Peter Boghossian,

Atheist Tactician:

What He Gets Right,

(Some of) What He Gets Wrong,

and How Christians Must Respond

By Tom Gilson

This ebook is provided to subscribers to the
Thinking Christian blog, www.thinkingchristian.net,
at no charge.

Readers are urged, however, to support the work of the Ratio Christi student apologetics alliance, and specifically my role as National Field Director, helping to equip students in universities and colleges nationwide with answers to challenges like Peter Boghossian's.

Please see tomgilson.ratiochristi.org for further information.

Thank you.

All scripture quotations in this book
are from the English Standard Version

Introduction

Peter Boghossian wants to create atheists, and he's the man for the job. An instructor in philosophy at Portland State University in Oregon, he has just published *A Manual for Creating Atheists* (2013, Pitchstone Press), a handbook for equipping atheists with "treatments" to cure religious believers of the "faith virus." While the *Manual's* weaknesses are abundant, tactically and persuasively it's brilliant. It will create atheists—count on it.

Atheists certainly are excited about it. Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris have promoted Boghossian's work. Jerry Coyne, professor at the University of Chicago and author of *Why Evolution Is True,* wrote in an endorsement, "This book is essential for nonbelievers who want to do more than just carp about religion, but want to weaken its odious grasp on the world."

More importantly, the book is selling well. It went quickly into a second printing, and two months after its introduction it remains a chart leader in its philosophy-related content categories at Amazon.com. Its author is seeking to sign up 10,000 fellow atheists to learn his methods and create more atheists.

Other atheists have written about their disbelief; Boghossian is launching a strategy to multiply it.

Not only that, but he's also campaigning for what he calls "containment strategies" for faith, for example, removing religious believers from the "Adult Table" of discussion on public matters. He literally says in his *Manual for Creating Atheists* that men and women of faith should be shunted aside to the "Kids Table," where our faith-infected conversations can't do the public any harm.

For the sake of our faith, and our children's faith, Christians need to know about this.

Atheists and Their Leaders

Some wider context is necessary to fully appreciate what Boghossian's book represents. I've been observing American and British atheism for many years now. I write the *Thinking Christian* blog (thinkingchristian.net), which has garnered a good share of atheistic and skeptical participants commenters over the years. Not only that, but it has attracted a disproportionate number of Ph.D. physical scientists, both believing and unbelieving to its commenting community, including physicists, chemists, and a nuclear engineer with an international reputation. I've debated intelligent, well-informed unbelievers online for years.

My most intense encounter with atheism, though, was when my friend Blake Anderson

and I co-led a group of Christian students to attend the atheist "Reason Rally," held on the National Mall in Washington, D.C in March 2012. Headlined by Richard Dawkins, and with between 10,000 and 20,000 in attendance, this soggy day of unbelief featured lowlights like a song by singer/comedian Tim Minchin about the Pope, which I'm told (I didn't count them!) 72 instances of the F-word. Religion was mocked and ridiculed the whole day long.

There I was treated to a discussion with a man who said he couldn't believe the Bible unless I answered his insistent question, "How did the donkey talk?" He told me—I'm not making this up—that I had to explain exactly what changes took place in the mouth, tongue, and teeth of Balaam's donkey to enable it to speak. In answer I proposed another question to him: "What about an even greater miracle? What about a man rising from the dead?" His answer was, "I'm not interested in the Resurrection. I'm interested in donkeys talking."

At that point I suggested he might want to look around for someone who was equally interested in donkeys. Obviously his purpose wasn't to discuss the truth of Christianity, but only to make it seem ridiculous. (I think it may have backfired on him.)

The whole day was like that. Blake and I had a short conversation with P. Z. Myers, infamous for his religion-hating *Pharyngula* blog, who said to us, "Are they ridiculing you here? They should be!" On stage and off, in conversations and on posters people were carrying, it was a day of mocking, ridiculing, and dehumanizing religious believers and our beliefs.

I left there thinking that if atheists ever had a real leader to follow, things could become nasty for Christianity and other faiths. Richard Dawkins, for all his fame, is no such leader. Whether Peter Boghossian is or not, I do not know—*but he's the closest thing so far.*

He has a following. He's a master of persuasion and personal change theory. He's latched on to something very powerful, for the methods he teaches in this book will undoubtedly create atheists.

It's too early to say—and predictions are dangerous—but I wouldn't be surprised if ten years from now we realized that this book's publication was a turning point in the decline of Christianity in the West, not only in the numbers of Christians, but also in the way we're treated by the rest of our culture.

"It Isn't Really About Atheism, It's About the Faith Virus"
He has a disingenuous way of saying it isn't really about atheism. It's about clear

thinking instead, which he says will lead indirectly yet inevitably toward atheism. Faith is an unreliable way of knowing, in his view; and if persons adopt more reliable methods, they'll give up their faith.

But faith is worse than that, to him: it's a virus, a contagious pathology. He says in a lecture to fellow atheists, "When I speak to speak to somebody of faith, I view them as a person who really is mentally ill."

While Boghossian claims to be raising a standard for clear thinking that will lead inevitably to atheism, in reality he practices the opposite. His own definition of faith is disconnected from evidence and sound reasoning. He calls faith "pretending to know things you don't know." That's a definition of his own invention, and he really ought to know (doesn't everybody?) that when a word has been used for thousands of years, no one can just invent a new meaning for it and proclaim it the only true one.

Or maybe I didn't mention that part yet. That's right: he says quite soberly that no matter where you see the word "faith," no matter what the person was talking about when they use the word, you should substitute "pretending to know what you don't know" for it, and then you'll understand what it really means. That's what it *always* means, he says.

There are only two exceptions. One is when "faith" is used in non-religious contexts, in which case he says "faith" is *never* the right word to use (no one has faith in their spouse; marriage isn't religious); you should use another, non-religious word instead. The other exception is that it's okay to use "belief without evidence" instead of "pretending to know what one doesn't know." That's not much help, I'm sure you'll agree.

Methods That Will Work, Unless…
It's false; it's irrational; it's outrageous. It's also disturbingly likely to work. Boghossian's methods are likely to turn churchgoers into atheists—possibly including your children. How? He's targeting one of Christianity's great vulnerabilities: we haven't thought through our faith well enough. We have a weak understanding of faith themselves, and we're ripe for being persuaded out of it.

It need not be that way. The Christian students who came to the Reason Rally with Blake and me made it through the experience with their faith strengthened, not weakened. That's because they understood the foundation their beliefs rested on. They were part of a fast-growing movement called Ratio Christi (ratiochristi.org, from the Latin for *the reason of Christ*), now active on about one hundred college campuses across the United States, and growing faster than its leadership can keep up with. The movement's mission is to help Christians, especially students, understand and articulate sound reasons for

belief in Jesus Christ.

Blake was and is Ratio Christi's Chief Operating Officer. At the time I was working with Cru as a ministry strategist, on a temporary assignment to help with strategies at Break-Point/The Colson Center for Christian Worldview. Since then I've accepted the position of National Field Director for Ratio Christi.

I've had the opportunity to see two sides to challenges like those that Peter Boghossian raises. I've seen testimonies of former churchgoers who say Boghossian "cured" them of their "faith virus." And I've seen many people's Christian faith grow and deepen through being challenged. The most crucial difference between the two has to do with whether they really know what their faith is, what it means, and why it's true.

Two Goals
In this brief book I want to accomplish three things. The first is to help expose Peter Boghossian's self-contradictory disregard for evidence and reason. He claims that clear thinking leads to atheism, but he demonstrates little by way of clear thinking himself. Thus he contradicts himself. The core of his error lies in his distortion of the term "faith," so I'll take time to explore both his false view and also the truth of what Christian faith really is. I'm convinced that as your understanding of that faith increases, your practice and experience of your own faith will grow deeper and stronger.

The second thing I intend to do in this book is to consider what we can learn from Peter Boghossian. His understanding of faith is obviously false, for those who know enough to evaluate it, and his motives come from the domain of disbelief and spiritual death. Why then has he gained a following? What has made him as effective as he is? As I said, he's an excellent tactician, and in the spirit of "wise as serpents, innocent as doves," there are things we can learn from him.

I hope this book might also become another avenue through which I might discover Dr. Boghossian's response to what I'm saying—most of which I have said previously on my Thinking Christian blog, and which has been influential: it has placed high in search engine rankings for terms related to his book, and traffic to my blog has been exceptionally high. I wrote him an open letter on December 3, 2013, to which he has not responded. You'll find that letter in the Appendix to this book. I'd be glad to find out what he thinks —if he ever responds.

Part 1: Assessing Boghossian On His Own Terms

Critical Thinking and the Definition of Faith

Evidence-Free Definitions

Peter Boghossian has essentially three definitions of faith. I've already mentioned two of them: "pretending to know what one cannot know," and "belief without evidence."

His other take on faith is less a definition than a description: it is "an unreliable episte-mology." "Epistemology" is one of two fifty-cent technical terms he uses in his Manual (the other is "doxastic," which we'll get to later). It is the philosophical study of how we know anything, and how we know that we know. In this case, when he says faith is an unreliable epistemology, what he means is that we can't count on it as a reliable way of knowing anything.

Definitions Matter

I'll come back in a moment to explain what he means by "unreliable epistemology," but first I need to speak to how important these definitional issues really are. Definitions are crucial. Let's take the most pessimistic view of it, or the most optimistic, from Boghos-sian's perspective. He wants the world to think of faith in a completely different way (though "think" may be the wrong word to use, as we'll see in a moment). He wants you and me, and everyone else to think of "pretending to know what one does not know" when we hear the word "faith." So suppose he succeeded in that. How would that affect our reading of the Bible and of Christian literature?

Jesus would be understood as rebuking the disciples, "Oh, you of little pretending to know what you do not know!" He would be regarded as encouraging them, "According to your pretending to know what you do not know, be it unto you." Paul's great exposi-tion of Romans would be on the just living by their pretending to know what they do not know.

If Boghossian were to succeed, this would be burned into everyone's brain, so that it would be impossible for them to think of faith in any other way without seriously working at it. We would all have to discover anew the original meaning of "faith," which would seem as archaic to us as "suffer" is in "suffer the little children to come to me."

If Christians were to share their faith with their friends, they would be understood right off the bat as sharing their pretense. If they told their friends they could be saved by faith, that would be understood as being saved by pretending.

This is what Boghossian wants to hard-wire into our vocabulary, *so that everyone would understand faith his way without ever even thinking about it*. To think about faith in its historic (and proper) sense would require working around that burned-in, false under-standing. Obviously this would erect a whole new barrier against belief.

This, by the way, is one reason I regard Boghossian as a savvy tactician or even strategist. He knows that if he undermines the *word* "faith," he will at the same time undermine the *reality* and the *propagation* of faith. He's aiming at a very strategic target. If the word "faith" goes down, then to a great extent, so does the rest of our faith.

It's that important.

Faith as "Unreliable Epistemology"

With that in mind, let's go back to his idea of faith as "unreliable epistemology." I'll adapt a scenario from one of his own illustrations to explain what he means by that. In personal conversations with believers, sometimes he will ask how the person knows Jonah was in the belly of the whole for three days. Whatever answer the person gives, he'll ask again, "how do you know that's true?" Eventually, he says, the person will say something like, "I know it because of my faith," or "I just believe it's true." And then he'll ask, "Mormons and Muslims believe their religions because of their faith, too. What makes your knowledge of your religion any more likely to be true than theirs, seeing it all comes from the same place?"

It's actually a good line of questioning. I've seen skilled Christian apologists use it to help believers understand they need better reasons for belief—and then go on to equip them with some of those reasons. There's no need to be afraid of the technique, because good reasons for believing do exist. Of course Boghossian has no interest in leading anyone toward those sound, solid reasons. He's more interested in getting people to say, "I know it because of my faith"—showing that faith is their "way of knowing," or their epistemology—and that if that is their way of knowing, it's really not very trustworthy. Hence, faith is an "unreliable epistemology."

That, along with his two proposed definitions, comprises his basic view of faith. Let's take a closer look now at the two definitions. (We'll come back to Jonah later on.)

Defining "Faith" In Novel Ways

I don't know where he got his definition, "pretending to know what you don't know" from. He doesn't say, at least not anywhere that I've found. He does admit, near the end of a talk he gave to Portland, Oregon area humanists, that he has no empirical (evidence-based) support for the *pretending* aspect, so it seems fair to conclude that he might have picked it out of thin air for rhetorical purposes: persuading people to adopt his view, regardless of where it came from.

Consider, for example, that his definitions for faith are never found in biblical or classical theology. Dr. Boghossian provides no citations, no references, no reason to believe that these definitions are correct; he expects us to take it on his authority alone. The first use

I've been able to find for his other preferred definition, "belief without evidence," came from Ambrose Bierce in the late 19th century, in his "Devil's Dictionary."

Obviously Boghossian's views have been deeply colored by atheistic conceptions of reality. He cites no leading Christian thinker in his book (or at least not in proper context), but he does quote from John Loftus, born in 1950, a prominent crusader against Christianity. Loftus is hardly an authority we would rely on to prove the accuracy of Dr. Boghossian's understanding of faith.

He made it up, and now he's selling it. That sounds rather critical, I know, yet I'm not sure how much that criticism would bother him. Sure, it's a new definition, one of his own devising, but he's quite candid about saying he's trying to change the meaning of the word. He's doing it intentionally, to make faith more rhetorically vulnerable to attack. In June 2012 he recorded a podcast interview with "The Good Atheist," in which he makes that purpose plain.[1] His "Good Atheist" host was smart enough to see the illegitimacy of Boghossian's move, but he was unable to talk him out of it.

The Good Atheist was on the right track. Both Loftus and Boghossian are quite simply wrong. Faith is not "pretending to know," and it's not belief without evidence. That is to say, it's not *necessarily* so. Maybe in some religions it's that way. Maybe in some thoughtless versions of Christianity it is. His definitions don't fit any kind of *thoughtful* Christian faith however—which, by the way, is the only kind of faith I'm dealing with or defending in this book: thoughtful Christian faith.

Was Jesus On a Crusade Against Faith?
In that light, then, let's consider Boghossian's "evidence-free belief" definition thoughtfully. Suppose it were accurate. Some very odd things would follow from that. The oddest is that if faith really meant "belief without evidence," then Jesus would have to be known as one of history's greatest crusaders against faith. When he rose from the dead, he presented himself alive as a demonstration of his resurrection, with "many convincing proofs" (Acts 1:3). If the disciples were expected to have faith in him as their resurrected Lord, then by showing himself alive, Jesus would have been destroying any opportunity for them to have "faith" in his resurrection. How could he have expected them to "believe without evidence," when he kept on giving them evidence?

The same pattern presents itself throughout the Bible. From the Exodus to the miracles of Elijah and Elisha, to the great signs and wonders that Jesus performed, to his resurrection from the dead, and finally to the miracles done by and through the apostles, there was evidence for the reality of God all along the way.

So by Dr. Boghossian's way of looking at it, the Bible must be one of history's great

manifestations of an anti-faith religious text. It presents faith as being directly associated with and the result of experience with evidences. Christianity down through the centuries has also conceived of faith as being directly tied to evidences and to reasoning.

"Evidence-Free Belief" Is An Evidence-Free Definition
There are other problems with this view of faith. While I've heard if spoken by many atheists, I've never seen them produce any evidence for it! It seems to be their very own evidence-free belief.

Some will point to the Oxford Online Dictionary, which defines faith (among other things) as belief without proof. Most of us, though, having watched a few court-related or detective shows on TV, know that proof and evidence are not the same thing.

It's worth wondering at this point, though, what "evidence" means to Boghossian. On any ordinary understanding, evidence ought to be thought of as information which, if it were known to be true, would cause a reasonable person to consider it more likely that something related to it is also true.

For example, if it's known to be true that Sam's fingerprints are on the gun at the crime scene, that counts as evidence that Sam committed the crime: with that information, it's more likely to be true that Sam is guilty. By itself it's not proof (I haven't even told you what the crime is yet). Suppose the crime looks like murder by gunshot. If it's discovered that the cause of death is a bullet matching that gun, that's also evidence: it makes it very likely that the deadly bullet was fired from that gun, and it increases the likelihood that Sam is the killer.

So evidence is any information that, if known to be true, would cause a reasonable person to conclude that something related to it is also true.

Evidence-Resistant Atheism
Let's consider another example: an atheist looking at the stars, when suddenly they re-arrange themselves to spell—for all the world to see—"I am God communicating with you. Believe in me!" It's fanciful, but if it happened, that would presumably count as evidence for the reality of God. Or (less fanciful by far!) what about the Second Coming of Christ: that, too, should count as evidence for the reality of God, one would think.

One would think—unless one were Peter Boghossian. On page 82 of the *Manual,* Boghossian says the rearrangement of the stars would be "suggestive (but far from conclusive as it's a perception and could be a delusion)." In a conversation with Richard Dawkins[2], he goes further than that; or at least he seems to be affirming Dawkins, as Dawkins goes further, saying that "the more probable explanation is that it's a hallucina-

tion, or a conjuring trick by David Copperfield or something." Dawkins even doubts that the Second Coming of Christ would convince him.

"Evidence" Without Meaning

This is problematic for Boghossian's position. He says that faith is belief without evidence, but when absolutely no possible circumstance could ever count for him as evidence, the word loses its meaning. If the set of all possible circumstances that could conceivably count as evidence for God is an empty set, then "evidence" is an emptied-out word. It has no referent. It refers to nothing whatsoever. He might as well say that faith is belief without uzloam, another word with no meaning and no referent. By his own understanding of "evidence" with respect to the existence of God, he's saying precisely nothing whatsoever.

That's a bit technical. Here's a simpler way of looking at it. Suppose I as a believer say that I have a friend who was instantaneously healed of epilepsy while being prayed for. (That is in fact true.) Boghossian can say, "That's not evidence." Suppose I say that historians have discovered multiple facts in the New Testament to be verifiable through other means. He can say, "That's not evidence." Suppose Jesus Christ appears before him and performs multiple miracles of healing. He can say, "That's not evidence." If the rearrangement of all the stars isn't evidence, why would he consider these things evidence?

Is it any surprise that he calls faith "belief without evidence"? Even if every single one of those were to happen, by his view of evidence, he would still consider our belief to be without evidence.

This is not reasonable.

He claims to value what he calls "doxastic openness." "Doxastic" is a term that has to do with belief; thus, doxastic openness means openness to change one's beliefs, given sufficient reason. Obviously in the case of the existence of God, though, there's no openness there. He's fooling himself about that.

Irrational Definitions

Consider also the strange, *bizarre*, even, treatment of faith he delivered in a lecture to Humanists of Greater Portland.[3] He has made reference to this talk frequently since giving it; apparently he considers it one of his more important ones.

One of his major points was that "there are only ten things that can be said for faith." It's not entirely clear what he means by that. Based on the way he introduces the talk, it could be that he's focusing specifically on the linkage of faith and morality, which "is a potent cultural force," he says, "and we must terminate it." (He speaks elsewhere of how his anti-faith campaign is the focus of his entire life.)

In the relevant portion of this lecture, however (beginning around the four minute mark), he seems to step away from that specific focus to speak about faith in more general terms, as he directs his attention to his "only ten things that can be said for faith." He details five of them:

1. "Life has no meaning without faith."
2. "I'm having a crisis of faith."
3. "Science can't explain quantum mechanics."
4. "I don't have enough faith to be an atheist."
5. "My faith is true for me."

It's hard to believe he could count these as these the top five (or five of the top ten) things to be said for faith. This list isn't just weak; it's worse than that. Let me deal with each of these items in turn.

1. *"Life has no meaning without faith."* I'm sure you and I could find many examples of this being said, but with respect to Christianity, it always comes in a package that includes God himself: *"Life has no meaning without a faith that is connected to a real God."* Christianity *never* exalts faith on its own; it never says faith alone provides meaning. It's God who provides meaning, and we relate to God through faith. For careful thinkers, the true statement might be, *"My life has no meaning without my relational connection to God through faith."* Or in certain philosophical discussions, *"Life has no objective meaning unless there's a God to give it meaning."*

Thus his first item of the best things that can be said for faith is a distortion of what Christians really believe.

2. *"I'm having a crisis of faith."* Let's deal with this one the easy way, shall we? It just doesn't belong on a list of "the only ten things that can be said for faith." It isn't even something that can be said for faith! Who would think that it was? How did he think that

belonged here? It's an astonishing statement to include on a list like this.

3. *"Science can't explain quantum mechanics."* Let me ask you, please: when's the last time you've heard that offered as one of the most important truths about faith? I've been in working in Christian apologetics a long time, and I've never heard that raised as a point in favor of faith. Boghossian told this lecture audience he couldn't help laughing when he wrote that one down. What or whom was he laughing at?

Again, he's not debunking Christian faith: he's distorting it, and debunking the distortion. Fine: no Christian supports distorted faith, either.

4. *"I don't have enough faith to be an atheist."* This one is different. Christian apologist Frank Turek *wrote a book* and delivers talks called, "I don't have enough faith to be an atheist." Obviously he's making a word play on faith there, which he explains clearly enough in the book.

Boghossian ignores that explanation, and distorts Frank's meaning and usage of the word play. Again he gets it wrong.

5. *My faith is true for me.* Here at last he makes a good point: this is something people say about faith, and it is totally invalid. If Christianity is "true for me," but not "true for you," then it's not true for either of us; for either Christ lived, died, and rose again for us, or he did not. It's not possible that "for me" he actually did that in history, while "for you" he never did such a thing.

So let's grant Boghossian that. Does he know, though, just how much effort Frank Turek (to name just one example!) and other apologists and preachers have put into trying to conquer that very misconception? Here he has named a valid target for ridicule: but it's one that most Christian thinkers I know of would also place high on their list of false beliefs.

So in this case he has genuinely identified a distorted version of "faith," and he has held it up for ridicule; apparently not realizing that what he's ridiculing isn't Christianity at all: it's something we, too, consider to be a distortion.

As If That Weren't Enough…
So what, then, can we say in summary of all this? I'm sorry, but it's a bit too soon yet to say. We need to turn to another lecture of his, this one at Portland State University,[4] wherein he speaks (after about 29:00) of "three core reasons for why one believes one's faith tradition is true…. Reason number one: Miracles. We're going to examine a few miracles."

That sets up his topic: miracles that Christians name as reasons for believing our faith is true. Now, let me pause and ask you to consider which miracles he might want to examine and debunk. They ought to be miracles that Christians commonly point to as evidences for faith, don't you think? So what would you include? The Resurrection? Healings? Visions? What's on your list of miracles that fit that description?

Whatever you had on that list, I can assure you, Boghossian didn't use it. The miracles he sets out to debunk, and thereby destroy the faith-enhancing credibility of miracles, are:

1. Transubstantiation: the substantial change of the Eucharist elements into the body and blood of Jesus, according to Catholic doctrine…. and
2. Tongues, or glossolalia.

Now, it could be that someone, somewhere has said that tongues constitute miraculous evidence for Christianity. I might have even heard such a thing myself, somewhere along the way. In my work, though, I spend a lot of time reading arguments for and against Christianity, and I simply cannot remember the last time I heard tongues mentioned. It's been decades, at least. Many Christians deny the reality of tongues altogether. Virtually no one offers up tongues as evidence for the miraculous. Or if they do, most of us know that it's weak; so weak that we don't put it forth. Boghossian is debunking another non-argument here.

As for transubstantiation, that's even worse. Dr. Boghossian has studied philosophy, so he'll understand the language I'm about to use. The doctrine of transubstantiation states that the Eucharist elements are changed in their *substance* (loosely meaning, *what they really, really are*), not in their *accidents* (loosely meaning, *how they appear on the surface*).[5] Their accidents remain as they were before. If you don't understand substance and accidents, don't worry: just realize first that as an instructor in philosophy, Boghossian does (or should) understand; and second, that because of this philosophical aspect of the doctrine, *no one* thinks transubstantiation demonstrates a miracle. Catholics believe there is a miracle *going on* there, but they do not think there's a miracle *demonstrated* there.

Boghossian said he was going to tell his audience "three core reasons for why one believes one's faith tradition is true…. Reason number one: Miracles." And then he proceeded to name two miracles, both of whose very reality are contested by large portions of the body of Christ, and neither of which anyone offers up as reasons to believe their faith tradition is true.

There are libraries filled with strong arguments for Christianity. But Boghossian has taken aim at — how shall I say this? — not *weak* arguments, but statements (or versions

thereof) that no one even *thinks of* as arguments.

Intellectual Irresponsibility

It's not going too far to call this intellectual irresponsibility. He's supposed to be an educator. Throughout his many interviews and lectures I've listened to, he emphasizes that his real goal in life is to promote serious critical thinking.

And these are his examples of serious critical thinking: setting up the weakest possible arguments (or non-arguments) for Christianity, knocking them down, and then acting as if he has somehow taken Christianity down along with them.

Bear this in mind if you read his book, or if you talk with anyone who has: he claims that his anti-faith campaign is really, really a mission to promote excellent, critical thinking. A philosophy instructor ought to know good critical thinking from bad. He displayed very poor critical thinking, however, in these two lectures. It leaves me doubting very seriously that he's really trying to promote good thinking after all.

The True Connection of Belief and Evidence

His historical research is lacking as well. Down through the centuries Christians have viewed faith as being integrally associated with good thinking, based on good evidences. (For the following I am indebted to a chapter by David Marshall and Timothy McGrew in the forthcoming second edition of *True Reason*.[6] Further examples like this are given in the Appendix to this book.) The Church Father Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165) wrote, "reason directs those who are truly pious and philosophical to honor and love only what is true." Origen (ca. 184-254) wrote,

> in the Christian system also it will be found that there is, not to speak at all arrogantly, at least as much of investigation into articles of belief, and of explanations of dark sayings, occurring in the prophetical writings, and of the parables in the Gospels, and of countless other things, which either were narrated or enacted with the symbolical signification, (as is the case with other systems).

The language is archaic but the point is plain if you focus in on, "there is … at least as much investigation into articles of belief … as is the case with other systems." In other words, belief is built upon investigation; or at least it can be, for those inclined to approach it that way.

Other Christian thinkers emphasizing the importance of evidence and reasoning have included Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Pascal, Lock, Berkeley, Calvin, Wesley, Edwards, Ricci, Butler, Paley, Warfield, Greenleaf, and many, many more. *Many* more.[7]

The point is that Boghossian's definition of faith is idiosyncratic, tendentious, and formulated falsely yet conveniently for the purpose of undermining belief in God. It bears no relation to the evidences of actual Christian belief or practice. It requires us to believe that Jesus, the great promoter of faith, was at the same time the great destroyer of faith. It requires us to believe that no one noticed this massive self-contradiction in the teachings of Jesus until the age of the new atheists, or perhaps we could take it back as far as the life of Ambrose Bierce, perhaps the original "New Atheist," who died (or disappeared, at any rate) just one hundred years ago. If it goes back further than Bierce, I'm not aware of it, and Dr. Boghossian doesn't care: his definition rules, in his opinion, regardless of what anyone else has said concerning faith.

Self-Serving Atheistic Rhetoric

Boghossian thinks he can redefine faith for the rest of the world. For him it's always belief without evidence, or belief opposed to knowledge, or some other form of essentially stupid belief. Face it: that's what he thinks of it.

Which exposes a serious with this atheist trope: it's self-serving. It's *obviously self-serving*. I can't imagine why anyone would think it was anything but propaganda.

Just think of what it would mean if it were true. Think of what it would mean for all the great Christian thinkers and artists and social activists down the centuries: they would be revealed as essentially stupid: pretenders at belief, and people who are willing to believe the craziest things with no evidence at all! Wilberforce led the fight against the slave trade for stupid reasons (faith reasons, that is). Bach's music was motivated by stupid thinking (his quest to glorify God). Aquinas's *Summas* were stupid from start to finish. Dostoyevsky's great theistically-inspired novels had were built on stupid themes.

Think of what this would mean for Jesus Christ: he would be revealed as history's great enemy of faith. He kept providing evidence. If faith is belief divorced from evidence, then Jesus messed up his followers' faith royally, again and again, by giving people reasons to believe.

Think of what it would mean for the whole New Testament, in which words related to knowledge, study, teaching, and so on occur an average of *twice every chapter*. Why would the Christian scriptures stand so much for learning if it undermines faith?

Think of what it would mean for the whole Christian educational enterprise, from publishing houses to grade schools to universities. Recall that all the first universities were founded by Christians. Why would we go to such pains to take away all the ignorance that faith requires?

Think of how completely opposed to faith every Christian apologist must be: every time we succeed in providing reasons to believe, we take away people's faith.

This matter is not complicated. Anyone can see that when atheists define faith their way, they're ripping the word out of all historical, scriptural, theological, and experiential context. They're trying to make it mean what it has never meant before. There's no reason for it except for rhetoric: propaganda, actually.

Or I suppose it could be ignorance. Maybe they just don't know about Christian thinkers and artists and educators down through history, or about Jesus Christ, or about apologists. The thing is, they act as if they know about these things. Are *they* pretending to know what they don't know? Probably not; I think they're far more likely to be intentionally engaging in propaganda instead.

Ironically False Definitions

Finally (for this section of the book), there's tremendous irony in atheists' claim that faith is belief without evidence. *They have no evidence for it!* Here's why, presented in the form of a dialogue between "Phil" the Christian and "Alex" the atheist. They're friends, out for coffee, having a conversation in which Phil decides to probe Alex on Boghossian's definition of faith.

ALEX: I know you don't much like Boghossian's *Manual for Creating Atheists*, Phil, but I've been reading it, and it's making sense to me.

PHIL: Well, you're right about one thing, my friend: I don't much like the book, but whether I like it is neither here nor there. The bigger problem is that he's wrong about so many things. Take his first definition of faith: he says it's "belief without evidence."

ALEX: Sure he does. But that's not just him saying that; that's what faith is, isn't it?

PHIL: Is it? I wonder what kind of evidence you could give me for that.

ALEX: Evidence? What do you mean? That's just what faith is, isn't it? If you had evidence you wouldn't have faith, you would have knowledge instead.

PHIL: I see. What you seem to be saying is that faith is belief that isn't knowledge. It sort of sounds like Boghossian's other definition, that faith is pretending to know things you don't know.

ALEX: No, not just "sort of;" that's exactly what it is. It has to be, otherwise you wouldn't talk about having faith in God, you'd talk about *knowing* God.

PHIL: We do, actually. I could go there, and I could tell you in particular about one of the great modern classics of Christian literature (it's called *Knowing God*), but at the moment I'm mostly interested in your evidence for the claim that faith is belief without evidence. Where I find people saying that, you see, is in atheist books and on atheist websites. Atheist commenters say that sort of thing on blogs. But I hardly ever see these atheists referencing anyone but each other as sources for that definition.

ALEX: Oh, no, that's not true. Here, let me show you on my iPhone. I've got three definitions for you here. One is at *Merriam-Webster*: "firm belief in something for which there is no proof." There's another one at *Dictionary.com*: "belief that is not based on proof." But the one that really makes my point is at the *Free Dictionary*: "Belief that does not rest on logical proof or material evidence." See, there's the evidence you asked for,

right there in the dictionary: faith is belief without evidence.

PHIL: Are those the only definitions those dictionaries give?

ALEX: Well, no, but they're the ones that apply to religious faith.

PHIL: So you say. Did you notice that only one out of the three supports your contention —so are the other two wrong? It seems rather overly convenient for you to choose just that one as the one that's right—but no, you don't need to respond to that, it was rather pointed, I know.

Anyway, I have another question: what about all the evidences that Christians give for our faith? Surely you have some idea how many books have been written on Christian evidences. Surely you've seen some of the websites that give evidences for faith. Surely you've *read* some of those things: I know you wouldn't go around saying there's no evidence for faith, without at least checking into whether there actually might be! You have, right?

ALEX: Of course I have.

PHIL: So, are you saying that none of those writers has faith? It seems as if you must be, since they're giving evidences. If faith is believing without evidences, and if they believe *with* evidences, then none of them has faith.

ALEX: No, that's not what I'm saying at all. I *have* read some of those books and blogs, you see, and I know what's in there. *You* might say they have evidences, but it's nothing that could ever convince *me*. It's nothing that could ever persuade anyone who didn't believe already, or didn't already want Christianity to be true.

PHIL: Not even the books by Lee Strobel, J. Warner Wallace, Josh McDowell, and the many others who weren't convinced themselves before they looked at the evidences? — but wait, don't answer that, that would take us off track. I'd certainly like to show you some empirical evidence that you're wrong about that—which would include those authors, among others—except that it would be a bit premature, since I'm not sure we agree on what counts as evidence in the first place. And we're not likely to get too far without that, are we?

ALEX: No, you're right. I mean, yes, you're right: if we don't agree on what *counts* as evidence then it won't do much good to talk about your evidences, whatever they might be. But what's so hard about agreeing on evidence?

PHIL: Good question! To me sounds like you don't think Christianity has real evidences

to offer; and it's not because there aren't books or websites that purport to offer evidence for faith, but because you don't think any of those evidences are good enough to persuade anyone except people who already believe, or want to believe. Is that right?

ALEX: That's about right.

PHIL: But you say that you have evidence to support your belief that "faith is belief without evidence."

ALEX: Yes, I already told you that.

PHIL: It's not convincing to me.

ALEX: Right. I knew that already, Phil.

PHIL: But I don't think you've thought through what that means. It seems to me that all you have for your claim, "faith is belief without evidence," is the sort of evidence that's convincing among atheists. They're the only ones I ever hear saying it. I don't think it would persuade anyone who didn't already believe it, or possibly some people who didn't care enough to look into whether it was really true or not. I know for certain it wouldn't convince anyone who knew the biblical and historical connections between faith and evidences and reasoning.

ALEX: Who said it had to persuade you? It's evidence. That's all you asked for, and that's what I gave you, straight from the dictionary.

PHIL: You yourself said that evidence had to be persuasive, Alex. You said that we Christians can't count our evidences as *real* evidences because they could only convince the already-convinced, or people who want to be convinced. But your "evidences" for the truth of your definition of faith aren't any more persuasive than ours, or (I could argue) even less so! No one accepts them except people who already agree it's true, or else want it to be true.

And if your evidences aren't actually persuasive, then they don't live up to *your standard* of what counts as evidence. Your "evidence" isn't evidence at all; and again, that's according to your own standard.

But it gets worse for you, I'm sad to say, because if you believe that "faith is belief without evidence," then by your own standard, you believe something for which you have no evidence—which means you accept it on "faith," according to your own strange definition of faith!

ALEX: That doesn't mean it isn't true, though; I still think faith is belief without evidences. And Boghossian says "faith" only applies to religion, whereas my claim isn't a religious one.

PHIL: Oh, don't worry, I'm not really going to argue that you're accepting it on faith. That's not because I agree with Boghossian—we disagree on a lot—but because it would require that I agree with your definition of faith, which is the very thing I'm trying to show is wrong.

Still, though, when you criticize faith as "belief without evidence," you're committing something a lot like a "performative contradiction"—which, as you probably know, is a statement that can't be true because no one can make it without violating one of its own assumptions.

ALEX: Sure, I know about that. I like logic, too, you know; such as for example, could this be true: "I am unable to express any thoughts in the English language." It isn't logically self-contradictory, but it's impossible for anyone who expresses it to express it truly. That makes it a performative contradiction.

PHIL: Exactly! In a similar way, if you say that Christian faith is belief without evidence, that could only be true if you require a very high standard for what you'll allow to count as evidence. But your claim doesn't live up to that standard itself, since there's no equally strong evidence to support it.

I could state it more simply: you have a double standard for evidence: one that you think Christians have to live up to, and a different one for you to live up to.

ALEX: Hey, look, Phil, I thought we were friends. Those are pretty rough things you're saying.

PHIL: We're still friends, Alex, and believe me, I'm trying to treat you with the respect a friend deserves, by thinking this through with you. I'm not saying anything you couldn't have figured out for yourself, if you'd spent the time thinking about it. And I know you well enough to know you wouldn't want to hold on to a double standard like that, once you recognized it for what it was.

It may not feel like it, but from my perspective I'm trying to help. And of course I'm also trying to clarify what's true about faith, because obviously that's important, too.

ALEX: Well, you're right I'm not in favor of living by double standards. I'm going to have to think about this a while. I do believe you have good intentions in mind. Thanks,

Phil—maybe….

Correcting Boghossian's Errors

Faith Through a Biblical Lens

By now it should be clear that Boghossian is a poor guide for matters of faith-related reasoning, much less for matters of faith itself. Still that leaves some important questions open, including, How *do* we know that Jonah was in the belly of the big fish those three days? More importantly, What is faith? Boghossian's definitions are no good, but what shall we say when someone asks us for a better answer? And is faith connected to evidence or not?

Faith and Evidence in the Life of Peter

Some time ago during a church Bible study I noticed a way to illustrate the difference between "evidence-free belief" and true faith as taught in the Bible. It's in the calling of Peter to be Jesus' disciple. All four Gospels tell the story in one way or another. Matthew's and Mark's versions are very similar

Matthew 4:18-20

> While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Mark 1:16-18:

> Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

This looks a lot like the way Boghossian might picture faith: Peter believed and followed for no apparent reason at all. There's no evidence, no logic, no background, and no thinking. Let's broaden our view, though, to get a more complete picture, starting with the Gospel of John.

John 1:35-42:

> The next day again John [the Baptist] was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard

John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).

Here we discover that Peter's brother had been a disciple of John the Baptist, and we also find out that John the Baptist had been preaching about Jesus Christ. Peter had more to go on than just a glance from Jesus: he had strong personal references. Interestingly, some scholars think this may have been a full year before called Peter as recorded in the passages quoted above. If that's true, then Peter had plenty of time to think about this great man he had met, to ponder his teachings, and to hear of his reputation.

Even if that's not the case, though, the fourth picture we have, in Luke, tells us even more clearly what information Peter was working from when he decided to follow Christ. He had seen Christ at work (*Luke 4:38-39*):

And he [Jesus] arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon's house. Now Simon's mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.

And much more beyond that (*Luke 5:1-11*):

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

So we see that Peter never "left everything and followed him" until after he had had (possibly) a year to think through what he first knew about Jesus, had seen Jesus heal his wife's mother, had heard Jesus teach at least once, and had seen Jesus perform the miracle of the fish. Peter's decision to follow Jesus was no leap of blind faith. It was based on an experienced reality, on data he had had a chance to reflect upon.

Of course he still had to have faith to follow, for he was trusting his whole life and future to this teacher Jesus, and to the God of whom Jesus taught. But this was not belief against the evidence. It was belief *based on* evidences and experience.

Faith and Evidence Throughout Scripture
The entire Bible is built on a similar foundation of reasoned conclusions flowing from knowledge toward trust. Consider what Luke says about Jesus at the beginning of Acts:

> In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Can We Use the Bible as a Source?
Some unbelievers who have seen me make this argument online have objected to my using the Bible to make my case. They don't believe in the Bible, they remind me, so why should they care what it says? But what I've written here would be true even if the Bible were false; for what I'm saying is that the Bible systematically presents "faith" as being associated with evidence.

And the Bible is where Christians get our conception of faith from, which is true whether or not the Bible can be believed to be true. Boghossian's view of faith clearly contradicts the view taken by Christians down the centuries. It contradicts the Bible itself. How could it be a true description of the kind of beliefs Christians value?

What Makes a Good Definition?
Still we haven't quite arrived at a better definition of faith to use in place of Boghossian's.

It would be a good idea at this point to consider what makes one definition better than another; for there is one sense in which Boghossian's is excellent: it serves (quite admirably!) his rhetorical purpose of undermining faith and instituting atheism.

But words are never for just one person's purposes. They're for sharing. They may have private functions in our minds or perhaps in our journals, so if Boghossian wants to use

faith his own way in his own space, no one could object to that. But he's hit the lecture and podcast trail insisting we must change the public meaning of faith. As I mentioned above, he even got into a bit of a spat with *[The Good Atheist](#)* over that, with his host holding fast to the sensible thought that changing the meaning of faith would be a bad campaign to pursue.

What then constitutes a good public definition? I've hinted at it already: it serves the purpose of conveying meaning from one person to another, reliably and accurately. (There are other characteristics of a good definition — Aristotle's *genus* and *species* come to mind — but I think this is sufficient for now.) Thus when Ann says *faith* to Belinda, and Belinda asks Ann what she means by *faith*, the goal ought to be for Belinda to find out what Ann means. The goal is not for Ann to know what Ann means.

Defining Faith
So then, what is *faith*?

Faith in the Greek is *pistis*, trust. The *Holman Bible Dictionary's* entry on *faith* (as found in *Accordance Bible Software, version 10.2*) indicates that "throughout the Scriptures faith is the trustful human response to God's self-revelation via His words and His actions." It is trust connected with knowledge. Again from Holman: "biblical faith is a kind of limited personal knowledge of God."

Multi-dimensional Meaning
When Christians speak of our faith, this is approximately what we mean by it, although it really cannot be encapsulated in such a short statement. One of Boghossian's errors (one that I have not previously brought out here; there are many) is that the term couldn't possibly be as one-dimensional as he says it is; it's been too strong and varied a force in history for that to be possible. I don't want to make the same mistake here. Quoting Holman again,

> The concept of faith has been radically redefined in some philosophical and theological circles during the past century. Those definitions rarely address the complexities of the biblical concept, a concept in which the whole person, the physical world, God's Word, and God Himself play crucial roles. Those alternative definitions often do not grasp the objective and subjective characteristics of biblical faith.

Again, with reference to the Old Testament term for *faith*,

> When employed to describe relationships between God and people, *aman* is used to express a complex concept. It describes both the subjective and objective nature

of trust in God and an objective quality of God Himself. God, who exists objectively outside of human beings, receives trust generated from within individuals (Deut. 7:9). He and His words are objectively faithful, constant, and reliable (Ps. 119:86). God enables people to possess these objective virtues, faithfulness and reliability (Josh. 24:14; Isa. 7:9).

Faith As Trustful Response to God's Word and Actions
Faith is a "trustful human response to God's self-revelation via His words and His actions." In biblical usage, it is nearly always connected to some source of knowledge. It is a response to knowledge.

Let me illustrate with one Old Testament example. Psalm 106 speaks of the Israelites' breaking faith. It begins with a review of what their ancestors had seen God do, including:

> Our fathers, when they were in Egypt,
> did not consider your wondrous works;
> they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love,
> but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea.
> Yet he saved them for his name's sake,
> that he might make known his mighty power.
> He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry,
> and he led them through the deep as through a desert.
> So he saved them from the hand of the foe
> and redeemed them from the power of the enemy.
> And the waters covered their adversaries;
> not one of them was left.
> Then they believed his words;
> they sang his praise.
> But they soon forgot his works;
> they did not wait for his counsel.
> …
>   Then they despised the pleasant land,
> having no faith in his promise.

These early Israelites had knowledge. They had seen God at work: at the Red Sea as noted here; before that, in the Passover; following that, in God's provision of water and

food. They had seen him keep promise after promise, but when they reached the point of entering the land to which he had promised to bring them, they were afraid to enter. They had no faith in his promise to bring them safely there.

Now, is this about pretending to know what one doesn't know? Did they *know* it was safe to enter the land of promise? That's the wrong question. *Did they know the character and the power of the One who had made the promise?* They should have. Did they have reason to know that Moses was a trustworthy messenger of God's word? They should have. But they quailed, and they failed.

That's a negative example. There were positive examples, too, at that point in Israel's history: Moses himself, and Joshua and Caleb, who said (*Numbers 14:8-9*), "If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us…. Do not fear the people of the Land, for… their protection is removed from them and the Lord is with us."

Someone will object, "the Exodus didn't even happen, so how can you use it as an example?" I'm convinced it did, of course, but let's set that aside. If the Exodus never happened, what would that mean for the historic and contemporary meaning of *faith*? Psalm 106 is one classic depiction of how the word has been used for centuries, by millions. At the risk of redundancy: *this is how millions have used the word for centuries*. Boghossian's definition is how one man has used it for less than a decade. Which one comes closer to a publicly useful definition?

The answer is obvious. The only question is where he got his version of "faith." He certainly didn't get it from the Christian thinkers who described faith as *notitia, assencia, fiducia:* knowledge, assent, and trust. He didn't get it from the one most relevant source — relevant, that is, if he's trying to understand and to counter Christian faith: the Bible, Christians' source documents, wherein faith is illustrated and explained as *placing one's trust in what one has full reason to know.*

Knowledge of God's Character
Boghossian seems to want Christian faith to be based in knowledge just like scientific knowledge. He's barking up the wrong tree. Christian faith, unlike confidence in science, isn't about regularities that can't be doubted, it's about a Person and his character. God doesn't do everything the same way in every circumstance, like the unchangingly rotating earth; he relates as a Person who freely does what he will do.

The Bible is (among other things) a revelation of God's character. God has made his character known through his actions on the human stage in real history. This is how we come to know any person's character: by observing what they do.

We can never know exactly what anyone will do next, but if we know something about their character, we know there's a limit to what they might possibly do. My son isn't going to run off and join the circus. My wife isn't going to go look for a job as a computer programmer. Both of them, though, will greet me warmly when they get up tomorrow morning.

It's about *known* character. Faith in God is confidence in the consistency of his character. Through his workings in the world, especially on the Cross, God has shown himself to be a God of justice, of mercy, and of love. He reveals himself consistently through his Word and through nature (see below). We can experience him through prayer. Less frequently he shows himself through answered prayer, and sometimes miracles.

He has promised good to those who trust him and follow his ways. We experience a strong taste of that good now, but we believe it's nothing compared to what is to come. We trust in that because of his promise, and because he has revealed himself—he has shown his character—as one who keeps his promises. So Christian faith is a matter of trusting in God's known character and living accordingly.

So although we don't know exactly what God will do next, we do know God's character; and therefore Boghossian is wrong to say faith is pretending to know things you don't know.

The evidence for faith in God is evidence relating to his past actions, as those actions reveal his character. The evidence for science is of a completely different sort. One has to do with an historical record and persons' direct but unrepeated experience. The other has to do with present repeatable phenomena and extrapolations from there to unrepeatable phenomena, either in the past or future, or at some unreachable distance in space.

The evidence for God's actions is different from scientifically repeatable sorts of evidence. That does not, however, make it any less evidence. It's less provable, but it's still evidence. Therefore Christian faith actually is an evidence-based belief: belief in the consistency of God's known character.

So, What About Jonah?
When Boghossian asks Christians, "how do you know *such-and-so* is true in the Bible?" he tends to ask about matters that seem unlikely and (this is important) which no independent evidence supporting them. I say this based on his own description of his interactions with believers. Frequently he'll ask about Jonah and the big fish, or about Jesus walking on water. So, how *do* we know those things happened? Do we, really?

My answer is that I know Jonah survived his fishy experience, and Jesus walked on water, the same way most of us know that the core of the earth consists of a molten

nickel-iron mix: through the reliable testimony of competent, credible, and trustworthy authorities. When someone clearly knows what he is talking about, and can be trusted to tell the truth, it's perfectly rational to believe what he is saying.

So it is with incidents like Jonah or the walking on the water. I have evidences leading me to believe that the writers of the Gospels recorded events accurately and faithfully. There is good evidence of their competence, credibility, and trustworthiness. I have no reason to doubt that the walking-on-water incident was any different from anything else they recorded correctly.

Jesus himself gave attestation to the Jonah incident. He, in particular, is someone I have reason to consider competent, credible, and trustworthy. It's perfectly rational to believe what he says—even if that's the only attestation we have for it.

This is likely to bring up questions like, "how can we be so sure the Jesus or the Gospel writers were so trustworthy?" My immediate to answer to that is, "Those are great questions, and they're a lot more important than whether Jonah survived the big fish or Jesus took an evening promenade on the lake. *Why didn't you ask that in the first place?*"

And then, using resources not unlike those I've included on the resource page near the end of this book (just before the Appendix), I would proceed to offer my best answer.

Science, Faith, and Hebrews 11:1

Speaking of scientific knowledge in relation to faith, atheistic biologist/blogger Jerry Coyne recently wrote an article on science and faith in Slate, in which he said.[8]

> The three religious claims (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, respectively) represent faith as defined by philosopher Walter Kaufmann: "intense, usually confident, belief that is not based on evidence sufficient to command assent from every reasonable person." Indeed, there is no evidence beyond revelation, authority, and scripture to support the religious claims above, and most of the world's believers would reject at least one of them. To state it bluntly, such faith involves pretending to know things you don't. Behind it is wish-thinking, as clearly expressed in Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Kaufmann's definition as quoted here isn't too bad. If Coyne had stuck with it he might have stayed on solid ground. He doesn't do that, though.

Misunderstanding Hebrews 11:1 and Faith

Coyne points to one Christian source and tells us it clearly expresses that faith is wish-thinking. First off, I think this is rather an odd conclusion for him to draw; Hebrews 11:1 *taken by itself* doesn't express *anything* clearly. It's part of an extended discourse on faith. It wasn't intended to be read on its own. Ripped out of context this way, its proper intended meaning is impossible to discern.

Knowing What We Have Not Seen

We need to take a further look at what the author of Hebrews has to say about it. There's another quasi-definitional usage in Hebrews 11:6:

> And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Christian (and Judaic) faith is tightly associated with believing in the reality of God and his goodness to those who seek him. It seems likely to me that this is the *hope* referred to in verse 1. Of course it's not seen: does that mean, though, that it involves "pretending to know things you don't know"? Not at all, or at least not necessarily. We know all kinds of things that we haven't seen and can't see. Before the Apollo missions we knew there was a far side to the moon, that it was alternately cold and hot, that it was dry and lifeless, and more, even though we had never seen it.

I know Coyne would tell us the far side of the moon is a matter of science, in no way analogous to faith. But our knowledge of the unseen far side of the moon isn't just a

matter of science; it's a matter of drawing a good conclusion based on relevant evidence and sound reasoning. Though he would certainly (and obviously) be right that science is involved in this case, sound thinking doesn't *have* to be scientific thinking. Suppose someone unearthed a lost Beethoven piano sonata. Based on relevant evidence and sound reasoning, without having seen or heard the piece, I could conclude with reasonable certainty that it must be good music. Science doesn't have to be in the picture.

That means it ought to be fair to ask whether it's possible that Christian faith could also be a matter of drawing good conclusions based on relevant evidences and sound reasoning. If that's the case, then Christian faith might conceivably rest on a foundation as firm as our knowledge of the other side of the moon or the quality of a newly heard Beethoven sonata.

That would be a great question to explore. As it turns out, I don't think the answer it to would be yes; for as Kaufman succinctly said, the evidences and reasoning behind Christian faith are not sufficient to command assent from every reasonable person. But I don't think the answer *has to be* yes, for faith to be something more solid than evidence-free belief. There are many among us who are reasonable and who think that we have good evidences and reasoning to support our conviction that God exists and rewards his seekers.

Who Do They Think Believers Are?
Jerry Coyne and Peter Boghossian would undoubtedly dispute that. And how would they carry out that dispute with us, logically? I could think of three general strategies they could follow. They could argue that

1. The evidence is not there, and/or
2. Our chain of reasoning is unsound, and/or
3. Christians are unreasonable people.

I've seen some atheists rush straight to that last option: that Christians are not reasonable people. I keep hearing that "thinking Christian is an oxymoron." But that charge is unreasonable itself, unless the person making it thinks Blaise Pascal, James Clark Maxwell, Galileo Galilei, Michael Faraday, William Wilberforce, J. S. Bach St. Patrick, and many other great scientists, artists, and leaders like them were unthinking, unreasoning persons, which is obviously wrong.

Some atheists say Christians are unreasonable people simply because we accept non-empirical, non-scientific evidences in favor of our beliefs. To define reasonability that way, however, is to commit the logical fallacy of begging the question; for the reasonabil-

ity of non-scientific knowledge is the very point in question.

In other words, not to put too fine a point on it, the person who says Christians are by definition unreasonable people reveals him or herself as reasoning irrationally, at least as far as that claim goes.

It is at least possible, therefore, that among those of us who think that there is good evidence and reasoning to support our Christian faith, some of us are reasonable people. There are also (at least possibly, if we employ the same level of caution) unbelievers who are reasonable people and think there is good evidence and reasoning behind their position. We're at parity there.

Coyne's article is about whether science involves faith, which he denies. I don't disagree with him much, for while I think there's a kind of faith involved in science, it's not the same as what's involved in religion. Reasonable people can disagree about religious convictions. Reasonable people really ought not disagree about scientific convictions, and in mature sciences they rarely do. Where they do disagree, it's generally either with respect to science-in-progress, such as the anthropogenic global warming debate, or else something else masquerading as science, such as when people claim "science shows the fetus doesn't have consciousness or feeling, therefore it's not a morally significant person." That's philosophical anthropology and ethics, not science.

So while the faith of Christianity and the faith of science have some things in common, they also differ in significant ways. Let's grant that to Jerry Coyne.

But we cannot reasonably grant that Christian faith involves pretending to know things we don't know. I'll use Hebrews 11:6 to explain why. Christians claim to know that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him. There are two primary ways Christians claim to know that. One, prominent among Reformed thinkers like Alvin Plantinga, is through direct experience of God, the *sensus divinitatis*, the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Reformed thinkers don't typically say that's the *only* way of knowing God's reality —Plantinga certainly doesn't!—[9]but they insist it's one of the ways we can know God. I agree.

To this the empiricist atheist objects, "That's not knowledge, that's just psychology, at best!" Our answer is, unless you know my internal experience, ***you're pretending to know things you don't know.*** If Boghossian's definition is right, then you're doing nothing more than practicing faith!

Evidence- and Reason-Based Faith
And then there are the objective evidences in favor of the reality of God. These range from philosophical to documentary to archaeological to experiential; for Christianity

claims that God works in history in identifiable ways.

For this we can return to Hebrews 11, where the author speaks of men and women who sought God and were objectively rewarded for doing so. Abraham founded a nation. Noah survived a flood. Moses led a people out of Egypt, with many signs and wonders accompanying. Joshua led the same people to the conquest of Canaan, again with signs and wonders.

Did all this really happen, or are we just playing pretend-knowledge games again? Let's not jump ahead too quickly to that question, because if we do, we'll miss answering an earlier one: does Hebrews 11:1 describe faith as "wish-thinking"? No. In context, it points to documented occurrences in history, sufficient (if true) to give solid substance to the hopes of faith.

But that's not all. Consider Hebrews 2:3-4, where the author makes an appeal to contemporary evidence, directly accessible to the letter's recipients:

> It was declared at first by the Lord [the reference here is to Christ on earth], and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Better yet, consider the entire letter to the Hebrews, which is a closely argued explanation for how the way of Christ fulfills and supersedes the ancient way of the Hebrew religion. This is (if I may repeat myself) *reasoning* in action. The letter contains less appeal to contemporary evidence than, say, the Gospel of John, because it was written to people who needed a different kind of question answered, but evidences and reasoning are by no means absent.

Who's Pretending To Know Things They Don't Know?
In its original context, as intended by its original author, Hebrews 11:1 simply could not have meant "wish-thinking." Still Jerry Coyne, Peter Boghossian, and others tell us with great assurance that it does. When they do that, they display an unreasoning willingness to draw dogmatic conclusions based on conveniently selected, incomplete, context-free evidence.

It's ironic, really: they pretend to know things they don't know.

What Does Faith Have To Do With Knowledge?

Then there is Boghossian's other charge against faith: that it's an unreliable method of knowing. I take it he means one or both of these: either that faith claims cannot be corroborated by independent observers, or that religious faith-claims (Christian, Mormon, Hindu, etc.) compete with each other, and there's no way to adjudicate which one is correct, so it is very possible for a faith-claim to be wrong.

To a certain extent he's right on both counts. But does that mean it's impossible for a faith-claim to be reliably true? Let me ask the question another way. Does that mean that it's impossible for there to be a God who can make himself known, in spite of those limitations?

In order for Boghossian to know this is so, he would have to know that this is impossible: *that there is a God who is able to communicate his own reality to humans in such a way that they know some truth about him, but who does not bind himself to communicating in a manner that meets Boghossian's standards for reliable knowing.*

For Boghossian to know that every faith-claim is pretense would entail his knowing that it's impossible that there be such a God. Further, he must know that when God spoke to Moses, Moses was deluded. He must know that when Jesus prayed to the Father, Jesus was deluded. He must know that when Thomas Aquinas moved from theology and philosophy to an ecstatic vision, he moved into complete delusion. He must know that every single believer in Christ who has expressed a deep awareness of God is deluded.

But if he makes this case, then he's providing us with another classic instance of arguing in a circle. He says faith is an unreliable way of knowing. How does he know this? By concluding that Moses, Aquinas, and Jesus himself could not have known God through faith, specifically, through their coming to knowledge of God by God's own initiative. And how does he know this? Because faith is an unreliable way of knowing.

Can He Know There is No Such God?
Boghossian can have his opinion that all these are instances of delusion (or legend, in some cases). But does he have some reliable means of *knowing* that God has spoken to *none of these persons*? To be so certain, he would have to know that the God described above could not exist. But he has been careful to say that his atheism is less definite than that: it is the atheism that says that God cannot be known to exist, not the atheism that says God cannot exist.

Here, however, he is flirting dangerously close to self-contradiction, saying in effect: *I do not know whether there is a God who can make himself known to exist, but I do that no God could be known to exist. Therefore if there is a God who can make himself known to*

exist, he cannot make himself known to exist.

Lesser Claims Boghossian Might Make

Going back to faith claims, such as those reported in the Bible or by contemporary Christians: Boghossian might object that if knowledge is not acquired "reliably" according to his terms—meaning, in a manner that others can check and will agree on it—it isn't knowledge at all, for it cannot be trusted by others. But this adds an odd and unnecessary layer on the definition of knowledge: why does my knowledge *have* to be in some form such that others could, at least in principle, verify it?

Take back injuries, for example. (No, I don't mean *take back* injuries, I mean, take *back injuries*.) They can be notoriously hard to confirm through objective diagnostic measures. Some people use that to their advantage, faking back injuries and claiming insurance payments or damages via litigation. These injuries aren't objectively verifiable in many cases. Does that mean, though, that no person with undetectable soft-tissue damage ever knows that his back is sore? Obviously not.

In like manner, here's no independently reliable test to confirm that I have tinnitus (ringing) in my ears, but I know — without pretending — that I do. There's no test to confirm that I was satisfied with this morning's breakfast, but I know I was.

So if I have read Boghossian's reliability criteria accurately, he's calling for an impossible standard. Knowledge need not be objectively verifiable to be true knowledge. If he wants to rule out all faith experiences because they cannot be independently verified, he's establishing a rule that cannot consistently be followed by anyone.

Yes, there remains a strong possibility of error. Remember, it's certain that a large proportion of faith claims are false, no matter what you believe about religion, since they contradict one another. It's also possible that faith claims, being unreliable, could be instances of self-delusion.

Still, just because all of them can't be right, it hardly follows that none of them can be. Some persons' experiences could be veridical (based in true knowledge). All that would require would be for there to be a God such as I've described above.

But whose experiences could count as trustworthy in that way, if anybody's at all? Let's continue exploring what faith has to do with knowledge. Faith is a complex experience and a multifaceted word, so what follows here is far from the whole story; but I think it comes close to the heart of it.

Faith Based On Knowledge

Consider the common Christian experience of having faith in the promise of eternal life.

That belief doesn't arrive out of thin air, or wishful thinking, or fear, or hopefulness, or (especially) pretending. There is a strong knowledge connection in it. It begins with knowing that Jesus Christ died and rose again following a life which, when capped off by his resurrection, established his credibility as one who could make promises of that magnitude, and who would keep the promises that he made.

Let me repeat that to make it clear. If we have reason to believe that Jesus:

- Lived a life at least approximately like what the New Testament records
- Rose again after his death
- Demonstrated a completely trustworthy character
- Demonstrated sufficient power to raise others from the dead
- Promised to raise you or me from the dead based on certain conditions

… then the step of *faith* is quite justifiable, even obvious: all we have to do is to take the otherwise quite normal step of believing someone will do what he says, when he is known to have the character and the power to do what he says. That's what Christian faith is like: it's drawing a warranted conclusion about the unknown based on knowledge of the known.

What if none of it's true, though? What if we don't have reason to believe such things? Some readers are probably asking that question, and I'll come to it. First, though, I ask us all to linger on this: without *the information* of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, no one would have *faith* in him for eternal life. The knowledge connection there is unavoidable.

Faith As the Determination To Keep Hold On Knowledge
C.S. Lewis has another helpful angle on this. In *Mere Christianity* he wrote,

> I am not asking anyone to accept Christianity if his best reasoning tells him that the weight of evidence is against it. That is not the point at which faith comes in. But supposing a man's reason once decides that the weight of the evidence is for it. I can tell that man what is going to happen to him in the next few weeks. There will come a moment when there is bad news, or he is in trouble, or is living among a lot of other people who do not believe it, and all at once his emotions will rise up and carry out a sort of blitz on his belief. Or else there will come a moment when he wants a woman, or wants to tell a lie, or feels very pleased with himself, or sees a chance of making a little money in some way that is not perfectly fair; some moment, in fact, at which it would be very convenient if Christianity were not true. And once again his wishes and desires will carry out a blitz. I am not talking of moments at which any real new reasons against Christianity turn up. Those

have to be faced and that is a different matter. I am talking about moments where a mere mood rises up against it.

Now faith, in the sense in which I am here using the word, is the art of holding onto things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods. For moods will change, whatever view your reason takes. I know that by experience. Now that I am a Christian, I do have moods in which the whole thing looks very improbable; but when I was an atheist, I had moods in which Christianity looked terribly probable. This rebellion of your moods against your real self is going to come anyway. That is why faith is such a necessary virtue; unless you teach your moods "where they get off" you can never be either a sound Christian or even a sound atheist, but just a creature dithering to and fro, with its beliefs really dependent on the weather and the state of its digestion. Consequently one must train the habit of faith.

For Lewis — and I am quite sure that he is right in this — faith is the determination of the *mind* to cling to what is *known* in the face of what is *felt*. Though it involves trust it's all about knowledge: *trusting* that what one *knows* to be true remains true even when it does not *feel* true.

The Unbeliever's Objection
But the skeptic will ask: *Sure, that's what you Christians say, but what good is that "knowledge" connection if what you think you know about Christ and the Bible are false?*

In that case our faith is a mess, obviously. Still my point would remain, however: faith and knowledge are bound together as one. For if we are right, we are not (primarily) right in our faith, we are right about what we know to be true. If we are wrong, we are not (primarily) wrong in our faith, we are wrong about what we thought we knew to be true.

Whether Christian faith is justified depends first of all on whether Christians' knowledge is justified.

Of course the skeptic may not be finished yet: he or she will likely go on to ask, *How could you possibly think that your "knowledge" is justified?* But that's another book. I'll be satisfied if we can just come to agreement that Christian faith is intimately tied to matters of knowledge. I am content to accomplish one thing without at the same time accomplishing everything.

Boghossian: Confused or Crafty?
Boghossian proposes erasing the faith-knowledge connection, and replacing it with a

faith-pretense connection instead. He should never have permitted himself that mistake. From an unbeliever's perspective like Boghossian's, Christian faith isn't *pretense*, it's *error*. It's not *play-acting* at knowledge, it's being *mistaken* about knowledge.

Pretense and play-acting are not the same as error or mistakenness; or if they are, then Ptolemy was a pretender, a child in the astronomical sandbox. So was Copernicus, who thought the heavenly bodies moved in perfect circles, or variations thereof. So was Columbus, who thought the earth's circumference was something like 14,000 miles. So was Darwin, who thought cells were made up of basically undifferentiated materials. And so were you, if you ever got a single answer wrong on a test or a paper in school, or if you ever misunderstood something your significant other was trying to tell you. If being *mistaken* is equivalent to *pretending*, then what do those words mean, after all?

To equate faith with pretense is to make a sophomoric error in rational thinking. It should be clear now: faith is intimately connected to knowledge. Faith's validity stands or falls with the validity of the knowledge to which it is tied. This is not the place to show that Christian knowledge stands; there are other books for that. I trust, though, that we can agree now that faith and knowledge genuinely go together with each other.

Boghossian As Rhetorical Tactician

Tactics, Not Truth

So what Boghossian is doing is making a strategic move to make *faith* more vulnerable to attack by associating it with *pretending*, even though he knows that's not the way it's been conceived of for the past couple thousand years. His definitional move here is pure rhetoric, and it's totally manipulative.

There's an excellent example in his *Manual for Creating Atheists,* pages 89 to 92. He tells about a conversation with a "nicely groomed" young man he ran into during one of his rare visits to a church. He asked the man to tell him what he would do if he became convinced God told him to kill all the left-handed people in the world. The young man wisely and repeatedly resisted the question, stating his conviction that God wouldn't do that. But Boghossian pressed him: "But what if…." Finally the man accepted the premise of the question: "Yes, if I were convinced God told me to do it, then I would do it."

Quite manifestly, what he was saying was, "If I were convinced God told me to do it—which I know would never happen—then in that impossible situation I would do it. Realize, though, that I'm only humoring you on your question, since I know that God wouldn't say that."

Then the young man asked, "What's your point?" Dr. Boghossian replied, "I don't really have a point. I'm just trying to figure out the limits of your faith. It seems to me your faith is limitless. You'd do anything you think God wanted you to do, including murder innocents."

Which is absolutely outrageous.

The hypothetical position he badgered the man into adopting for the sake of argument was outside the limits of the man's faith throughout the whole conversation. Boghossian wasn't testing the limits of anything; the man had already established his limits. Instead he set up a pretend thought-game and then acted as if its results meant something real about the man's beliefs. Boghossian acted, in fact, as if by pretending this he had learned something: which is perilously close to "pretending to know things you don't know," his (mis)definition of faith.

Urging Extreme Measures

This is not just about playing innocently with words. Dr. Boghossian soberly recommends a set of "containment protocols" regarding faith, which include the following:

1. Use the word "faith" only in a religious context.

He recommends this on his own authority. It's just wrong, he says, to speak of having faith in one's spouse. This is because "when the faithful are pressed on the definition of faith… they usually retreat to the words 'hope,' 'trust,' and 'confidence,' abandoning knowledge and certainty"—as if the authority of his recommendation follows from that observation.

2. Stigmatize faith-based claims like racist claims.

Faith-based claims should be dismissed, he says, as quickly as racist claims. Specifically he urges not allowing people of faith to "sit at the Adult Table." He goes on, "Those at the Kid's Table can talk about anything they'd like, but they have no adult responsibilities and no voice in public policy." In other words he wants us muzzled; if we speak up we should be told, "You are pretending to know things you don't know. Go to the Kid's Table, this is a conversation for adults."

Note, by the way, that he's not only excluding faith-based conversations, he's excluding all conversation by people of faith. It's not just that we need to be careful about bringing our beliefs into discussions where others will disagree with them or disrespect them. It's that we're not welcome to the discussion on any terms.

8. Treat faith as a public health crisis.

"We must reconceptualize faith as a virus of the mind … and treat faith like other epidemiological crises: contain and eradicate." Never mind that faith is positively associated with personal health, according to virtually every study ever done on the topic. Dr. Boghossian's adoration of evidence has its limits, you see; and even though all the research shows that it tends to be good for physical and mental health, still it's a "public health crisis" *because he says it is*.

11. Remove religious exemption for delusion from the DSM (the mental health professions' Diagnostic and Statistical Manual).

This bears an extended quotation:

> Once religious or delusions are integrated into the DSM, entirely new categories of research and treatment into the problem of faith can be created. These will

include removal of existing ethical barriers, changing treatments covered by insurance, including faith-based to special education programs in the schools, helping children who have been indoctrinated into a faith tradition, and legitimizing interventions designed to rid subjects of the faith affliction.…

In the long term, once these treatments and this body of research is [sic] refined, results could then be used to inform public health policies designed to contain and ultimately eradicate faith.

At least he doesn't suffer the flaw of being overly subtle. Now, if faith really were what he says it is, and if it really were a faulty epistemology, then there might be some reason to "contain" it. Still, to treat it as a "public health crisis" and to "stigmatize it" like racism, is dangerously extremist language. To call it a virus, to remove ethical barriers(!) regarding its treatment (!) is reminiscent of nothing quite so much as Soviet "psychological" approaches toward dissent.

This is the language of hatred toward the beliefs of not just millions but billions. And it would be so even if Dr. Boghossian's view of faith were accurate; which it is not.

I said it earlier, and I say it again: *Christians must become aware of these things*.

What Christians Can and Must Learn From Boghossian

Nothing Is All Bad

In this book I have focused at length on Peter Boghossian's errors. I close it with a section on what we can learn from him. For obvious reasons, it is much, much shorter than the section on what he gets wrong. It is no less important, though.

The Good In Boghossian's Work

Nothing in God's world is entirely bad. Peter Boghossian opposes the gospel, but the gospel does not oppose him: the good news is still good news for him, just as it has been and is for you and me. We need to stand against his ideas, but to pray for the man himself, and seek to do him good in whatever way possible. The same goes for others who have accepted his influence.

Beyond that, there is good to be discovered even within his book and in his talks. He emphasizes the importance of careful thinking—even if he doesn't practice it—which is something we can support. He stands against relativistic ways of thinking about truth and morality, which all Christians should agree with. His book provides a rather masterful introduction to Socratic questioning, one of the best of all teaching techniques.

Perhaps most importantly, he has shined a light on Christian vulnerability, in the realm of our thinking about our faith. The faith itself is strong and secure, but our thinking about it has not been. It should be clear enough by now that this could expose us—or our children—to the danger of having our faith kicked completely out from underneath us, by Boghossian-style interactions with atheists. That's bad enough. There's more to it than that, though. To the extent that our thinking about our faith is weak, our faith itself may also be weak.

Boghossian has described himself as on a mission to destroy *pretending to know what you don't know*. I wish him well: I hope he succeeds. His mission as such has nothing to do with Christian faith, for his definition of *faith* is far removed from ours. Still I'm sure that eliminating pretense could only be helpful to our cause.

Further, this book could be an excellent exercise for Christians who want to sharpen their thinking. It's an outstanding example of the irrationality of today's new atheism – that form of disbelief which claims supreme rationality, but (as my co-authors and I show in the book *True Reason;* see the Resources page) rarely if ever succeeds in living up to it.

So I think his *Manual* could do us all some good, provided we assess and understand it properly. Its author wrong on many points; I've shown that already. Armed with that information, we have nothing to fear from him, and we could even learn some things.

At the end of this book you'll find a list of additional resources on confident faith: how

we can know that the faith we hold is reasonable, rational, and trustworthy. I do not want to repeat the work these authors have done, for it's not my real topic in this short book, and they do it better than I would anyway.

Learning from Boghossian's Methods

Boghossian likes to turn people away from faith by asking repeatedly, "how do you know…"

It's a version of a technique called the Socratic method. It's named after Socrates, one of the most brilliant thinkers of all time—although he didn't consider himself to be so brilliant; in fact he said he knew almost nothing. So he asked questions everywhere he went. His brilliance was in the questions that he asked, his unwillingness to accept easy answers, and the quality of the conclusions toward which these question-oriented conversations led.

The Socratic method, therefore, is really quite simple: it's a matter of asking good questions.

It's ironic, though: Peter Boghossian wasn't the first person I heard asking those "how do you know?" questions. The first time I heard it was at a Christian high school assembly in southern California, led by Josh McDowell, one of our generation's leading Christian apologists.[10]

Josh is quite an entertaining speaker, so as he opened up his talk, the crowd of students really got into it. Then he got the students really involved: he walked down the aisle, put his arm around one of them, and asked, "Tell me, do you believe the Bible is true?" The student answered, "Yes!" and all the others cheered loudly for him.

Josh asked, "How do you know it's true?" The student answered, "Because it's the word of God!" His classmates cheered all the more.

Josh went on, "How do you know it's the word of God?" The student answered, "Because I have faith in it!"

The students cheered. Josh frowned.

"Mormons have faith in the Book of Mormon," he said. "Muslims have faith in the Qur'an. How does your faith in the Bible show it's true, any more than their faith in their books shows that their books are true?"

The cheering came to an abrupt halt.

Josh had just successfully used the Socratic method to expose the whole student body's

lack of knowledge and careful thinking.

I could imagine Peter Boghossian doing exactly the same thing with the same words in the same crowd with the same result. There is a huge difference, though: with people who know little about their faith or their reasons for faith, Boghossian wants to leave them knowing even less, whereas Josh leaves them knowing more.

The Socratic method is a great method for drawing out what people know, even if they don't know they know it. In this case, it made the students aware that the foundation they rested their faith on was no different than the foundation some Mormons or Muslims might rest theirs on. That's an extremely important discovery to make.

Jesus himself practiced this question-asking method. Study the gospels and you'll find that with people who were ready to hear truth, he offered answers, but with people who were not, he offered questions. His goal was to bring them to a stage of readiness.

By the time Josh finished this exercise with the students that day, they were more than ready to listen. At this point the Socratic method was no longer the appropriate tool for teaching. No amount of questioning could cause a person to realize, from within his own resources, that there are (for example) dozens upon dozens of historical confirmations of the Gospels. That takes actual teaching, and Josh proceeded to give them actual teaching. His questions had awakened in them than urgency to listen and to learn, though. I'd be willing to bet that they were eager to keep learning even after he left.

The tactical approach I've illustrated here is not only Josh's. His son Sean McDowell likes to "play atheist" with Christian audiences, to help them understand objections to the faith, and how to answer them. Brett Kunkle and others with Stand To Reason (www.str.org) do the same. Stand To Reason's founder, Greg Koukl, has published an excellent book titled *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions*. Call me biased, but I see one distinct advantage Koukl has over Boghossian in their use of tactics: Koukl is seriously seeking truth.

These methods all move beyond teaching and into *training*. Teaching is fine, but no one expects a soldier to be ready for battle if he's only had classroom training. As J. Warner Wallace says, our training needs to include simulations, not just book education.

Atheists Are Made, Not Born…
The title of Boghossian's book reveals a real truth: atheists are made, not born. Some atheists seem to think that atheism is a sort of default position that requires no proof to support it. Both anthropological and human developmental research, however, indicate that belief in God (or gods) is the human's natural position. It takes effort to make an

atheist.

As national field director for Ratio Christi, an alliance of students focused on reasons for confidence in Christianity, I've given a lot of thought to what makes people into atheists. I think Boghossian is on the right track (to the wrong destination): the way to create atheists is to cause Christians to question why they believe. Research from the National Study on Youth and Religion supports this: it found that among American teenagers who turned against the religion they were brought up in, the main reason they did so was because of intellectual questions about their faith.

… And Not Without Our Cooperation

Boghossian's methods wouldn't work if he didn't have some people behind the scenes helping him. And those people, I am sad to say, are Christians. In the unforgettable words of the classic Pogo comic strip, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

This is how we've helped create atheists: we haven't asked ourselves the kinds of questions that Boghossian (or Josh McDowell) is asking. We haven't searched out the answers for ourselves. We haven't trained the next generations to do it either. We've left ourselves wide open to doubt, just because we haven't asked, "why do you believe?" And we haven't practiced answering that question.

Boghossian knows this. His strategy is brilliant. He's poking at the soft underbelly of Christian belief: our careless teaching, our taking belief for granted, our emphasis on what to believe apart from *why* we should believe, and all the time we spend on *how to behave* without also teaching why the whole thing makes sense in the first place.

The church is complicit in the creation of atheists. By what we're not teaching, we're contributing to Boghossian's success. We've opened the door of opportunity, and he's walking through it. Why wouldn't he?

But it need not be so. It certainly ought not be so—because Boghossian is wrong. He's wrong in multiple ways. I don't know whether he knows he's wrong and is being dishonest with his distortions of Christian belief, or if he is unaware of his error, which would amount to professional incompetence on his part. Either way, he has a strategic stake in preserving the illusion that he knows what he's talking about, since his methods will work only where people don't know the truth.

Atheists are made, not born. Solid, firm believing Christians—people who can't be made atheists by Boghossian's manipulative methods—are born, then born again in the Spirit, then "made" further by good equipping. They know their reasons to believe because they've been taught. They know how to handle questions because they've been trained. They've studied: they know their reasons for believing in God, Jesus Christ, the historical

reality of Christ's death and resurrection, the trustworthiness of the Bible, and more. They've even practiced: they've put their beliefs to the test, whether in the safety of a simulated training environment, or in real-world situations where the questions are real and the questioners really care about the answers.

Churches and parents who take this training seriously produce believers who will stand solid, no matter what strategy atheists might throw at them—because they will know the truth, they will know that it really is true, and they will know why they know it's true.

Growing In Faith and Knowledge
The Christian faith is rational. It's based on knowledge. It's based on evidence. It goes beyond provable knowledge, but it's hardly wholly divorced from it. Our faith can stand up to the challenge of creating atheists.

The faith can stand, but can the faithful? Can your children stand? Can your friends? Can *you*? Now that you've read this book, you're prepared on one level. You know that *faith* is connected with *knowledge.* You still need to ensure, however, that *your faith* is connected with *your knowledge.* The same is essential for all Christians.

I haven't begun to delve into all the knowledge that supports Christian faith. That wasn't my purpose in this book. My purpose was to provide you some specific armor against the attacks of *A Manual for Creating Atheists,* and even more importantly, to encourage and exhort you to seek further equipping, for yourself and for people whose faith matters to you. In the resource section to follow, you'll find a small, manageable, and helpful list of websites and books for you to check out as you pursue that equipping.

For there are people out there trying to create atheists. They are well equipped with persuasive tactics. Our best defense against them is a thorough, well-practiced knowledge of the truth.

Prayer and Unity

Finally—though in reality it is first of all—we must pray. 2 Cor. 10:3-5 is a classic passage on the battle of ideas and beliefs. Notice how it begins:

> For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

We are not waging war against the flesh. We destroy arguments like Boghossian's partly through the application of good thinking, but there is power far beyond that in our praying.

There is further power in unity. I close this book with an appeal to you to join with me in my work leading *Ratio Christi,* a nationwide movement of students being equipped to handle challenges like Peter Boghossian's. Our students are learning how to stay strong in the faith, and they're sharing their faith with many others.

We could use your help. For more information, please see http://tomgilson.ratiochristi.org. Thank you!

Resources

A resource page for a book like this must necessarily miss many good resources. I have chosen to keep the list short, even at the risk of almost criminally excluding some outstanding books and websites, because I consider a short list to be more usable than a long one. These are the materials I most frequently recommend to anyone seeking more equipping in knowledge of the faith. Start here, but don't stop here! There's much more to be learned.

Books

Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels by J. Warner Wallace. I consider this the best, most readable book on reasons for faith in the past several years.

Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions by Greg Koukl. This book presents a solid approach to persuasion, from a perspective of biblical truth.

True Reason: Confronting the Irrationality of the New Atheism (print book, revised edition, available in February 2014) or True Reason: Christian Responses to the Challenge of Atheism (ebook, first edition of the same work, currently available), edited by Tom Gilson and Carson Weitnauer. This multi-author volume examines atheist leaders' claims to be the real representatives of reason, and shows that Christianity has the better claim on true reason.

On Guard: Defending Your Christian Faith With Reason and Precision by William Lane Craig. Like Cold-Case Christianity this book presents reasons for faith, but on a somewhat higher level of academic challenge.

Websites

www.thinkingchristian.net — My Thinking Christian blog

www.str.org — The website for Stand to Reason, which I find to be the best source for ready answers to faith questions.

www.reasonablefaith.org — William Lane Craig's website, another source of ready answers, ranging toward greater academic challenge

www.christianapologeticsalliance.com — The blog and website for the Christian Apologetics Alliance, a large group of Christians committed to understanding and extending the knowledge of reasons to believe.

Conferences

There's nothing quite like the encouragement of joining with others in pursuit of deep equipping. [Look here to find an equipping conference near you](#)!

Appendix: An Open Letter to Peter Boghossian

The things I've shared in this book ought to matter to Peter Boghossian. My blog-based work, on which this book has been based, has been very prominent in the Internet search engines, so undoubtedly he knows that it's been as influential as any opposition he has faced. I've made the charge that he fails seriously at critical thinking. That ought to matter to him a lot, since he emphasizes it as a value even above atheism.

Wondering what he would think about all this, I sent him this open letter on December 3, 2013. I contacted him via email and Twitter. His response has been total and complete silence.

It seems to me that if he had an effective response, he would have made it.

Here is the letter I wrote to him.

****

Dear Dr. Boghossian,

In your *Manual for Creating Atheists* you express a high value for doxastic openness, which you define on page 51 as a willingness and ability to revise beliefs based on sufficient reasons. On page 69 you name "a willingness to reconsider" as one attitude that predisposes persons to rationality. On page 70 you say, "The moment we're unshakably convinced we possess immutable truth, we become our own doxastic enemy.… Street epistemologists enter into discussions with an open and genuine attitude from the start – even if there is no reciprocity." In your interviews and lectures, you have insisted that if you are shown that you are wrong you will change your mind.

In this open letter, Dr. Boghossian, I offer you the opportunity to demonstrate your doxastic openness with respect to your definition of the word *faith*.

You define *faith* in two ways: belief without evidence, and pretending to know things one doesn't know. You say on page 23 of your book, "If one had sufficient evidence to warrant belief in a particular claim, then one wouldn't believe the claim on the basis of faith. '*Faith*' is the word one uses when one does not have enough evidence to justify holding a belief, but when one just goes ahead and believes anyway."

I'm speaking only of Christian faith in my letter to you today; I have no interest in whether your definitions apply in other religious contexts. I'm not trying to show that your definitions are wrong in every context, for I know you can find Christians who

would agree with you that faith is belief without evidence. I'm disputing your position that your definitions are the *only* correct ones. They are not. In this letter I intend to show that *among people who have given it serious thought,* the definitions you espouse are minority usages, and therefore rarely accurate overall.

To be more specific, I intend to demonstrate:

1. The predominant, conventional usage(s) of any term is (are) to be determined by looking at the relevant literature.
2. The relevance of literature for the defining of terms has nothing to do with whether that literature is believed to be true. Both fiction and non-fiction can determine the usage of a word, and can implant its conventional usage into a culture.
3. The Bible, being the Christian's primary source document, is the proper source to look to first in defining Christian faith, whether or not one believes in its truth or accuracy.
4. The Bible presents faith in terms quite contrary to "pretending to know" and "belief without evidence."
5. Subsequent Christian thinkers have also presented faith in contrary terms.
6. While some Christian thinkers may speak of faith as an epistemology, that is not the usual understanding of the term.
7. In contrast to that, you present faith as being defined strictly and exclusively as an *epistemology*, as *belief without evidence*, and as *pretending to know.*
8. If Christians are wrong in our treatment of evidences, or if some Christians understand none of it at all, those circumstances do not make your definitions correct. If we are wrong, we are *wrong*, not "believing without evidence" or "pretending to know."
9. Therefore, based on the way *faith* is used in the relevant literature, and in spite of the fact that some usages of *faith* may agree with your understanding, you are wrong to describe faith exclusively as an epistemology, as "belief without evidence," and "pretending to know what one does not know."

I call on you to examine the evidence I present here, and to demonstrate your doxastic openness by publicly admitting that your definitions of faith are (a) not the only correct ones, (b) largely inaccurate with respect to the historic usage of the word, and therefore (c) not necessarily descriptive of faith as practiced by Christians today, and (d) certainly not normative.

Words, Definitions, and Literature
Definitions are a matter of convention. Words acquire their meanings through their use in literature and in conversation. This is true of the word *faith* just as much as for any other word: the word is defined by the way it is conventionally used in the literature. Now, the

literature on *faith* has been dominated for centuries by the Bible. This is undeniably the case whether one believes anything in the Bible is true or not. That is, the way the word is used in the Bible and in the subsequent literature determines the meaning of the word.

I have argued this point frequently on my blog and also in discussions following my review of your book at Amazon.com. Many readers have objected to my use of the Bible in determining the word's definition, saying that we can't know what's in the Bible is true. But they misunderstand the history and uses of language. The word orc has a meaning. Though many fantasy writers have used the word work in their novels and stories, undoubtedly the definition of the term is dominated by the way J. R. R. Tolkien used it in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. So we see that it's not necessary for literature to be true for it to be the foundation upon which the word's definition is built and maintained.

"Faith" and Its Usage in the Primary Literature

Of course I believe the Bible is true, and you believe that it is mostly not true. We can set that aside, as it's not the point in question in my letter to you today. My focus is strictly on the use of the word *faith;* and in the Bible, as well as in the subsequent literature, *faith* is rarely used in the manner in which you characterize it.

Let me illustrate. In *Matthew 9:18-30a*, we read,

> While he was saying these things to them, behold, a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, "my daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus rose and followed him, with his disciples. And behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, for she said to herself, "If I only touch his garment, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. And when Jesus came to the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him but when the crowd had been put outside he went in and took her by the hand and the girl rose. And the report of this went through all that district.

> And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed him, crying aloud, "Have mercy on us, Son of David." When he entered the house, the blind men came to him, and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." Then he touched their eyes, saying, "According to your faith be it done to you." And their eyes were opened.

In a parallel passage, *Mark 5:36*, while on the way to the ruler's house Jesus tells him, "do not fear, only believe."

Pretending To Know What One Does Not Know?

Now in this passage, Dr. Boghossian, I am going to follow the strategy that you used on pages 24 through 26 of your book, replacing the word *faith* with "pretending to know things you don't know." Here we see Jesus, by that, methodology saying, "take heart, daughter; your pretending to know things you don't know has made you well." He said to the ruler, "Do not fear, only pretend to know things you do not know." He told the blind men, "According to your pretense of knowing what you don't know be it done to you."

The woman's pretending to know things she didn't know resulted in her healing. The ruler's pretense resulted in his daughter's being raised from death. The blind men were healed according to their pretending to know things they did not know.

If you're right, then that's how it comes out in the literature that is most responsible for producing the Western world's understanding of faith, and it's really quite absurd, as I'm sure you can see. Faith has never been understood—by those who have thought about it carefully, at least— as a pretense at knowledge. That definition is completely unsupported in the literature.

Belief Without Evidence?

And what about the idea that faith is belief without evidence? That definition has a longer pedigree. It goes back to at least the 19th century, when Ambrose Bierce, author of *The Devil's Dictionary,* wrote "faith is belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge, of things without parallel." Similar ideas can be found as early as the second century CE, as we'll see in a moment—and they were rebutted as early as the second century as well.

Many dictionaries today define *faith* as belief without proof. As a philosopher, you know very well that evidence and proof are two different things, and that therefore the common dictionary definitions lend no support to your contention that faith should be defined as belief without evidence.

Bierce's view of faith was on the fringe when he articulated it. What does the dominant literature have to say on it? Again we can look to the Bible, still setting aside the question of whether the Bible is true or not, but only asking what its effect on the conventional usage of *faith* has been. And here we find massive *evidences for faith*. Moses called on the Israelites to believe in God because of what they had seen: the plagues, the opening of the Red Sea, the water from the rock, manna from heaven, smoke and fire of God. Jesus called on the disciples to believe because he showed them his power. He multiplied the loaves and fishes. He calmed the storm with the word. *Acts 1:3* says, "Jesus presented

himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." I could go on and on.

Thus we see that if faith is defined as belief without evidence, then while Jesus was presenting proofs, he was undermining faith. Clearly in the literature dominating the usage of *faith* it does not present it as anything remotely like belief without evidence.

"Faith" In Subsequent Literature

The following are a small but representative sampling of how "*faith*" has been used down through the centuries. (This material is freely adapted from the work of David Marshall at *creatingatheists.com*. I use block quotes in this section for primary sources, and quotation marks outside of block quotes where I quote from David's comments. Sources for these quotes may be found on the linked page.)

Clement of Alexandria wrote,

> So also here, I call him truly learned who brings everything to bear on the truth; so that, from geometry, and music, and grammar, and philosophy itself, culling what is useful, he guards the faith against assault....

Origen disputed an opponent of the faith named Celsus on many points, one of which he describes thus in *Contra Celsus:*

> He [Celsus] next proceeds to recommend, that in adopting opinions we should follow reason and a rational guide, since he who assents to opinions without following this course is very liable to be deceived. And he compares inconsiderate believers to Metragytae, and soothsayers, and Mithrae, and Sabbadians, and to anything else that one may fall in with, and to the phantoms of Hecate, or any other demon or demons. For as amongst such persons are frequently to be found wicked men, who, taking advantage of the ignorance of those who are easily deceived, lead them away whither they will, so also, he says, is the case among Christians. And he asserts that certain persons who do not wish either to give or receive a reason for their belief, keep repeating, "Do not examine, but believe!: and "Your faith will save you!"

But the whole point of *Contra Celsus* is to give reasons for belief, pointing to multiple lines of evidence, "including archaeology, miracles, history both secular and Christian, and especially prophecy."

Concerning *Augustine of Hippo*, Marshall quotes from Kenneth Samples,

> In his Sermon (43.7, 9) Augustine asserted: Crede, ut intelligas ('Believe in order

that you may understand'). For Augustine, faith ("trust in a reliable source") is an indispensable element in knowledge. One must believe in something in order to know anything. Knowledge begins with faith and faith provides a foundation for knowledge. Faith is itself indirect knowledge (like testimony or authority). While faith comes first in time, knowledge comes first in importance. Faith and reason do not conflict, but instead complement one another. Augustine believed that while reason does not cause faith, reason everywhere supports faith. Augustine also argued that Christians should seek to use their reason to understand doctrines (the Trinity, Incarnation, etc.) that are given via divine revelation (thus 'faith seeking understanding'). Augustine's writings about the role of faith influenced Credo, ut intelligam ('I believe in order that I might understand') by St. Anselm (a.d. 1033-1109).

Aquinas wrote,

> The existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles; for faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature and perfection the perfectible.

> From effects not proportioned to the cause no perfect knowledge of that cause can be obtained. Yet from every effect the existence of the cause can be clearly demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects; though from them we cannot know God perfectly as He is in His essence.

Marshall adds this comment from Historian Donald Treadgold:

> Aquinas' great achievement was to expound the relation between faith and reason in such a way that those who regarded Aristotle as authoritative in philosophy could wholeheartedly remain Christian . . . to build strong intellectual foundations for Christianity and to vindicate the use of reason . . . (A History of Christianity, 110) .

And also this from philosopher Richard Swinburne:

> "The Summa doesn't start from faith or religious experience or the Bible; it starts from the observable world . . . While I realized that the details were not always satisfactory, it seemed to me that the approach of the Summa was 100 percent right. I came to see that the irrationalist spirit of modern theology was a modern phenomena, a head-in-the-sand defensive mechanism. In general, I believe, it is the spirit of St. Thomas rather than the spirit of Kierkegaard that has been the more prevalent over two millennia of Christian theology." (Philosophers Who

Believe)

John Locke had this to say:

> Reason, therefore . . . I take to be the discovery of the certainty or probability of such propositions or truths, which the mind arrives at by deduction made from such ideas, which it has got by the use of its natural faculties; viz., by sensation or reflection.

> Faith, on the other side, is the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication. This way of discovering truths to men we call revelation.

C. S. Lewis wrote in various places,

> Have we now got to a position from which we can talk about Faith without being misunderstood? For in general we are shy of speaking plain about Faith as a virtue. It looks so like praising an intention to believe what you want to believe in the face of evidence to the contrary: the American in the old story defined Faith as 'the power of believing what we know to be untrue.' Now I define Faith as the power of continuing to believe what we once honestly thought to be true until cogent reasons for honestly changing our minds are brought before us."

> There is, of course, no question so far of belief without evidence. We must beware of confusion between the way in which a Christian first assents to certain propositions, and the way in which he afterwards adheres to them. These must be carefully distinguished. Of the second it is true, in a sense, to say that Christians do recommend a certain discounting of apparent contrary evidence, and I will later attempt to explain why. But so far as I know it is not expected that a man should assent to those propositions in the first place without evidence or in the teeth of the evidence. At any rate, if anyone expects that, I certainly do not. And in fact, the man who accepts Christianity always thinks he had good evidence; whether, like Dante, [physical and metaphysical argumentation], or historical evidence, or the evidence of religious experience, or authority, or all these together. For of course authority, however we may value it in this or that particular instance, is a kind of evidence.

> I am not asking anyone to accept Christianity if his best reasoning tells him that the weight of the evidence is against it. That is not the point at which Faith comes in. But supposing a man's reason once decides that the weight of the evidence is for it. I can tell that man what is going to happen to him in the next few weeks.

> There will come a moment when… all at once his emotions will rise up and carry out a sort of blitz on his belief. [...] I am not talking of moments at which any real new reasons against Christianity turn up. Those have to be faced and that is a different matter. I am talking about moments where a mere mood rises up against it. "Now Faith, in the sense in which I am here using the word, is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods. For moods will change, whatever view your reason takes.

Many more examples could be adduced, but this small sampling from major Christian writers should suffice to show that faith, conventionally understood, is by no means contrary to evidence or knowledge.

Faith As An Epistemology

You claim, Dr. Boghossian, that faith is an epistemology, and an unreliable one at that. You give examples of people who "know" that Jesus walked on water "because they have faith that he did." If that's how they "know" it, then of course in such instances *faith* could be described as an epistemology. But you present it is though that were all there is to be said about it; you give no place for faith being anything other than that. This is not the way *faith* is conventionally understood, however.

In my case, I know Jesus walked on water the same way you know that the core of the earth consists of a molten nickel-iron mix: through the reliable testimony of credible authorities. That is to say, I have evidences leading me to believe that the writers of the Gospels recorded events accurately and faithfully, and I have no reason to doubt that the walking-on-water incident was any different from anything else they recorded correctly. If that's using faith as a religious epistemology, then you likewise are using faith as an earth-science epistemology. But in fact it's not accurate to call that an epistemology in either of our cases.

Here's another example where faith is undeniably involved. I have faith that Jesus will return. Do I have "evidence" that he will? Not in the sense of seeing his tracks in the sky heading our direction, obviously! But I do have evidence supporting the ideas that (a) Jesus made the promise of his return, that (b) he has the power to fulfill the promise, and that (c) he is known to be one who tells the truth. In this case, the epistemology behind my expectation of Jesus' return is identical in form to the epistemology behind my expectation that my wife will come back from the errand she's currently running. *Faith* enters in identically in both places: I have faith in the character and promises of Jesus Christ, and I have faith in my wife's character and promises.

(I know you claim that *faith* must only be used in religious contexts, but that's an idiosyncratic, authoritarian, move on your part, completely divorced from the term's

conventional usage, motivated by your rhetorical purposes rather than by any evidence concerning the conventional usage of *faith;* there's no reason for anyone to pay such a tactic the slightest attention.)

What C. S. Lewis wrote, quoted above, is especially apropos here. Faith is not (at least not necessarily, or not always) the way we come to know anything. It's the attitude of holding on to what we know, even when present circumstances seem to make that knowledge uncertain.

But What If Our Beliefs Are All Wrong?

At this point I expect another objection, for I have heard it from others, and indeed it's an obvious one. *"Sure, you Christians claim to base your faith on evidences, but you're all quite mistaken about the whole thing."* That's an interesting topic and worthy of much discussion, but not here: for present purposes there's no need here for me to take up the question whether we're right or wrong. There are some things we can surely agree on, and those few things are enough for my purposes here.

Surely there's no denying that Christians present evidences for our beliefs: that's what the whole enterprise of Christian apologetics is all about. (There's a branch of apologetics, presuppositionalism, that eschews evidentialism, but that's beside the point here: there are still plenty of apologists presenting plenty of evidences.) So *faith* cannot be *belief without evidence.* It might be *belief based on mistaken interpretation of evidences,* but that's an entirely different matter. Ptolemy based his cosmology on the evidences available, which he misinterpreted. His view of the universe wasn't *evidence-free.* It was just *wrong.* The problem is not in our *faith,* it's in our *interpretation of evidences.*

Similarly, if we're mistaken about our beliefs, we're not pretending to know things we don't know. We're *mistaken.* Being *mistaken* and *pretending* are two different things. Ptolemy wasn't *pretending to know* the earth was at the center of the universe. He was just *wrong.*

And What About Christians Who Misunderstand All This?

In your book, on page 122, you describe people who resist your re-definitions of faith as "suffering from severe doxastic pathologies." On page 73, you tell us, with emphasis, that "*Every* religious apologist is epistemically debilitated." Thank you for that compliment; it goes nicely with your espoused value of considering a person of faith as "someone who needs your help—as opposed to passing judgment. A positive, accepting attitude will translate into an increased likelihood of treatment effectiveness" (p. 68). May I tell you how deeply I appreciate your non-judgmentalism expressed there?

At any rate, your advice is not to tangle with people who have thought through these matters — apologists, for example. That's a wise tactical move on your part. You will

find considerably more success among Christians who have given little thought to what their faith really means, or where it comes from. But this letter is not about tactical success or failure, it is about the definition of faith. Sure, you can find people of faith who can't articulate a clear reason for belief or a sound definition of the term. Their lack of knowledge or skill does not make their position normative.

Recap and Invitation to Respond

This letter has run long, I know, but there was much to say. To recapitulate, I have made these points:

1. The historically predominant and conventional usage of (Christian) *faith* is to be determined by looking at the relevant literature.
2. The relevance of literature for the defining of terms has nothing to do with whether that literature is believed to be true. Both fiction and non-fiction can determine the usage of a word, and can implant its conventional usage into a culture.
3. The Bible, being the Christian's primary source document, is therefore the proper source to look to first in defining Christian faith, whether or not one believes in its truth or accuracy.
4. The Bible presents faith in terms quite contrary to "pretending to know" and "belief without evidence."
5. Subsequent Christian thinkers have also presented faith in contrary terms.
6. While some Christian thinkers may speak of faith as an epistemology, that is not the usual understanding of the term.
7. In contrast to that, you present faith as being defined strictly and exclusively as an *epistemology*, as *belief without evidence*, and as *pretending to know.*
8. If Christians are wrong in our treatment of evidences, or if some Christians understand none of it at all, those circumstances do not make your definitions correct. If we are wrong, we are wrong, not "believing without evidence" or "pretending to know."
9. Therefore, based on the way *faith* is used in the relevant literature, and in spite of the fact that some usages of *faith* may agree with your understanding, you are wrong to describe faith exclusively as an epistemology, as "belief without evidence," and "pretending to know what one does not know."

You affirm doxastic openness, and you maintain that if you are shown to be wrong in any belief, you will change your mind. Now is your opportunity to demonstrate that you mean what you say.

Respectfully,

Tom Gilson

*****

---

[1] [interview with The Good Atheist](#), at about the 47 to 48 minute point.

[2] Beginning at about 12:30 in a video available at http://shadowtolight.wordpress.com/2013/12/20/dawkins-finally-admits-he-is-closed-minded-about-the-existence-of-god/

[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qp4WUFXvCFQ

[4] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIaPXtZpzBw

[5] My philosopher friends will cringe at my loose explanations here. Technically they are not correct, but they are somewhere in the right ballpark.

[6] http://www.amazon.com/True-Reason-Confronting-Irrationality-Atheism/dp/0825443385%3F-SubscriptionId%3D0PZ7TM66EXQCXFVTMTR2%26tag%3Dthinkichrist-20%26linkCode%3Dxm2%26camp%3D2025%26creative%3D165953%26creativeASIN%3D0825443385

[7] http://www.creatingatheists.com/2013/11/01/key-christian-thinkers-faith-reason/

[8] [Slate article on science and faith](#)

[9] [PDF here](#)

[10] An apologist is one who studies or practices *apologetics,* the subdiscipline of theology that focuses on reasons for confidence in the truth of the faith. "Apologetics" has nothing to do with "apologizing." Rather, the word derives from the Greek word for "answer," *apologia,* in 1 Peter 3:15.