

HAVE THE APOLOGETICS QUESTIONS CHANGED?

By Paul Chamberlain, PhD

TikTok. Zoom. Meta. Covid 19. Social distancing. Vaccine passports. Twitter. X. Stop the steal. Barbenheimer. Imagine someone returning to North America who had been away for the past decade and hearing terms like these for the first time. They would have some catching up to do.

All cultures change; it's a given. They are dynamic, not static, because they consist of people who change. In current culture, however, the changes have been coming at a breath-taking pace in recent years. Even those who have not stepped out sometimes find it hard to keep up. More importantly, many of the changes have occurred at the level of prevailing cultural assumptions and ways of thinking. Simply put, people look at the world around them differently than they did just a few years ago.

This raises a question for anyone who desires to communicate and defend Christian faith: are the questions people ask about faith and life also different than they used to be? Have they changed too? Should pastors, teachers, and parents be addressing different issues? If so, which ones?

New Questions and New Ways of Asking Old Ones

The first thing Christians who want to communicate and defend the faith should do is distinguish between *new questions*, and *new ways of asking old ones*. There is something new about both. Some questions, such as how a good and loving God can allow suffering and evil, are perennial ones. This one, in particular, will not go away because the steady stream of heartbreak and pain continues unabated each day. Recently, I was told of a man in Oregon who backed out of his driveway over his grandchild who had been playing behind his vehicle. The child did not survive. Two weeks earlier, I participated in a funeral for a three-year-old boy who died after being struck by a falling log while playing with his older brothers and friends on a family camping trip. There are no words to describe the heartache and pain the parents of these children continue to experience. Beyond individual heartbreaks like these, the years of COVID-19 with all its ills, disruptions, divisions, and deaths, are still fresh in people's memories.

Questions about suffering will continue, but they may not be the same ones heard before. They will be asked differently for two reasons. First, questions inevitably arise from individual events, which always influence the precise way they are asked. Second, cultural thought patterns shape the way people struggle with suffering. Observers from other cultures occasionally point out that, thanks to Western cultural expectations, suffering in Western countries is viewed not only as *hard*, but also as *wrong*. Suffering should not happen. Westerners should be able to prevent it, fix it, or at least greatly mitigate it through the laboratory or technological means or safety measures. If someone has a pain in their back or arm, an intervention should be able to make it go away. This expectation is not universal throughout the world, but it is a deeply held assumption in Canadian culture, and it affects the questions people ask about suffering and pain. It also accounts for why MAID (medical assistance in dying) is becoming more widely accepted in the very countries which have developed the best pain management techniques the world has ever seen. Life, as Canadians see it, is meant to provide enjoyment and when it ceases to do so, there is no reason to keep it. This way of thinking receives further encouragement from the high value Canadian culture places on personal autonomy. Peter Singer, Australian bioethicist who has influenced the thinking of Canadians for a generation, continues to advocate for the right to end one's life when it is no longer meaningful or providing happiness.¹ A sanctity-of-life ethic is being replaced by a quality-of-life one. If one thinks like this, MAID seems almost natural.

How can Christians respond to the questions about suffering today? Here are six brief suggestions with one important proviso: they need to be used only if helpful and they should be tailored to each situation with great care.

First, church leaders should remind their people, and those outside the Christian community, that whatever their cultural expectations, the God of the Bible has not promised a life free of suffering and pain. The opposite is true. Jesus' own words were, "In this life, you will have trouble" (John 16:33). Wishing that this were not so is hardly relevant. What Christianity promises is a Saviour, Jesus, who understands suffering because he, too, has suffered. This same Jesus conquered death by rising from it. He now offers to walk with his people through heartache and suffering and, if necessary, meet them on the other side if they will let him. It is a powerful message, one that Christians should learn well.

¹ Peter Singer. *Ethics in the Real World: 90 Essays on Things That Matter*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.

Second, Christians can fly the flag for the intrinsic value of human life. Their message is that life has value which does not end simply because the quality of one's life goes down. Its value stems from the fact that each person is a purposeful creation of a loving God who made them in his own image. This view of life is a significant contribution Christianity can continue to make to the world.

Third, it is okay to ask why. Why did God allow that grandfather to back his car out of the driveway at that precise moment? To ignore this question is entirely unnatural and, as it turns out, unnecessary. Even Jesus, after having been crucified by an angry mob for crimes he never committed, asked why. In fact, he shouted it: "My God, why have you forsaken me?" It is an old question that doesn't get easier with time. Tragic situations like these are hard regardless of what people believe or where they stand. No philosophy has an easy time making sense of or addressing them.

Fourth, Christians should use high level philosophical responses carefully. They are helpful for university students who are addressing the alleged incompatibility between a good God and evil. These students should be directed to the works of philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga who have successfully argued that it is possible that a good and all-powerful God has a good reason for allowing evil in the world and, from the fact that his reasons are not known, it does not follow that he does not have them.² Plantinga refutes the contention that a good God is incompatible with evil. For the parent who has just lost a child, however, this kind of response may be exceedingly unhelpful, even hurtful. What can Christians do for such heartbroken people?

Fifth, Christians can offer community. Christian community can be a place where those who are hurting find people who genuinely care and who grieve with them over the loss of a child, a bad diagnosis, or a hurtful decision by a family member. It ought to be a place where the Greatest Commandment, empathy, and the Golden Rule are the guiding motifs through all that is said and done.

Sixth, for those who blame God for their tragedy and want to turn from him, it may be worth raising the question: if you reject God because of what has happened, where will you turn for healing? This is not meant to "win" an argument, and should be asked it only if it helps in the situation. Atheism is perhaps the least equipped to offer any help or hope to people who are hurting. Most atheists freely admit that, in a world without God, they live, they die, and that is the end of the matter. The world is a hostile place and there is not much more to say.

² Alvin Plantinga. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

Does Truth Exist and, If So, is It Dangerous?

There are new issues too, not just the old ones asked in new ways. Some of them go to the level of foundational cultural assumptions. These are the things people take for granted and which shape the way they talk about everything else. One relates to the issue of truth. Truth claims are viewed differently by many of our friends and neighbours, including Christian truth claims.

Sam D. Kim, a Harvard-trained ethicist and research fellow in Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard's Center for Bioethics points out that postmodernism has changed the thinking of the world. Truth has come to be widely regarded as relative, and there is a deep suspicion of those who offer objectively true overarching narratives. Overarching narratives are seen as power grabs and attempts to manipulate other people into a way of thinking.³ If Kim is right, that means for millions of people, real objective truth does not exist, and those who think it does are dangerous, especially if they promote their views as true, not just for themselves, but for others too.

But the changes in how culture views truth and reality go further. There is an increasing openness to the idea that people now can create and live in their own reality. Indeed, talk about doing just this has become commonplace in the Western vocabulary. The Internet buzzes with articles bearing such titles as *7 Tips To Create Your Own Reality*⁴ and *The Truth Behind "You Create Your Own Reality"*.⁵

How does creating one's own reality work? Tom Stafford, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Sheffield, and associate editor of *Psychologist* magazine, suggests that the answer lies in the power of repetition. He believes that those who become skilled at using it have a powerful strategy at their disposal. Simply repeating an idea, Stafford observes, makes it seem truer to people regardless of whether it is true, or even whether the person uttering it even believes it to be true. Psychologists refer to this repetition as the "illusion of truth" effect. Stafford

³ Sam D. Kim, *A Holy Haunting: Why Faith Isn't a Leap but a Series of Staggers from One Safe Place to Another*. New York: Morgan James Publishing, 2023, 75.

⁴ *Keen* magazine Online at the following website: <https://www.keen.com/articles/spiritual/7-tips-to-create-your-own-reality#:~:text=When%20you%20create%20your%20own,is%20completely%20up%20to%20you>. Viewed on September 13, 2024.

⁵ Kathy Gottberg, *The Truth Behind "You Create Your Own Reality"*, SMARTLiving365.com. Found at the following website: <https://www.smartliving365.com/the-truth-behind-you-create-your-own-reality>. Viewed on October 4, 2024.

adds that people would all be wise to understand and take seriously the power of this effect on belief-producing mechanisms.⁶ No one is immune from it.

How can such a strategy work? Canadian political philosopher, Tyler Chamberlain, who has read and reflected on this phenomenon provides the best explanation I have heard for why it sometimes succeeds. Most people, he observes, would not brazenly create false stories about big things and expect others to believe them, so they implicitly take it for granted that others would not either. Therefore, if a claim is being repeated often enough, they assume that there must be something to the claim.⁷

The important question for all is this: if people believe something, anything, why exactly do they believe it? Have they heard good reasons for it, or is it simply that they have heard it enough times that it must be true? It is the first question raised in any course on critical thinking, and Christians should ask it too.

This way of thinking about truth and reality undermines confidence in the idea of objective reality, i.e., reality which is discovered or recognized, rather than created. It also means that when people hear Christians talk about God, Jesus, the Bible, and moral truth, the stumbling block may not be the content of those claims, but rather the fact that they are put forward as objectively true. How can Christians speak into a culture where truth is being undermined in these ways?

There are two starting points. First, Christians may skillfully show how notoriously difficult it is to eliminate the idea of objective truth. Claims currently presented as foundational objective moral principles include the following ones: there is no objective truth, all truth is relative, nothing can be known with certainty, and tolerance requires acceptance of these claims.⁸ In the latter, the notion that tolerance is something all value is treated as a bedrock objective truth even while it is said to require relativism.

Second, Christianity offers a more satisfying solution. It is one Christians should be ready to offer as an alternative, especially to people who begin to see how difficult it is to eliminate objective truth. Christianity endorses the reality of objective truth but also teaches that as Christians communicate truth to those around them,

⁶ Tom Stafford, BBC Online, “How liars create ‘the illusion of truth,’” October 26, 2016. Found at <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20161026-how-liars-create-the-illusion-of-truth>. Viewed on September 27, 2024.

⁷ Personal conversation with Canadian political philosopher, Dr. Tyler Chamberlain, on July 2, 2024. For a further explanation of this phenomenon and why it sometimes succeeds, see Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, which is devoted to it.

⁸ For further reading and assessment of contemporary perspectives on truth, see J.C. Beall & Ben Middleton. *Truth: the basics*. New York: Routledge, 2024.

they are to be people who love not just friends but also enemies, who are willing to turn the other cheek, go the second mile, and do unto others as they would have them do unto them. This raises the question: if people who believe in objective truth really follow the teachings of Jesus, would they be a threat or danger to others? More importantly, would they be people who were simply trying to manipulate others into believing or thinking as they do?

Why are People So Lonely?

It seems like a cliché to say people long for something greater and to be in relationship with others. Perhaps a better word for it would be a truism. Anyone who looks can see indicators of this basic human yearning throughout history and in popular culture today. St. Augustine wrote, “. . .our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee.”⁹ Bruce Springsteen sings, “Everybody has a hungry heart.”¹⁰

Meaningful relationships and a sense of connectedness are precisely what elude many today. Sam Kim goes further and observes that the level of emptiness, loneliness, stress, mental health challenges, and even thoughts of suicide have reached epidemic proportions, and he cites studies to show it. These struggles currently pose a severe health risk to the general population. In this vein, he asks, “How can the most technologically connected generation be the most socially disconnected in human history?”¹¹

This is a perceptive question. It is also a new one in the sense that never before have lonely people been as connected through technological means as they are today. Connected yet lonely; busy yet empty. What can Christians say about this tragic conundrum?

First, loneliness is a signpost or indicator, like a set of flashing signal lights or a road sign being waved by a flagger. Loneliness points beyond itself to the fact that people desire to be in communion, and this makes the Christian teaching that people were created from community (the Trinitarian God) and for community, reasonable, even compelling. C. S. Lewis took this concept further in the following words: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”¹²

⁹ Saint Augustine. *Confessions*. Hackett Publishing, 2006. p. 18.

¹⁰ Bruce Springsteen, “Hungry Heart,” *The River*, 1980.

¹¹ Sam D, Kim, *Holy Haunting*, 19.

¹² C. S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity* (Kindle ed.). London: HarperCollins, 2007, p. 139.

Second, lonely people can be offered a place to come, a community, where they can explore life's big issues and think about life without repercussions or judgment. Community could be the greatest opportunity to communicate Jesus, the reason for community, to them. It is an opportunity to minister at the deepest level to lonely people created and loved by God.

The Changing Face of Atheism and How to Engage It

Some time ago I took part in a public forum on the existence of God and came face-to-face with a surprisingly reality, i.e., atheism is changing, and some of the changes can be disorienting. If Christians have not engaged atheists recently, they should expect some surprises when they do, at least if they are current and well-informed. Simple-sounding questions, such as *what do atheists believe* or *why should people think atheism is true*, no longer receive the same answers they once did, not even the same kinds of answers.

How can something like atheism change? Is it not simply the belief that there is no God while Theism is the view that there is one? Agnostics suspend judgment on the question. These are the definitions given by one of the most prominent atheists in history, Bertrand Russell.¹³ Many contemporary atheists, however, no longer define their view this way.

In the forum mentioned above, one of the other participants was a leader in the American atheist community who travels widely throughout North America promoting atheism. At one time he had been a zealous follower of Christ preparing for vocational ministry but had discarded his faith and now was devoting his life to refuting Christianity and advocating atheism. To say he knew his Bible well would be an understatement.

At one point, he was called upon to provide reasons why anyone should believe God did not exist. Astonishingly, rather than give any, he conceded that neither he nor anyone else could prove God did not exist and he was not going to try. This was not what I was expecting to hear. Was he conceding defeat? Not at all. Rather than viewing this as a weakness in his position, he went on to argue that, as an atheist, he had no duty to provide proofs for his position. What, exactly, released him from this obligation? Here is where a new and somewhat perplexing definition of atheism began to appear. He made a distinction which ended up changing the very definition of atheism, itself.¹ He distinguished between the following two claims:

¹³ Bertrand Russell. *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*. Edited by Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Denon. New York: Routledge, 2009, 557-58.

Claim #1: *I believe God does not exist.*

Claim #2: *I do not believe God exists.*

While it may appear to be philosophical hairsplitting, this distinction was of great importance to my atheist friend. He argued that, as an atheist, he was making only the second claim and, therefore, had no burden of proof to support it. Why? Because when people read the second statement carefully, he said, they would see he was not the one claiming to believe something. In fact, he was claiming *not* to believe something, namely that God exists. This led him to define atheism as *NOT believing God exists*.¹⁴

Why is this distinction important? The significance of this strategy can hardly be overstated. Simply put, if this way of thinking concerning the burden of proof is accepted by all sides, it will change the way the entire discussion over God's existence is carried out. If it can be established that the burden of proof rests entirely on theism, then atheists would have no obligation to set out reasons for their position. Their task would merely be to find fault with theistic arguments according to whatever standard they employ. As most of us know, it is easy to poke holes in a viewpoint with which one disagrees if one does not, at the same time, have to put forward and defend an alternative view with better reasons. This is why people often say, "well, if you don't like my view, what is yours and why do you hold it?" But no such question can be asked of atheism if defined this way. The answer will be, "I'm not the one who believes something. You are. I don't need to give any reasons for my view. That's your job." Is there a response?

First, Christians should be ready to press the question of whether the burden of proof does, in fact, rest entirely with the person making the positive claim (in this case, the theist), and never on the one making a negative one (the atheist). Here is one place where examples can be especially helpful. In the forum, I presented my atheist friend with an example of a negative claim, i.e., *the holocaust did not occur*, and asked him whether a person making this negative claim would have any burden of proof to support it. He backpedaled and agreed that a person making this claim *would* need to bring support for it. This was a concession of sorts. He did, however, revert back to his main principle and argue that if a person merely said, "I do *not*

¹⁴ This position was articulated by Matt Dilahunty in a debate he and I were involved in at the annual convention for Atheist Alliance International, in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada, May 18, 2012.

believe the holocaust occurred,” they would have no burden of proof since, again, they are not claiming to believe anything. This is a creative strategy. Can anything further be said about it?

A second response can be made. As my students pointed out when I presented this to them, two can play this game. They chuckled but noted that theists could also change the definition of theism along the same lines. Rather than claiming to believe God exists, the revised theistic position could be: I do *not* believe God does *not* exist. This claim is a purely negative and, to follow the same reasoning, theism now needs no supporting arguments. It is the new default position because it merely states a *lack* of belief? No atheist would allow a theist to get away with this kind of linguistic game. The response would likely be something like, “You’re only telling us what you do not believe; how about telling us what you do?” And it would be a fair question. But why not ask the same question of the atheist who has defined his position negatively?

This leads to the third response which is to get to the heart of the matter. The statement, *I do not believe God exists* (claim #2 above) is ambiguous and needs to be clarified. What does this claim really assert? The question should be put this way: when you say you do *not* believe God exists, do you also not believe God does *not* exist? In other words, are you saying you simply don’t believe either way? You don’t believe God *does* exist, and you also don’t believe God *does not* exist? Is that what you mean by it?

To this the atheist may answer yes or no. If *yes*, then the atheist is no longer asserting atheism. He is now withholding belief on the question of God’s existence, saying he lacks belief in either position. He has now abandoned atheism and has embraced agnosticism instead, and that should be pointed out.

Suppose, on the other hand, he answers: *no, I am not saying that I don’t believe God does not exist. That is precisely what I do believe, i.e., that God does not exist.* Notice what has happened. He is now back to asserting traditional atheism, the very claim he earlier denied making. It is a serious claim and one which requires a burden of proof. In other words, once Christians clarify this attempt to redefine atheism and escape the burden of proof, it is unsuccessful after all.

As intricate and precise as this sounds, it really amounts to nothing more than asking atheists whether they are willing to state their belief in atheism’s long-time position, i.e., the nonexistence of God. If they are unwilling to state their belief, as many atheists seem unwilling to do today, then one presses further to see if they are truly defending atheism. If they are unwilling to state either their *belief* or *lack of belief* in the non-existence of God, then it seems they are merely withholding belief

on the question of God's existence and are sitting comfortably (or uncomfortably) with agnosticism. They have, in fact, given up on atheism and that should be pointed out.

Conclusion

Questions about faith and life will continue to change and the reason is not hard to see. A favourite pastime in North America has become absorbing the continuous avalanche of ideas from myriad social media platforms. Almost imperceptibly, underlying perspectives and values will continue to shift. It will happen to everyone, but especially to those who think they are immune from such effects. Furthermore, these shifts will happen much more rapidly than before thanks to the sheer amount of time people spend on platforms. The result will be a combination of new questions and new ways of asking the old ones.

If Christians are to be faithful, they must keep alert to the way questions are being framed. It is the only way they will be able to address the questions people are asking and apply God's truth to them. Few skills will be more needed in the coming decades.

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