

# ANSWERING THE ATHEISTS

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**BISHOP ROBERT BARRON**

**WORD**  
on FIRE



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Around the mid-point of the twentieth century there flourished the existentialist movement, led by such figures as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. These philosophers argued rather vigorously against the proposition that God exists, but, to their credit, they saw the deep sadness and feeling of emptiness that result from atheism. The “ethic” of existentialism involved a willingness to accept this absurdity and to assert one’s freedom in the face of it.

Now, I don’t think for a minute that Sartre and his colleagues were right about the non-existence of God, but at least they were clear-eyed enough to appreciate the terrible tension that obtains between the infinite longing of the human heart and the absence of the one reality that could possibly assuage it. Even as they denied Him, they knew that God, by definition, is what the human heart desperately needs. Today’s atheists, in their condescending and often snarky dismissal of all transcendent truths, seem to be playing at atheism rather than seeing to the bottom of it. Yet they have revived the existentialists’ claims against God’s existence and have mastered the art of propagating their message.

It is important that we Christians are able to answer the atheist's best objections to God's existence in hopes that we can win their hearts and the heart of the culture at large. That's why I recently devoted a whole episode of my podcast, "The Word on Fire Show," to answering the atheists.

Below you'll find an edited transcript of the show so you can read it slowly, at your own pace, and reflect on how you can share the good news of our Lord with the people nearest and dearest to you.

Peace,

+ Robert Barron

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WORD  
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**QUESTION:** Today we're talking about atheism. The show is titled "Answering the Atheists," and in particular we wanted to focus on this trend of the new atheism. Bishop Barron, you've written several articles and videos over the years in response to many of its main proponents, including people like Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, etc. This is not a new content of atheism, but a new style, a new mode of communicating it. What do you see as something that marks it different from older forms of atheism?

**BISHOP BARRON:** I think the point you made there was a very important one, that as you read these gentlemen, there's not anything particularly new in terms of the arguments. Most of it is a rehashing of people like Ludwig Feuerbach, Sigmund Freud, Jean Paul Sartre – the classical atheists. It's a rehearsing of those arguments. I'd say a couple things about the novelty. I think it was a post-September 11th phenomenon. A lot of these books came out just as the last decade was getting underway, and I think it was a revival

there of the old Enlightenment argument. In the wake of September 11, what did people see? They saw fanatical religion. The old Enlightenment argument was that because religion is irrational, the only way it can defend itself is through violence. I think that's what prompted these new atheists.

Secondly, I'd say it's new in its vitriol, and in the meanness of the approach. Go back to someone like Sartre, or even Freud or Feuerbach. They were certainly enemies of religion, but they took religion seriously and they engaged it in a much more highbrow fashion. What I see in the new atheists is a sort of disdain for religion. Like the old atheists, they think it's wrong, but they also have this kind of condescending disdain for it, that only an idiot could possibly subscribe to these views. I've always found that really off-putting about what's new in the new atheism. It's not content; it's not as though they found some convincing new arguments. These arguments are as old as the hills.



**QUESTION:** I think the new atheism is worth answering not because it's substantial, but because it's increasingly prevalent, it's sweeping across the culture, especially on the internet. Atheists are disproportionately represented online. For all of those reasons, we thought we'd tackle some of the most common arguments that you hear from the new atheists. Let's start with this first one, and I think this is the most popular one. (I run a website, [StrangeNotions.com](http://StrangeNotions.com), where atheists and Catholics dialogue, and this is the most common argument we hear.) It's, "What evidence is there for God?"

It reminds me of the great atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell. He was asked what he would say if he found himself standing before a god on judgement day, and God asked him, "Why didn't you believe in Me?" Russell said he would reply, "Not enough evidence, God. Not enough evidence." What do you say to someone who says there's just no evidence?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Actually, I'm pleased to hear that's maybe the number one thing that you hear on your website, because in some ways it's very easy to refute that. The trouble is the loaded term, "evidence." Evidence is a term that's drawn largely from the sciences, so you're looking for physical evidence for whatever phenomenon you're discussing. Or you form a hypothesis, and then you say, "Let's look for evidence that would back up this hypothesis." That's fine, within the scientific framework. That's part of the scientific method, looking for empirically verifiable or physical traces in the world.

Well, if that's what you mean by evidence, I agree with them, there's no evidence for God. Here's the trick: God is not subject to the norms of the scientific method, because God is not a being in the world. God is rather, as Thomas said, *Ipsum Esse*, the sheer act of "to be" itself, in and through which all things that the sciences look at come to be. The one thing you're not going to find is God using the scientific method, because He is prior to and more ontologically basic than anything the scientists can investigate.

Here's what I would suggest, and I have done this to new atheists who use that appeal to evidence. I'll say, "No, there's no evidence for God, if you mean it in your typical scientific way; but there are plenty of rational warrants for belief in God." I put it that way, because then you're not limiting it to what the sciences can discover. Then you're open to Thomas Aquinas, who argues from the contingency of the world to the non-contingent ground. You're open to all sorts of rational approaches, which aren't scientific. I would urge people that appeal to this argument to broaden their epistemological horizons. What I mean is, there's more than science. There's more than the scientific method. You can be utterly rational and not be scientific.

The trouble with the whole evidence appeal, or "Science is the only way to know reality," well, you're saying that Homer and Plato and Shakespeare and Dante have no truth claims to make. Well, that's nonsense. They're saying all kinds of true things about the world, but not in a scientific way. Change the term from evidence to rational warrant, and then we'll take it from there.

**QUESTION:** You talk a lot in *The Mystery of God* study program, which we'll get back to a little later in the show, about some of these reasons or rational warrants for believing in God. So, if anyone wants to have a deeper look at some of those, they can check out Bishop Barron's *The Mystery of God* study program. The second common argument you'll often hear from atheists is based on maybe a cursory exposure to Thomas Aquinas or Aristotle's arguments for a first cause. Many atheists after reading that will conclude, "Well, if everything has a cause, then what caused God? How could God be the first cause, because then you'd still need to say, 'Well, what caused Him?'" How would you reply to that?

**BISHOP BARRON:** It's a sophomoric sort of argument, because the principle is not, "Everything has a cause." The principal is, "Contingent things have a cause." Things that don't explain their own being have a cause. The whole point of the demonstration is that we finally must come to one reality, namely, God, namely *Ipsum Esse*, that which isn't caused. The trouble there is they just get off on the

wrong foot. If you think the principle is, “everything has a cause,” then you’re missing the point. Contingent things have a cause. That’s how the argument unfolds. If a contingent thing like you or me or a table has a cause, well then what caused it? Is that contingent or not? If it is, we ought to keep looking.

Back and back you go, but the one thing you can’t do is appeal to an infinite causal series, because then you haven’t found a ground for contingency at all. You must come, the argument concludes, to some reality which is not contingent. I think we have to dismiss that kind of sophomoric observation, but I’ll say a lot of really smart people have made just that observation. As I say, it’s not really grasping the nettle of the argument. We’re in fact proving that there is at least one reality that doesn’t have a cause. To say, “What caused God?” is a bit like saying, “Why isn’t a triangle a square?” The one thing God can’t be is caused.

**QUESTION:** One of the other popular objections you’ll hear, and I think this has increased as our culture has leaned more toward a scientific point of view, is the ob-

jection that science has disproven God and religion or that science and faith are somehow incompatible. How would you reply to that?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Let me first talk about your opening observations. Scientism is the reduction of all knowledge to the scientific form of knowledge, and the trouble with that perspective is that it is self-contradicting. If you ask, “Where did you see that principle? How did you experiment so as to derive the truth of that principle?” And a believer in scientism answers, “All true things are known to the scientist,” well that answer is itself not a scientific claim. That’s a metaphysical kind of claim. We can debate it and dispute it, but scientism in its belief is self-refuting. It’s self-contradictory. People are in a certain way beguiled by science. Think of the movie *The Martian*, which I like very much, but it’s undergirded by this kind of assumption that science will explain everything, and we humans should “Believe in science.”

You see, there’s the problem right there. If you say, “I believe in science,” well then, that’s a non-sci-

entific claim. People that are non-scientistic, like you and I have the argument on our side right there. “Oh, I believe that science is the all-explaining thing.” Well, clearly it’s not, because you didn’t scientifically derive that principle.

**QUESTION:** You’ve mentioned before, too, that science depends on certain philosophical presuppositions that can’t be explained by science, things like the intelligibility of the world, or the principle of causality. Talk about that.

**BISHOP BARRON:** That’s a good example of what I was just describing. What has to undergird any scientist, of any stripes? Psychologists, physicists, botanists, chemist, is they assume the intelligibility of what they’re going to be examining. The more you think about it, the stranger that seems, though. Why would you just naturally assume that the being that we encounter will be rationally understandable? Every scientist has to assume that, but there’s no experiment that shows you that truth. Rather, all experiments are based on that assumption. That comes, I would argue,

from theology. It comes from a keen sense, or you can say philosophy at a high level, a keen sense of the creator God. If there is one ultimate cause of all things, and that ultimate cause is intelligent, then you will expect intelligibility in all things.

Again, the more you think about that, the stranger it becomes. We take it so for granted, but it's a fundamentally theological assumption that undergirds the sciences. The other idea that science has disproven God, again, that's almost self-contradictory as well. As I said, God is not a being in the world. The sciences in all their different dimensions deal with things in the world that can be empirically verified or experimented upon. There is the method. What they can't in principle comment upon, draw conclusions about, is that transcendent reality in and through which all worldly things come to be.

We seem to rightly understand that it would be nonsensical for a scientist to say, "I've proven God through science." However, it is just as



nonsensical to say, “I’ve disproven Him through science.” Science is not a tool that can be used in the adjudication of this question. That’s why other rational methods, like philosophy, have to be invoked. Something my mentor, Cardinal George, often said, was that our curiosities rush too quickly to religion and science. What we need is the mediating discipline of philosophy, which offers you a way to speak rationally about realities that transcend the sciences. Once you get philosophy, you can see how religion too can be rational.

I think that mediating discipline of philosophy is key to recover here, but don’t allow the scientific mind to dominate. It’s a house of cards, it’ll collapse upon itself. I think we should boldly claim the rational tools that we have to show that belief in God is reasonable, and stand up and resist the scientific advocates.

**QUESTION:** Tell me if this jives with your experience, but a lot of times if I talk to an atheist or a skeptic of some sort who claims that science has disproven God or rendered Him useless or unnecessary, almost inevitably they view God as something with a scientific explanation, as a being within the world. This brings to bear a deeper question: Is God just a being, one hypothesis among many, or is He the ground of all that exists? Atheists argue, “At one time we didn’t know how thunder and lightning work. We thought it was God slamming down His hammer like Thor. Now we do, so we don’t need God to explain that.” Or, “We didn’t know how the sun and the moon and the planets all moved through the cosmos, but now we do, so we don’t need God to explain that.” That view of God, you would say, is a deeply misunderstood view of what we mean by God.

**BISHOP BARRON:** Yes. I would say that Thomas Aquinas anticipated Occam by a century, and formulated a version of Occam’s razor, which is the view that all things being equal, the simpler explanation should be preferred. When Thomas

is articulating an objection to God's existence, he uses that. He explains that if all things can be explained through an appeal to natural causality then we don't need God. That objection to God's existence is as old as Thomas Aquinas, certainly. What is the answer to this objection? The answer is when you're looking for God, you're right, you're not looking for one contingent cause among many. You're not looking for something you don't understand now but eventually could, as in the cause of thunder.

When you're looking for God, you're looking for the ultimate cause of the very "to be" of the universe. You're not looking for one more (however big it is) contingent cause. What you're looking for is the answer to the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" That is not a scientific question. That's a philosophical question, or theological one. Again, it's being lured into the trap of scientism to say natural causes explain everything. They can't explain why there's something rather than nothing, why the very "to be"

of the universe is. This is the problem when you collapse all of the rational forms into one rational form, namely the scientific.

**QUESTION:** You mentioned that one of the arguments that Thomas saw posed against God is the argument from Parsimony, that we don't need God to explain some of these things, therefore God doesn't exist. The other argument that he thought was a strong one, but also ultimately answerable, was the age-old problem of evil. I want to spend a little more time on that one, because I think for many atheists on the ground, this is really the most personal, heartfelt reason why they could never believe or follow God. What is the problem of evil, and how would you at least begin to flesh out an answer?

**BISHOP BARRON:** I think you're right. It is I think the most compelling argument against God, although as I'll try to clarify, it's more emotionally compelling than intellectually compelling. Thomas Aquinas put it this way, again in these beautifully understated arguments he articulated

against God. He said, “If one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed.” He said if there were infinite heat, there’d be no cold. God is described as the infinitely good, so if He exists, how could there possibly be evil? Now, that’s a pithy formulation of the argument from evil that Thomas makes himself answer. How do you respond to a seemingly air-tight objection?

Well, I’ll give you Thomas’ response, and he was drawing on something much earlier than himself, namely the reflections of Augustine, where Augustine said, “God is so powerful that He can permit evil so as to bring about a greater good.” A first clarification is that evil is not something. Augustine saw this. Evil is a privation of the good. Think of a cavity in your tooth that’s bugging you. It’s a lack of a good that ought to be there. Think of a cancer that’s compromising your system. It’s a lack of what ought to be there. Think of blindness. It’s a lack of vision that ought to be there. It’s not like dark side of the force/light side of the force, where you have two powerful

things fighting each other. Evil's not a thing, it's an absence.

First of all, there's no power (and certainly not God) who produces or creates evil. You can't create it or produce it. It's permitted by God. Permitted. Now, why? Go back to Augustine. So as to bring out of that a greater good. We can give loads of examples of this. Certain goods that would not exist, were there not certain evils. Thomas' own example, which I've always loved, is there's no life in the lion without the destruction of the antelope. The lion, in all of its glory and beauty, wouldn't exist unless the antelope were devoured by the lion. God permitting evil so as to bring about a good that wouldn't otherwise be there.

His other example is there's no virtue of the martyr without the tyranny of his tormentor. Think of it. Even though it might seem weird, but no Hitler, no Edith Stein. No Hitler, no Maximilian Kolbe. No Hitler, broaden it out, think of all of the innumerable acts of nobility and courage and

kindness and so on that happened during World War II, precisely because of the suffering. That's the principle.

Now, I totally get, I can feel people hearing me, reacting. I totally get the emotional reaction to it. I don't mean that in a condescending way at all. I mean, I experience it. When something goes bad in my life, "God, how could You do this? How could You allow this to happen? Why are You doing this to me?" I get the emotional power of it, but go back now, having articulated this principle, go back to the intellectual side. God, by definition, has an infinite mind, and God is presiding over all of space and all of time. Think about that. All of space, all of time. What do we see of space and time but this tiny, tiny, tiny fragment? Can you see how it's a little off-kilter? For us therefore to say, "This makes no sense, there's no redeeming value to this," how in the world could you know? By definition, a finite mind cannot take in the workings of an infinite mind. That's why I say from a purely intellectual standpoint, the objection fades away.

It's like a little child, three-year-old child, who couldn't possibly understand what his parents are about and who is facing some suffering they have imposed upon him, and wondering, "How in the world could they be doing this?" Well, think of that difference, and now multiply it to the nth degree. The difference between our finite minds and God's infinite mind, which is worrying about all of space and all of time. Of course things seem anomalous to us, of course they do; but it would be arrogant in the extreme for us to say, "Because I don't get it, there's no meaning." That's like a beginning math student in sixth grade looking at Einstein's most elaborate formulas and saying, "This is a bunch of nonsense. They're just silly symbols on the page." Well, a fortiori, raised to the nth degree, that's us in relation to God.

Those are some points I would use in responding to this extremely powerful objection, at least from the experiential standpoint.

**QUESTION:** You came out with a study program called *The Mystery of God: Who God is and*



*Why He Matters*. It contains a whole collection of resources, but the main component is this six-part video course where you look at many of the questions we've discussed here in much more depth. Can you tell us a little bit about why you created that program, and tell us a little bit about what's in it?

**BISHOP BARRON:** I think I did it because I was getting so annoyed at the new atheists, and especially at the impact they were having on young people. So many people have come to me and said that after college or even high school they learned these really compelling arguments against God. Then you see the new atheists, who are very skillful evangelists at propagating their message, and they're using all the new media, etc. I just feel the church has got to be in that arena, and it's got to be there as an opposing voice. That's why I did it. I wanted to present something that was not like reading a 500-page philosophical study, but was substantive enough to give everybody, maybe especially high school kids, college kids, some way of answering these objections.

What's in it is really a capsulization of my Doctrine of God class that I taught for 20 years at Mundelein Seminary. I had a ten-week course in God, and I thought, "Let's try to bring that down to a more digestible level, without flattening it out, without dumbing it down." That was the instigation for it, and that's more or less the content. We talk about all the issues you've raised, among others. I really hope young people can use it.

**QUESTION:** You can learn more about that at [MysteryOfGod.com](http://MysteryOfGod.com), and especially if you have a young adult child, maybe who's going off to college, this would be a great gift to give them to solidify their understanding of God and how to answer many of these atheist objections. In addition to the video course, there's a study guide written by Trent Horn, who is an apologist at Catholic Answers. There's also a pocket guide to answering atheists, which contains a condensed version of several of these points. Find that at [MysteryOfGod.com](http://MysteryOfGod.com).

In addition to the Mystery of God supplements, Trent Horn also has his own good book called

*Answering Atheism.* What would you recommend for some other resources to either understand atheism better, or to be able to respond to it?

**BISHOP BARRON:** At a higher level, if you want to go high octane, get David Bentley Hart's book. His book is very fine, and it revolves around the point we've been making a lot today, that it's a misunderstanding of God that gives rise to a lot of these objections. A little further back in the 20th century, get Henri de Lubacs *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*. I think it's very helpful at understanding how this fits into the more contemporary conversation. Then I'd go back to the classics. Go back to Aquinas, and read the first 13 questions of the *Summa Theologica* if you want graduate school, high octane reflection.

**QUESTION:** Bishop Barron is probably too coy to recommend it himself, but his own book on Aquinas covers Thomas Aquinas' arguments for God and gives a more digestible approach to them than just reading Aquinas straight through.

*For more conversations like this one, be sure to check out “The Word on Fire Show” at [WordOnFireShow.com](http://WordOnFireShow.com). You’ll also find instructions on how to subscribe to new episodes so you’ll never miss one.*