very humans are and have always been our own worst enemy; that we alone have inflicted and continue to inflict the most robust, cruel, and imaginative damage against each other and ourselves.

We.

Not any God. Not nature. Not the universe. Not life. Not happenstance. Not other.

We.

To those who will surely say that an overabundance of examples has been presented in this section, including too much detail, I respond that the examples and the detail given are necessary:

- (1) necessary in order to demonstrate the excessive abundance of destructive acts ideated and executed by human beings against human beings throughout recorded history;
- (2) necessary in order to demonstrate the high frequency and egregious destructiveness of those acts;
- (3) necessary because it is indispensable that we squarely face such truths about ourselves not only toward the end of abandoning as myth the old argument that blames a cruel God for our own cruelly destructive acts, but also and *more importantly* toward the end of understanding and admitting, at last, that we have all the required power (if not the will) to end the myth;
- (4) necessary because the barrier stated in the title and first paragraph of this section is one of the most common barriers we hear of as to why a person can't believe in God or decides not to. Despite that it is a barrier whose basis in fact appears negligible upon close examination – negligible certainly when

compared with the cruelty of the human species toward its own members; and (5) necessary because this barrier is likely the most difficult and painful one for us to study, for it not only requires a serious examination and confrontation of our minds, hearts, and souls in order to determine the causes and extent of our own destructiveness as human beings, but requires also an equally serious decision regarding what we will choose to *do* about what we discover in the process.

Let us not be deceived into thinking that we can simply discard as exaggerations the examples given below, for those examples not only are neither exaggerations nor an exhaustive listing, but, as implied above, they are quite easy to verify by simple use of Internet searches alone. Those who dare to try it for themselves will have their fill! Our search for additional examples is only as unlimited as we have the patience to pursue and the stomach to endure.

Furthermore, it is not honest to point the finger only at others when it comes to destructive actions against other individuals, or to consider the destructiveness of such actions mainly on the basis of how large scale, repulsive, or far reaching they may be. For most if not all of us, in our own unique ways, perform destructive acts at many times in our lives, and many among us do so frequently. Perhaps we act thus only to the extent that we feel safe, or with the confidence that we will not be found out, or that we are acting within legal (distinct from moral) laws, or acting without grossly crossing beyond cultural norms, and so on. But something as simple as knowingly talking down to one's kids or discouraging them or diminishing their self-esteem is in fact a destructive act and one that can have a negative effect on them for life. Sharing with others a confidence that you have promised to keep to yourself, or that you know better than to share, can be a destructive act. Slandering a friend or colleague by deliberately sharing information about them that you know is false or misleading, or you know *may* be, is a destructive act. Examples of smaller scale destruction abound in life and can destroy silently, insidiously, and permanently no matter how minor they may seem. For more on the subject, check out your local and national news stories on likely any and every day of the week and virtually all day long.

One cannot say logically, credibly, or with evidence that the destructive acts caused by natural disasters (hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc.), or, more importantly, caused by ourselves (murder, theft, cheating, lying, deceiving, war, domestic violence, sex abuse, verbal and emotional abuse, child abuse, alcohol and drug addiction, jealousy, drug trafficking, bullying, revenge, lust, slander, greed, human trafficking, envy, child slavery, sloth, rape, etc.) – one cannot say logically, credibly, or with evidence that God wills these things into existence, wants these things to continue, or forces us to commit them against each other.

And, exclusive of natural disasters, if we humans are the ones ideating, perpetrating, and perpetuating these evils against one another – which will be demonstrated in the remainder of this section – why would we turn around and ask why God does not stop them? The fact is that the ability to stop these human-generated destructive actions lies within our own complete power. No God caused or causes them; *we* did and we do.

Whether regarding the imagination that goes into the cruelty, or the successful implementation of that cruelty, it is not difficult to conclude that God might well take lessons from *us* concerning cruelty since it appears that we are far and away this planet's master teachers of it, and its most accomplished and undeniable champions.

While it may be tempting to blame God for the cruelty in the world, doing so would seem to be more than anything else a distraction away from holding ourselves accountable for our own choices and actions. Blaming God would seem to be a way to escape taking a long, hard, honest look inside ourselves and our society. It would seem a cowardly, easy, empty excuse for continuing the violence that since the beginning of human existence we have brought against each other; brought against the “fairy tale of all fairy tales” that is our uniquely special planet Earth; and indeed, as a result, brought against the entire created

universe. And all with the most incredible ingenuity, tirelessness, and brutal force!

This section is not an attempt to defend God, for if God does exist he or she surely can take care of self. Rather it is an attempt to help us face and acknowledge squarely the primary cause of evil and destruction in the world: homo sapiens.

If we were to tally on one balance sheet all the bad things that happen to people which are provably caused by us, wholly or in part, and on a second balance sheet those bad things that we believe are caused or willed by God, the content of the latter sheet, by comparison with the former, would surely be basically insignificant.

The remainder of Section XIV is an effort to present reasonable evidence that challenges and substantially refutes the idea that it is primarily God rather than human beings who allows bad things to happen to people.

XIV. B. Evidence

Appearing below are three types of destruction that I believe are the most significant to discuss in this Section XIV. The listings within each type are in complete random order. They are a selected sampling from among a virtually infinite number of possibilities and so are by no means exhaustive. The research was done using Wikipedia and a large variety of other free and readily available online links and resources. Thus, if desired, the reader should be able to easily verify and establish independently the veracity of any listing.

XIV. B.1. Destruction caused by human beings and the choices we make.

The statistics reported here are approximate because invariably they differed from source to source. The figures selected are *the very lowest* of each range located, and the plus signs following them have been used to remind the reader of this. Precise and universally agreed upon figures regarding destruction by human beings do not appear to be obtainable, nor is this level of precision and agreement important for the purposes of this section.

It merits stressing that where death figures are stated they regard the dead only and do not include those incalculable many other individual human beings who have been seriously injured and otherwise negatively affected for life: an eye or arm or leg missing; permanent emotional damage; severed or damaged spinal cord and resulting paralysis; brain damage; Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and other trauma; psychological illnesses, the separation for unbearably long periods or for life of mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, brothers, sisters, friends; suicide; acting out against others; geographical displacement or relocation away from all that was once familiar; loss of homes, livelihoods, ways of life and – of equal importance – loss of hope and self-esteem themselves.

- Stalin's Soviet Ukraine genocide/man-made famine, 1932-33: 1,800,000+ dead
- Greek genocide against Christian Ottoman Greeks, 1914-22: 450,000+ dead
- Cambodian genocide, 1975-79: 1,700,000+ dead
- Rwandan genocide, 1994: 500,000+ dead
- Armenian genocide, 1915-22: 800,000+ dead
- Iraq war led by the US, 2003-2016 (ongoing to date): 200,000+ dead
- World War I, 1914-18 : 17 million+ dead (20 million+ wounded)
- World War II (arguably the greatest catastrophe by human beings against human beings in the history of the human race), 1939-45 : 60,000,000+ dead
- Bosnian genocide, 1992-95: 96,000+ dead
- Duterte Philippine killings of known and suspected drug dealers/users, 2016 (ongoing to date): 5,000+ dead
- organized crime, white-collar crime, financial crimes, political crimes, war crimes – all together

involving assault, murder, money laundering, embezzlement, counterfeiting, tax evasion, fraud, copyright and intellectual property infringement, etc. All of these have a negative impact on the lives, attitudes, and hopes of innocent individuals and groups.

- arms trafficking and sales of nuclear materials to rogue-states
- identity theft, computer viruses, worms, ransomware, spyware, adware, spam, malvertising, botnets, not to mention direct cyber warfare that has the potential even to disable components of a country's major infrastructure and democratic systems
- fake news and other types of lies and deliberate misinformation
- the many colonial empires in modern times (Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, British, Russian, Ottoman, Austrian, American, Japanese, Italian, Belgian, etc.) and the resulting subjugation, displacement, slavery, and murder of peoples who were already legitimately living in the conquered lands. These were empires born mainly to satisfy greed for natural resources, material goods, foreign corporate interests, cheap labor, and lust for power.
- oppressive authoritarian regimes specifically supported by the US: for example in Nicaragua (the Contras), Egypt (Mubarak), Uzbekistan (Karimov), Democratic Republic of Congo (Mubutu), South Africa (apartheid), Philippines (Marcos), Panama (Noriega), Chile (Pinochet), Brazil (Médici)
- oppressive authoritarian regimes generally, in which exist various combinations of absence of free elections; of elections that are rigged or won by means of violence or force; of repression; of unconstrained power; of those who are in power not being accountable to the people; of enforcement of public conformity; of a tightly controlled military for the purpose of controlling political opponents; of prevention or hindering of intellectual freedom, of demonstrations and other public acts of disagreeing with those in power; of little or no influence over decisions by the governing power; of non-existent or weak independent judicial systems. Some examples of these regimes are North Korea, Syria, Cuba, China, Yemen, Russia, Ethiopia, Laos, Bahrain, Tajikistan, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Sudan, Libya, Central African Republic, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, South Sudan; past regimes in Franco's Spain, Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy
- Assyrian genocide (extermination of Assyrian population by the Ottoman Empire), 1915-23: 275,000+ dead
- Dzungar genocide, 1755-1758 (extermination of the Buddhist Dzungar people by the Chinese dynasty): 480,000+ dead
- Extensive sexual abuse of children in the Roman Catholic Church involving thousands of victims over a period of decades, including cover-ups and failures of Church hierarchy in dealing effectively with the problem
- Holocaust by Nazi Germany, 1939-45: approximately 17 million dead, among which Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Serbs, Romani, Spanish Republicans, people with disabilities, people of Asian and African descent, gays and lesbians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, others, *and* 6,000,000 Jews (total of 23 million people)
- Holodomor man-made famine by Soviets against Ukrainians, 1932-33: 4,000,000+ dead
- Bangladesh genocide, 1971: 300,000+ dead, and 200,000+ Bangladeshi women raped
- Syrian Civil War, 2011- March 2018 (ongoing): 350,000+dead; 6,000,000+ internally displaced; 5,000,000+ refugees to other countries
- Mongol Empire conquests (Genghis Khan & others), 1206-1368: 30,000,000+ dead
- "Comfort Women" from Korea, China, Philippines, & other countries forced into prostitution/sexual slavery by the Japanese military during World War II: 200,000+ women & girls
- Darfur genocide, 2003-2017: 200,000+ dead and 2,700,000+ displaced
- Zulu Kingdom exterminations, 1810-28: 1,000,000+ dead
- Congo Free State atrocities (Belgian colony), 1885-1908: 3,000,000+ dead
- Indonesian Genocide, 1965-66: 500,000+ dead
- Thirty Years War in Europe, 1618-1648: 7,000,000+ dead
- Spanish colonization of the Americas, 400+ years: 8,000,000+ dead
- Roman Catholic Inquisitions, 13th-19th centuries: 8,000+ dead not including countless tortured
- American Civil War, 1861-65: 785,000+ dead
- Kidnapping of Blacks from Africa for slavery in America and the New World, 15th-19th centuries:

10,000,000+ kidnapped

- U.S. Indian Removal Act, 1830-42, resulting in forced expulsions of Native Americans from their homelands to the western part of the country: 59,000+ moved
- current (2017) significant U.S. discrimination against Native Americans & Blacks in housing, education, incarceration, employment
- German Empire genocide in Namibia of Herero, Nama, and San people, 1904-07: 60,000+ dead
- Native Americans either killed in conflict with U.S. forces or who died from various diseases brought to the New World by Europeans and their domesticated animals: 10,000,000+ dead
- segregation and prejudice (past and ongoing) and its negative effects against Blacks in the U.S. in spite of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation freeing Blacks, in spite of the 1870 15th Amendment to the Constitution giving Blacks the vote, and in spite of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to overcome legal barriers for Blacks at the state and local levels
- discrimination and cruelty against all manner of those who are not like us: Catholics vs Protestants, Sunnis vs Shias, Israelis vs Palestinians, whites vs non-whites, Northerners vs Southerners (in the US, in Europe, in Italy), Buddhists vs Rohingyas, Tutsis vs Hutus, men vs women, Indians vs Pakistani, white supremacists vs people of color, Christians vs Muslims, Republicans vs Democrats, fundamentalists vs mainstream Christians, political liberals vs political conservatives, LGBTQ vs straight, people with non-visible disabilities vs people with visible disabilities, etc. (the list is virtually endless)
- environmental pollution, including from automobile and airplane exhaust, power plants, coal production, metal refineries, industrial boilers, petroleum oil refineries that produce our gasoline, diesel oil, kerosene, heating oils, lubricating oils, etc.
- human trafficking in the form of sex slavery, child slavery, forced labor, and commercial sexual exploitation – all in all 20,000,000+ children & adult victims globally – not to mention the destruction and trauma involved in all of this, including violence, torture, brainwashing, rape, physical assault, depression, self-hatred, self-destructive behaviors, self-mutilation, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, alcohol and other substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, loss of hope, suicide, etc.
- sexual abuse, domestic violence, emotional abuse, rape, drug trafficking, global terrorism, mass murders
- 1947 partition of India into Pakistan and India as a result of the end of British colonialism there: 1,000,000+ dead
- September 11 attacks in the U.S., 2001: 2,900+ dead
- atomic bombing in World War II, 1945: of Hiroshima 140,000+ dead and Nagasaki 70,000+ dead
- US war in Afghanistan, 2001-2017 (on-going): 50,000+ dead
- nuclear weapons tests and resulting planetary pollution from 1945 to 2016 by Great Britain, United States, Soviet Union, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea. These were conducted underground, in the oceans, in the atmosphere, and above the atmosphere. Resulting pollution involved worldwide fallout (radioactive materials) into the global ecosystem and related effects including elevated levels of cancer, malformation of children, birth defects, genetic damage, lower immunity to diseases, etc.
- Kosovo War, 1998-99: 13,000+ dead; 1,200,000+ displaced
- corruption in U.S. federal government and of our elected members in Congress due to poorly restricted and even more poorly enforced lobbying and campaign financing laws, and the damage which that corruption creates both to American morals and ethics as a nation and to the American spirit
- killing in China of practitioners of Falun Gong spiritual practice who have been imprisoned in order to harvest their organs for international sale and as cadavers for medical science, 1999 to the present 10,000+ killed
- man-made famines in Yemen, Somalia, South Sudan, and Nigeria, 2017: 18 million+ human beings starving to death or at risk of same
- failure to clean up in a timely manner the U.S. Hanford Nuclear (plutonium production) Site on the Columbia River despite the threat of earthquakes, sabotage, and materials deterioration, all of which risk the contamination and devastation of life for several million residents of the Pacific Northwest
- Yeomen conflict March 2015 to November 2017 (ongoing): 8,670+ dead
- Myanmar ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslim minority, 2017: 6,700+ dead; 615,000+ refugees

Again, the reader is reminded that the figures indicated in Section B.1 are the *lowest* of each range that

was researched.

XIV. B.2.a. Destruction caused by disease and illness that results from or is negatively influenced by human activities and the choices we make.

- *Air pollution* from human activities and our choices can and often does cause or negatively influence coronary artery disease, stroke, lung cancer, COPD, asthma, skin and thyroid cancers, birth defects, cognitive disabilities, etc. Human activities, for example, such as factory chimney discharges, vehicular traffic and airplane exhaust, coal mine dust, radioactive waste, nuclear test explosions, bombs. [From US Environmental Protection Agency Web Site, 2/9/2017: “People exposed to toxic air pollutants at sufficient concentrations and durations may have an increased chance of getting cancer or experiencing other serious health effects. These health effects can include damage to the immune system, as well as neurological, reproductive (e.g., reduced fertility), developmental, respiratory and other health problems. In addition to exposure from breathing air toxics, some toxic air pollutants such as mercury can deposit onto soils or surface waters, where they are taken up by plants and ingested by animals and are eventually magnified up through the food chain. Like humans, animals may experience health problems if exposed to sufficient quantities of air toxics over time.”]

Since the first nuclear test explosion in 1945, at least eight nations have detonated a total of 2,000+ nuclear test explosions either in the atmosphere resulting in air pollution or in the ocean resulting in water pollution (see entry immediately below).

- *Water pollution* from human activities and our choices can and often does cause or negatively influence dysentery, cholera, Hepatitis A, lead poisoning (from both environmentally contaminated water and water conduit containing lead), illness and death in marine life (our food supply), etc. Human activities, for example, such as oil spills, oil and other discharges from ocean vessels, underwater nuclear detonations, dumping of garbage and commercial chemicals in waterways allowing them to enter the groundwater and other sources of drinking water.

- *Noise pollution* from human activities and our choices can and often does cause or negatively influence hearing loss, stress-related disorders, sleep disruption.

- *Land & soil pollution* from human activities and our choices can and often does cause or negatively influence breathing problems, skin problems, and cancers. Pollution, for example, from acid rain, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, fertilizers, deforestation, soil erosion, mining, animal waste, garbage in landfills. All of these either make their way eventually into our groundwater or facilitate it.

- *Poor nutrition* and resulting cumulative health risks from consuming prepared convenience foods too frequently and in excessive quantities, almost all of which foods contain some combination of chemical preservatives, chemical stabilizers, chemical food coloring, chemical artificial sweeteners, chemical flavor enhancers all of which can and do cause or negatively influence allergies, hyperactivity, Attention Deficit Syndrome, skin problems. The regularly high or excessive consumption of salt, saturated fat, and sugar in many diets, perhaps most typically in the American diet for example, can lead to increased risks for hypertension, high cholesterol, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and obesity to name a few.

- *Insufficient physical exercise* and its negative impacts on one's health. Insufficient physical exercise is a key risk factor in the development or exacerbation of many chronic diseases (cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, obesity, blood clots, osteoporosis, cognitive dysfunction, depression and anxiety, falls and bone fractures, colon and breast cancers, physical pain generally, higher mortality rate, etc.)

- *Extended levels of emotional and psychological stress* can have negative impacts on one's mood and personality and contribute to depression, anxiety, cognitive problems, personality changes, behavioral

problems, difficulty completing daily activities, difficulty developing and maintaining rewarding interpersonal relationships, difficulty holding a job, etc.

- *Insufficient sleep* can lead to increased risk of occupational and medical errors, bad moods, lack of focus, diabetes, irritability, disruption to the immune system, risk of injury or accidents at home, work, or on the road.

- *Insufficient physical health insurance*, or insurance that is too expensive to afford for what is needed, can and does leave hundreds of millions of people worldwide vulnerable to increased numbers of illnesses and severity of those illnesses, increased unhappiness, loss of hope, and greater risk of death.

- *Insufficient mental health insurance*, or insurance that is too expensive to afford for what is needed, can and does impact negatively on crime, violence, mass shootings, addictions (drug, alcohol, food, gambling, sex, work, etc.), mental illnesses, despair, loss of contributions to society.

- *Insufficient affordable, comprehensive, and effective treatment for alcoholism, illicit drug use, opioid addiction, and abuse of licit drugs*, can and does lead to loss of jobs and income, loss of homes, deterioration and/or loss of family life, erosion of human relationships, seriously poor life-choices and critical thinking skills, and unmerited incarceration of many people.

XIV. B.2.b. Disease and other destructive physical conditions that as far as we know do *not* result from human activities and our choices. This could change, as it has through time, as our knowledge continues to grow. Perhaps these situations are caused by God one could argue. Perhaps instead they are, as with the human species too, simply a natural part of evolution and the free and unrestrained development of the universe. At this time, it appears that we do not know.

Examples are:

- genetic diseases like cystic fibrosis, Down syndrome, hemophilia, Huntington's disease, muscular dystrophy, sickle cell anemia
- non-genetic diseases like congenital heart defects and spina bifida
- diphtheria, mumps, measles, rubella, chickenpox, and polio – but these are all preventable today by known vaccines, if we choose to use them
- malaria (largely preventable however) and cerebral palsy (partly preventable)
- mental illnesses that do not result from human activities and our choices but from genetics and abnormal balance of neurotransmitters. However, what are normally genetics-based mental illnesses can be *triggered* by human-caused psychological and/or environmental factors (see examples in Section XIV. B.2.c below).

XIV. B.2.c. Mental illnesses, however, can also be caused or triggered by psychological trauma resulting from human activities and our choices.

For example: physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, parental neglect, low self-esteem, excessive stress, abuse of alcohol and other chemically addictive substances, family dysfunction, traumatic divorce of parents, abusive foster care, being bullied, and one's belief that one is unloved, unloveable, unwelcome, or irrelevant.

XIV. B.2.d. To be considered in all of this is also the serious and sobering question of what negative consequences occur when *more than one* of the problematic situations presented in Sections XIV. B.2.a. through B.2.c. are experienced by the same individual, or when that individual experiences the *cumulative effect* of these situations over time, including over an entire lifetime.

XIV. B.3. Natural Disasters

The Earth's natural processes frequently result in destructive events in nature. As far as we know, and as far as science can take us currently, these destructive events are the result of a universe that appears to be free and unencumbered to develop and evolve as such happens. The more science learns about these natural phenomena, the better our understanding will become.

One product of this free development is the formation over time of the inestimable beauty, grandeur, and uniqueness that is our planet Earth, for which we are grateful and without which we would not be as happy. Yet another product of this development is destruction, sometimes catastrophic, with which, it appears, we must learn to live until such time as our knowledge and resulting capacities to deal effectively with it might catch up with our experiences.

One could choose to believe that God controls these events and could stop them if his or her desire were such. But, apparently because God does not control *us*, which we appreciate and likely insist upon and demand, leaving us free to choose as we will and what we will, it would seem reasonable enough to assume that God has done the same with the universe, its development, and its characteristics, including its destructiveness at times.

We are not, however, completely innocent victims or powerless when it comes to preventing natural disasters.

Some of our well documented role in contributing to the natural disasters that result from or are exacerbated by global warming and climate change may not seem really much of a choice at this point in human existence, especially given our dependence on energy and transportation, and given the current state of progress, or lack thereof, regarding alternative energy sources. Practically incalculable is the current role of fossil fuels – coal, oil, and natural gas – in the production of the energy and fuel that drive our world's current everyday wants and needs, including in the manufacturing of plastics, steel, and iron, for cars, trucks, trailers, airplanes, satellites and space exploration, trains, ships, pleasure boats, equipment and tools of every type including medical; construction projects, military development, furniture, toys, electronics, clothing, road surfacing, storage, recreation, and untold numbers of other everyday material goods.

However, other aspects of our contributory role in natural disasters *are* a choice. For example, our frequent resistance to honestly and squarely define and address the difference between *what we want* and *what we need*; our reluctance to take a hard and serious look at the “elephants” that live in the rooms of our personal choices; our very frequent, irresponsible, and unnecessarily excessive acquisition, use, and discarding of the world's goods, much of whose production has contributed to the pollution and destruction of our environment. Our greed appears to be incessant, as does our refusal to admit that we can live without many of the goods and services that we use, *and* still be happy. And still be happy! Perhaps even investing more time in pursuing the non-material depths of the meaning of our humanity. The culture of mass consumerism and waste that surrounds – indeed bombards – us holds a stranglehold grip on us that many have come to think little about seriously, or are entirely unaware of altogether, thanks to a successfully ideated and managed profit-driven capitalist system of consumption that has too often skillfully duped us regarding what it is that we really need.

The temptations inherent in the strategies and tactics of mass consumerism are powerfully alluring, almost beyond belief. They very often cater to some of our deepest insecurities and fears: doubts about our physical appearance, our status, our self-image and self-esteem, and whether we really are a legitimate and valued part of the society and groups around us. And the temptations are powerfully alluring not only for the affluent in our society and the world, but also for the world's poor *if and when* they might have the financial opportunities that would make massive consumerism possible for them. The greed for more is universal and classless.

These temptations, however, are by no means impossible to resist. Many of the goods that we buy, use (or

not), and then discard are our choices to buy in the first place. And how long we use them is also a choice, as is whether we make good faith efforts to have them repaired for our continued use, whether we replace them unnecessarily, whether we recycle them (which is not a justification for having them in the first place), or whether we offer them for use by others. The more goods we produce the more of our resources we burden; the more goods we throw away the more of the environment we burden; and both actions negatively impact the planet and humanity alike. If we are gut-level honest, I suspect we will admit that most of our choices regarding goods, services, energy, etc. actually regard wants, not true needs.

Although natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, sea rises, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis, avalanches, and desertification can happen on their own without human cause, they also can be and are significantly and negatively influenced by us humans and many of our choices, often resulting in upsetting the Earth's natural balance regarding the carbon cycle.

For example:

- The human contribution to rising sea levels is related to our burning of fossil fuels and subsequent increases in greenhouse gases. This same human causal factor is having an influence on the frequency and severity of hurricanes and their destructiveness.
- Human activity appears to be responsible for those earthquakes that result from the disposal of wastewater related to hydraulic fracturing (fracking). Fracking is known also to have contaminated groundwater and surface water; to have resulted in the escape of harmful methane gas and other pollutants into the atmosphere; to have chemically polluted the soil from the drilling, etc.
- The human contribution to desertification includes our deforestation activities, overgrazing the land, redirecting waterways, and the increased covering of the land with roads, buildings, and megacities.
- When we eliminate or degrade wetland habitats through urban sprawl, roads, buildings, parking lots, megacities, shopping malls, or industrial pollution, the result can involve a decline in waterfowl numbers; an increase in animal species deformities; an increase in contamination of water by inappropriate agricultural drainage pollutants in stormwater runoff and by leaching from landfills; increased flooding; loss of once productive land, etc. A major negative result is reduced absorption of greenhouse gases due to fewer trees and other similarly acting vegetation.
- When we produce more greenhouse gases than nature can absorb, some areas that humans inhabit receive more rain than they can cope with while others receive less rain than they need. Both results are problematic for each respective group: potential death, disease, homelessness, loss of economic resources, etc.

XIV. C. Final Remark

As stated at the start of this Section XIV, the primary cause of the super-grand majority of destructive acts and situations experienced by human beings throughout history has been and still is humanity itself rather than any deity or other factor. I believe I have shown this to be the case. We have it in our complete power to end the majority of the worst of all destruction on the planet, whether against our fellow human beings or the planet itself. The destruction we cause is the product of our choices gone awry. Choices.

Humankind has always lived in a time and a place of opposites, of polarity, of good/evil, love/hate, sadness/joy, building up/tearing down, male/female, strong/weak, dictatorships/democracies, yes/no, either/or, hot/cold, sickness/wellness, pride/humility, war/peace, cowardice/bravery, truth/lies, disease/health, life/death. Endless the list. The negative components of the pairs of these opposites – especially the more destructive ones in the case of Section XIV – do seem to be an integral part of life and what it means to exist at all. No one escapes life's pains and no one escapes its joys. Life is full of both awful and awe-filled moments. It would seem they come as a pair and are an inseparably integral part of existence, however paradoxical and painful that may be and however desperately we might wish it otherwise.

The struggle between good and evil behavior in our lives (1) is present in the psyches of all of us, (2) is present at the same time within each of us, and (3) is present without end. The inclinations within us to perform actions that affirm, encourage, and sustain life, and to perform actions that erode, diminish, and

tear life down – these both exist within us always and simultaneously, and we often turn from one of them to the other within the short span of only a few minutes. Each end of the polarity tugs at us constantly and vies ceaselessly for our attention and action. Which one wins out is basically, in the end, our call. Again, a choice.

So, quite apart from the separate issue of whether or not God exists,
when you say you can't believe in a God who allows bad things to happen to good people,
consider that you mis-take the actors in all of this:
It is not a God who allows the majority of bad things in life to happen.
It is you and I.

XV. Acceptance Of The Mystery? (You're Kidding Of Course!) (Yes?)

Although previously stated in the prologue, this seems to be a good place to repeat that my goal with this reflection is not to proselytize or otherwise lure the reader into believing in God. I am simply trying to examine, as objectively as my abilities will allow, various barriers I have heard given in support of lack of belief.

We are fascinated by various mysteries of the non-God variety in many areas of life as we encounter them through reading, studying, lectures, documentaries, etc. For example, where the cosmos comes from, the existence or not of UFOs, how the human brain functions, understanding our emotions, whether there are other forms of life in the universe, what the human spirit is, what love is, why we are such a violent species, where our self-destructive behaviors originate and why they continue. We live and walk effortlessly among these mysteries on a daily basis.

Why do we not resist exploring these mysteries in the same ways we so often seem to resist exploring the mystery of whether God exists? Why are these mysteries seemingly so much easier to accept and live with, even though, potentially, they have less impact on the ultimate meaning of our existence than might the mystery of God?

Is it because these types of mysteries do not challenge us? That is to say, could it be that the psychological side of our fascination with life's non-God mysteries and our ease in accepting them and living with them as mysteries is supported by an underlying sense and confidence, probably unconscious in most of us, that one day we *will* understand them? That it's just a matter of time?

But if this is the case, then could not the same thinking be applied as well to the mystery of God?

What would happen, for example, if we tried applying to the mystery of whether God exists the same acceptance as we experience with many of the other mysteries in our lives? What if the most simple and immediately practical way to deal with our doubts about whether God exists is to abandon altogether the desire and the search for absolute certitude? What if our desire itself for certitude is what is standing in the way and is not necessary? After all is said and done, maybe a reasonable starting place for exploring the existence or not of God would be to give simple belief a try, trusting without reservation, and see how that feels; surrender and just accept simply, for a while at least, and watch what happens.

It is possible that most children have something to say to us about this – that is, the way they place their trust unconditionally in adults, accepting without reservation. "Children do so because they are dependent on us," some might say. "They are not fully developed in thought and have very little choice regarding whether to trust adults."

But is this really the reason children seem to trust and accept without conditions? Could it not be the case as well that children can still sense something that we adults forgot long ago, perhaps in the process of becoming adults? Something which children, without understanding it, are able to respond to by some

primal intuition that is still alive and functioning within them – namely the ability to trust without reservation? To repeat from above, could belief that God exists be as simple as just *trusting* that belief without reservation? Sort of similarly as many people who are in a love relationship, for example, trust without reservation that each is loved by the other?

So maybe just giving simple belief a try might be for some a reasonable starting place for dealing with the question of whether God exists. *Embracing* the mystery rather than wrestling it, then watching what happens.

Giving a *fair* try, however, would likely require a *full-hearted* try. A genuine try, with full assent. Not some let's-get-it-over-with-to-prove-a-point try. A try that applies *all* of our honesty and sincerity to the proposition, not just the convenient or “spare-change” part of it.

What if we tried applying all of the time and effort to the endeavor – but *all* of the same time and the same effort – that we apply to other things important to us in life, as when trying to make someone fall in love with us? trying to get a promotion? trying to become rich or famous? trying to look always beautiful or sexy or smart? trying to make a name for ourselves? A genuine, intentional effort.

Further, what would happen if we looked for God, searched for God, as we might look and search for the end-point of all our aspirations? What if we looked for God as for the most important thing we ever sought? What might we find following *that* path? How much more productive might it be regarding belief if we spent time walking *that* road rather than pondering, tallying, cataloging, and focusing on doubts?

XVI. A Matter Partially Of Evolution?

Many issues and situations in our lives are complex, unclear, confusing, mysterious. For example, deep-seated inter-personal conflicts with others, intra-personal conflicts within ourselves, multitudinous enigmatic entanglements existing deep within the human psyche. Many of these issues and situations gain clarity and become increasingly and ever more fully understood *only over time*, as we mature as individuals and as a species, growing and deepening our body of knowledge and experience concerning them. So it may be too that our awareness and understanding of God's presence (or absence) in the world and of God's efforts (or not) to communicate with us may also be growing, evolving, and gaining clarity, only over time, and in basically the same way.

"Cop-out," one might say. Perhaps.

But maybe instead, reality.

XVII. But I Don't Want To Live A Restricted Life

To those who fear that belief in God would mean that one would need to live in a significantly restricted way, unhappily perhaps, in sackcloth and ashes as it were, or live feeling unfulfilled or "less than," one might respond, as it seems to me to be the case, that living a decent, grounded, enjoyable, responsible, rewarding life, rich with meaning and joy is in no way incompatible with believing in God.

Neither should believing in God force one to adopt a specific religion or even *any* religion. God is God, not a religion.

Nor it seems to me, if religion itself is the concern, must one believe in every single tenet of a religion (as I suspect most do not), especially if according to one's best informed conscience one cannot do so regarding this or that issue. For to go against one's conscience would be an outrageous insult to the soul and to free will, and would contradict and deny one's very personhood and humanity.

And if, in the process of believing in God, one were to find that one must give up murdering, lying,

cheating, stealing, adultery; physical, sexual, or emotional abuse of others; or excessive greed for money, power or sex, would this be really such an unbearable loss?

XVIII. I Can't Believe In A God Who Feels Impersonal, Distant, Removed From Me

What if there *is* a God and if the reason God created the cosmos and us was because he or she was lonely and desired company? Yes. Seriously. What if?

What if God did a *Big-Bang*-or-other-similar-number on him- or herself as a way to manage the loneliness by scattering parts of self into every atom of existence, including us, knowing that slowly but surely through the millennia, each in our own way, we might find God in ourselves, in each other, in the staggeringly amazing beauty that surrounds us, and in the – still today – limitless amount of detail and complexity of existence?

What if God determined that we needed the passing millennia of time and resulting slower-maturing discovery of him or her through our physical, intellectual, and spiritual evolution (not God's evolution) as the surest way for us to be able to handle both discovery of and belief in God?

And what if this process simply parallels the same search we are on for truth in other areas of the human experience, where our discovery and understanding of truth is also continually developing and being revised as we mature as a species, though truth itself (as with God) remains unchanging, constant, and does not evolve?

XIV. The Seed

So . . . having come to the end of this reflection regarding several common barriers to belief in the existence of God, what is one left with? Belief? No belief? Half-hearted belief? Some belief in between? Go-away I'm busy belief? Pick-and-choose belief? Give belief a try and see what happens? Many are the possibilities.

But as stated at the beginning, this reflection has not been about convincing the reader to believe in the existence of God; rather to challenge certain common barriers to belief that do not appear to be valid as barriers and, as such, would best be abandoned because they only get in the way of and clutter one's discernment process. In addition, and rather naturally I suppose, the reflection has also been about the pursuit of truth generally.

Just as the tiniest and most fragile of seeds, well nurtured and given sufficient time, can become a garden of great dimensions and value, so it may be for the seed of belief in God that has been, it seems to me, so obviously present within the human family from the beginning of time. I say "obviously," for the question of whether God exists and what this might mean for us, where we come from and where we are going, has been and still is, if arguably, one of the central questions that has confronted the soul of the human species since the beginning of self-awareness. Indeed, when all is said and done, it is perhaps *the* central question.

And to me that seed seems staunchly planted in some kind of perpetual vigil at the entrance to our souls, waiting patiently and vying quietly for our notice and consideration whether we like it or not, desire it or not, curse it or not, nurture it or not, find it or not.

The End

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About the Author

Ron Talarico is a writer based in Portland, Oregon.

Born and raised in Portland, and other than having lived in Italy on three occasions in my twenties and taught in Texas for two years, I have always been satisfied to remain rooted right where I am. Despite the excitement and importance of traveling to places far away and experiencing all manner of new things to learn and do, the journey I most prefer and to which I keep coming back is the one within myself. The endless places of mind and soul that there I find have long upstaged all other contenders for my attention and remained center-stage to my sense of the essential meaning of who I am.

Truth, Beauty, and Today are my greatest encouragements and favorite places to linger. As ideas, they turn me on something crazy. I wish getting to know them better did not require near-equal time trying to escape the barrage of human enticements that would lead me away from them. And though I could never possess these three wonders of inspiration or even be sure I am coming closer to them, yet there they are — Truth, Beauty, Today — omnipresent, indispensable, eternal, irresistible. And if all I ever achieve is knowing I have given my best to the journey to be closer to them, who says I'm not lucky?

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