

IS CHRISTIANITY TRUE? THE EXISTENCE OF GOD, THE DISCOVERIES OF SCIENCE, AND A CLOSING ARGUMENT FOR THE RESURRECTION

by
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Christianity teaches that we are made for eternal happiness---for heaven, that we lost our way, and that God will stop at nothing to win us back, including becoming one of us, suffering death, and then rising to new life. In the words of St. John, the Evangelist, “God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son.” John 3:16. If true, it would be difficult to think of a more important fact to know about ourselves and those around us. Believing it to be true, C. S Lewis declared in his famous sermon *The Weight of Glory*:

There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.¹

In other words, Christianity claims that this life is but a prelude to the next, and our choices in this life will lead to either eternal happiness or eternal misery for each of us.

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¹ Lewis, C. S., *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, pg. 15 (Eerdmans Publishing 1972 ed.) (Original copyright 1949 MacMillan Co.)

Of course, many people in the world of today find Christianity’s teachings impossible to believe. Especially for those immersed in the popular culture of the West, it is difficult to understand how any modern, educated person could believe God became man, let alone that he rose from the dead. After all, as Justice Antonin Scalia observed in his speech to this organization at its inaugural dinner ten years ago, to the modern mind “the notion that the Creator should become a man is as unsophisticated as the notion that Zeus should become a bull.”² Yet, according to a 2016 Rasmussen poll, 77% of Americans believe that Jesus rose from the dead.³ Are they all simply ignorant and/or gullible?

The place to begin in trying to defend this belief, of course, is not with whether God, the Creator of the universe, became man and rose from the dead, but rather with the question whether such a God even exists, one of the so-called “preambles of the faith.”⁴ For it makes no sense to talk of God becoming man unless God actually exists. On this question, my own impression is that it is getting more and more difficult for thinking people to remain hardcore atheists.

² Published in *Scalia Speaks: Reflections on Law, Faith, and Life Well Lived*, (2017), under the title “The Christian As Cretin” at pg. 108.

³ Rasmussen Reports: Three Quarters of Americans Believe Jesus Rose From the Dead (March 26, 2016), available at: http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/lifestyle/General_lifestyle/march_2016/three_quarters_of_americans_believe_jesus_rose_from_the_dead.

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas calls what reason can know about God, i.e., the object of Natural Theology, preambles to faith. (S.T. Ia, q. 2, a. 2)

Richard Dawkins, in his book *The Blind Watchmaker*, said “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.”⁵ As the title of an article that appeared last year at the *Federalist* website suggests, however, many scientists are no longer so sure that Darwinism⁶ is really up to such a task. The article, entitled “Why One-Third of Scientists Now Question Darwin,” notes that “[c]urrent estimates are that approximately one-third of professional academic biologists who do not believe in intelligent design find Darwin's theory is inadequate to describe all of the complexity in biology.”⁷ The article cites a controversial 2014 letter to *Nature*, an international weekly science journal, as the first sign of “mounting concern, however slow and cautious, among thoughtful professional biologists,” and goes on to note that “[o]ther works by atheist authors like ‘*What Darwin Got Wrong*’ and ‘*Mind and Cosmos*’ find ‘fatal flaws’ in the theory and assert it is ‘almost certainly false.’”

⁵ Dawkins, Richard, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a World Without Design*, pg. 10 (1996)

⁶ As used here, “Darwinism” refers to the theory that all life can be entirely accounted for by material causes; specifically, that nature, in the complete absence of any divine guidance or involvement, “selected” for survival organisms that became more and more complex as a result of random but beneficial mutations. In other words, “Darwinism,” as used here, means more than the scientific theory of common descent. It involves the further assumption that whatever the route to the evident complexity of life, it must have been an unguided and mindless process.

⁷ Available at: <https://thefederalist.com/2019/04/16/one-third-biologists-now-question-darwinism/>. For a more detailed discussion of the problem, see Gelernter, David, “*Giving Up Darwin: A fond farewell to a brilliant and beautiful theory*” XIX *Claremont Review of Books*, No. 2, Spring 2019, available at: <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/giving-up-darwin/>.

Though perhaps growing, the concern over whether naturalistic causes can account for life is not new. Many scientists have long questioned whether the billions of years since the earth formed are enough time for Darwin's theory of random mutation and natural selection to have arrived at the now scientifically established complexity of even a single-cell organism, a complexity that Darwin could never have imagined.

The first problem is that Darwin's theory assumes a living organism capable of reproduction already in existence. Until such an organism exists, there can be no random mutations for nature to select. Second is the sheer complexity of a living organism. To Darwin, writing in the nineteenth century, the cell was a black box containing undifferentiated protoplasm, the basic substance of living material, and thus responsible for all living processes. Now, as a result of advances in microbiology, we know that even the simplest single cell organism, with its many molecular components, is more irreducibly complex than the most technologically advanced factory or machine of today.⁸

To buy more time for Darwin's process of random mutation and natural selection to work its miracle, Nobel Prize winning scientist and co-discoverer of the structure of DNA Francis Crick came up with a theory called "directed pan-

⁸ For a clear and comprehensive explanation of the concept of "irreducible complexity" and the difficulties it poses for the materialistic version of Darwinism, see Behe, Michael J., *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*, (Free Press 1996).

spermia.” The theory holds that an advanced extraterrestrial civilization, possibly facing extinction, sent primitive life forms to earth in a spaceship. Crick speculated that the spaceship builders couldn’t come themselves because of the enormous time required for interstellar travel, so they seeded the earth with bacteria capable of surviving the voyage and the severe conditions that would have greeted them upon arrival on prehistoric earth. A less incredible version of the theory eliminates the extraterrestrial intelligence part and speculates that the bacteria could have been transported to earth by asteroids. Both theories amount to little more than rank speculation, however, seemingly justified only by the need to offer some explanation other than the dreaded “God” cause. They also just push the materialists’ problem of how you get life from inanimate matter off to another planet. British astronomer Fred Hoyle captured the magnitude of the problem vividly in this analogy: that a living organism emerged by chance from a pre-biotic soup is about as likely as that “a tornado sweeping through a junkyard might assemble a Boeing 747 from the materials therein.”⁹

Then there's the cosmological argument and the anthropic principle. In his 1996 book *God: The Evidence: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason in a Postsecular World*, former atheist Patrick Glynn says that before he actually began studying the question, he “simply assumed that religious belief had

⁹ Johnson, Phillip E., *Darwin On Trial* (2d ed. 1993) at pg. 106. For those interested, Johnson uses his analytical skills as a Berkeley law professor to take readers through the evidence, as he carefully analyzes the materialistic claims and scientific pretension that mask the professional uncertainty the federalist article references.

become impossible for rational human beings in the modern era, a fact that one accepted with a certain melancholy and nostalgia for previous ages when it was still possible for ‘men’ to believe.”¹⁰ This assumption, he writes, “reflected the confidence of the intellectual world that modern science had destroyed all rational foundation for the religious worldview.”¹¹ Notwithstanding the philosophical and theological consensus of earlier times that the world was inexplicable without God, Glynn notes that for the past several centuries,

scientific exploration seemed to be taking us down precisely the opposite road---toward an ever more mechanistic, impersonal, and random view of the universe. Twentieth century intellectuals had commonly spoken of the “random universe.” The predominant view of modern philosophers and intellectuals was that human life had come about essentially by accident, the by-product of brute, material forces randomly churning over the eons.¹²

This view started to change in the 1960s, Glynn says, when “scientists began to notice a strange connection among a number of otherwise unexplained coincidences in physics.”¹³ They began to realize that “many mysterious values and relationships in physics could be explained by one overriding fact: Such values had been necessary for the creation of life.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Glynn, Patrick, *God, The Evidence: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason in a Postsecular World*, pg. 4 (Prima Publishing 1997).

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid at 23.

¹³ Ibid at 24.

¹⁴ Ibid

Glynn starts his discussion of this change with the “big bang” theory, the now generally accepted idea that the universe, as we know it, originated in a primeval atom that in essence exploded out from an initial point giving rise to the expanding universe in which we find ourselves today.¹⁵ He then describes how scientists have since concluded that the universe seems to be “fine-tuned” for life. Cambridge astrophysicist and cosmologist Brandon Carter coined the term “anthropic principle” to describe the fact that “all the seemingly arbitrary and unrelated constants in physics have one strange thing in common—these are precisely the values you need if you want to have a universe capable of producing life.”¹⁶ Glynn describes some of the findings that underlay the theory:

Even the most minor tinkering with the value of the fundamental forces of physics—gravity, electromagnetism, the nuclear strong force, or the nuclear weak force---would have resulted in an unrecognizable universe: a universe consisting entirely of helium, a universe without protons or atoms, a universe without stars, or a universe that collapsed back in upon itself before the first moments of its existence were up. Changing the precise ratios of the masses of subatomic particles in relation to one another would have similar effects. Even such basics of life as carbon and water depend upon uncanny “fine-tuning” at the subatomic level, strange coincidences in values for which physicists had no other explanation.¹⁷

¹⁵ For those convinced that the Catholic Church is at war with science, the “Big Bang” theory, which some think looks suspiciously like creation *ex nihilo*, was first proposed by Belgian physicist Georges Lamaitre, a Catholic priest, as was Gregor Mendel, the “Father of Genetics.”

¹⁶ Glynn, at 22.

¹⁷ Ibid at 29. Francis S. Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, gives particular prominence to this argument in his book *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence For Belief*, pg. 71 (Free Press 2006).

Even the idea that the world had a beginning poses a serious problem for atheists, since it forces them to come up with an “other-worldly” cause. For logic dictates that something cannot be the cause of itself; otherwise, it would have to act before it came into existence. Theoretical physicist and cosmologist Lawrence Krauss attempted to solve that problem in his book *A Universe From Nothing*, but as Philosopher Edward Feser points out, in addition to not understanding metaphysics, Krauss doesn’t seem to know what “nothing” means.¹⁸

One might think that the difficulties of explaining not only how life and the universe itself came into existence, but also why the universe appears fine-tuned for life, would cause those intellectually fulfilled atheists that Dawkins had in mind to question their assumptions. But for many, it has not. In their effort to deny even the possibility that it all could have started with an act of creation, scientists like the late Stephen Hawking came up with the “many worlds” or “multiverse” theory, the idea that there are an infinite number of other universes or, as the late science popularizer Carl Sagan might say, “billions and billions” of universes constantly coming into and going out of existence.¹⁹ Thus, the fact that one of those universes—ours—happens to hit upon the right combination

¹⁸ Krauss, Lawrence M., *A Universe From Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather Than Nothing* (Free Press 2012). Philosopher Edward Feser’s review of Krauss’ book appears in the June 2012 issue of *First Things* under the title “Not Understanding Nothing.”

¹⁹ Glynn at 41–42.

of physical laws to produce the miracle of life isn't a miracle but a matter of probability over time.

To those not convinced that human knowledge begins and ends with science, it all seems like a desperate effort to avoid the conclusion that many with an appreciation for Aristotelean or Thomistic metaphysics arrived at a long time ago—that there must be a First Cause or, in other words, a God.²⁰ The refusal to at least question one's atheism in light of the most recent scientific discoveries appears to many the result of a methodological belief that science must limit its conclusions to material or naturalistic causes. For others, it seems more an ideological bias against all things leading to God.²¹

In addition to the scientific evidence and the metaphysical arguments that point to the existence of something beyond the material world, there is also a moral argument for the existence of God. This argument begins with the recognition that there is such a thing as moral truth, a transcendent moral law. In other words, certain acts are objectively wrong no matter what our intentions or rationalizations, and no matter what laws our governments have enacted. Slavery, to give but one obvious example, is wrong and always has been wrong, even at a time and in a culture in which it was socially and legally accepted by a

²⁰ See Feser, Edward, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God: Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Leibniz* (Ignatius Press 2017).

²¹ As to the latter motivation, Ben Stein's 2008 documentary "Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed" offers a series of first-hand accounts that provide a window into the mind-set of the scientific establishment that bars any challenge to its atheistic "dogma." (available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5EPymcWp-g>)

majority of people. To be sure, people can and do disagree about what acts are morally wrong, but on most there is substantial agreement. C. S. Lewis made this point at the very beginning of his famous “Broadcast Talks,” later published as *Mere Christianity*:

Think of a country where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of double-crossing all people who had been kindest to him. You might just as well imagine a country where two and two made five. Men have differed as regards what people you ought to be unselfish to—whether it was only your own family, or your fellow countrymen, or everyone. But they have always agreed that you ought not to put yourself first. Selfishness has never been admired. Men have differed as to whether you should have one wife or four. But they have always agreed that you must not simply have any woman you liked.²²

The main premise of the moral argument is that in order to have a transcendent moral law, you must have a transcendent moral lawgiver -- God. This premise is shared by both theists and atheists alike, but they reach opposite conclusions because they start at different places. Atheists, like Nietzsche, begin with a rejection of God and conclude that, therefore, there can be no moral law, which for many is both a liberating and convenient conclusion.²³ A theist like C. S. Lewis, on the other hand, begins with the moral law, which he comes to

²² Lewis, C. S., *The Case For Christianity*, Part I, “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe” (MacMillan Co. 1944); published in England under the title “Broadcast Talks” and later published as part of collection under the title *Mere Christianity* (HarperCollins ed. 2001) at 6. Lewis offered more evidence to make this point under the title “Illustrations of the Tao” in the appendix to his book *The Abolition of Man* (MacMillan Co. 1944).

²³ De Marco, Donald and Wiker, Benjamin, *Architects of the Culture of Death* (Ignatius 2004), at 41-53.

know through reason and experience, and concludes that there must be a God.²⁴ As a matter of logic, the theist has the better argument: He reasons from what he knows directly—that there is a moral law—to what he can know only indirectly—the existence of God. A sad sign of our times is that those who begin with the assumption (or, for some, the hope) that God does not exist, and therefore reject the idea of a transcendent moral law, are seen as the intelligent, the enlightened. At the same time, those who begin with a recognition that we are subject to a higher law, a recognition that underlies even the founding of our country, and conclude from this fact that there must be a lawgiver, God, are viewed as the ignorant, the uneducated.²⁵

Ultimately, the secular needs the sacred. The moral truths we recognize all around us imply, indeed, demand, something more than the material world.

Why?

The answer is that the sacred realm makes sense out of life—a service the state cannot perform for itself. If there is no fixed transcendent order, everything becomes relative. Without reference to a higher authority, laws are perceived as arbitrary impositions of the state. One follows them simply to avoid the state's penal institutions. As Dostoevsky put it, “If there is no God everything is permissible.” Likewise, if there is no God, there is no ultimate

²⁴ Even agnostics, like Yale Law Professor Arthur Leff, recognize the need to ground moral truth in a Divine Being. In his influential article “Unspeakable Ethics, Unnatural Law,” Leff noted that “[t]he so-called death of God turns out not to have been just His funeral; it also seems to have effected the total elimination of any coherent, or even more-than-momentarily convincing, ethical or legal system dependent upon finally authoritative extrasystemic premises.” 1979 *Duke L. J.* 1229, 1232.

²⁵ For a more thorough treatment of this argument, see Johnson, Phillip E., “Nihilism and the End of Law,” *First Things* (March, 1993) (available at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1993/03/nihilism-and-the-end-of-law>).

standard by which the state itself can be judged. Hence, the state becomes the ultimate arbiter of what rights you can and cannot have.²⁶

There are other arguments, to be sure, but this brief sketch of a few should be sufficient to make the point that notwithstanding the scientific pretensions of some, the case for the existence of God remains strong and compelling to many, including many who are highly educated. It has long been and remains the firm teaching of the Catholic Church “that God, the first principle and last end of all things, can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason.”²⁷ This does not mean that everyone has either the capacity or the inclination to reason to a conclusion they may have already arrived at intuitively or simply accepted because of the example of those whose lives serve as a kind of living proof. It does mean, however, that those who claim that modern science has proved God does not exist are wrong, and whether intentionally or not, they are seriously misleading others, especially the young, about the most fundamental question of life. It is up to each of us to use all our faculties, to the best of our ability, to answer the ultimate question of whether there is a God. The arguments in favor of God’s existence, I submit, are quite compelling. To quote again from Justice Scalia’s speech some ten years ago,

²⁶ Kilpatrick, William, Notre Dame: A Fiery Sign? available at: <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2019/notre-dame-a-fiery-sign>

²⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church (2d ed. 1997), 36.

“heck, a First Mover is at least as easy to believe in as a Big Bang triggered by nothingness.”²⁸

But as the title of this essay suggests, my topic is not only the existence of God, but also the truth of Christianity. Realizing that there must be a God is merely a prerequisite to faith. Once you realize God exists, a second series of questions arises: What difference does it make? Does He care about us? What can we know about Him? For what purpose did He create us? Does He have a plan? The answer to these questions is even further beyond science. As Frank Sheed explains in his wonderful little book *A Map of Life: A Simple Study of the Catholic Faith*, “the scientist can tell us what we are made of—or rather what our bodies are made of—but he cannot tell us what we are made for; and by comparison with this altogether vital matter, what he has to say, interesting as it is, is but trivial.” As for the far more important question of what we are made for, Sheed continues, “short of God telling us, we cannot be told, we cannot know” why we are here.²⁹

The essential claim of Christianity, of course, is that God has told us. Christians believe that God's revelation of Himself and his plan for us begins with the creation stories and God's promise to Abraham as recounted in the Old Testament. It continues over thousands of years with His Chosen People, “our

²⁸ *Scalia Speaks*, note 2, at 108.

²⁹ Sheed, Frank, *A Map Of Life: A Simple Study of the Catholic Faith*, pg. 12–13 (Ignatius Press 1994) (originally published by Sheed and Ward 1933).

elder brothers in the faith,” and culminated in the birth and life of Christ, who not only redeemed us from our sins and opened the gates of heaven by his death and resurrection, but founded a Church to carry on his saving mission to the end of time.

But how can we know whether this is true? Why should we believe what the Church teaches? Well, St. Paul gave us the test in his First Letter to the Corinthians. There, he tells us: “Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” 1 Corinthians 15:12-14.

There you have it. The resurrection is the key. If Christ has not been raised, then the Christian faith is false, and we should admit it and move on with our lives. But if it is true, if Christ did rise from the dead, that fact alone changes—changed—everything. This follows because if Christ rose from the dead, He must be who He said He was; He must be God. For mere humans do not come back to this life after they are dead, not without God. And God would not raise a person from the dead who falsely claimed to be God.

Christianity is not based on a theory; it is based on a Person Who Christians claim is God, a claim that is itself based on historical events that either did or did not occur. And while Christianity’s claim may seem impossible based on our understanding of nature, we are no longer talking about mere

nature; we talking about a realm beyond nature, or more precisely, a realm that is supernatural, a subject that far surpasses the meager understanding of even our greatest scientists and philosophers.

So, how do you decide whether something that supposedly occurred almost 2,000 years ago actually happened? How do you know whether an alleged historical fact is true? Well, here's where I thought my forty years of experience, first as a practicing lawyer and then a judge, in the country's state and federal courts might help. Why? Because that's what courts do—they use a formal procedure with a prescribed set of rules, otherwise known as a trial, to determine whether allegations of historical fact are true. Is the defendant guilty of the crime with which he is charged or not? Or turning to the civil side of the law, did the defendant run the red light and thereby cause the accident, or was it green, giving him the right of way? The purpose of a trial is to find the answer to such questions.

Of course, trials are not used to determine the truth concerning events that are alleged to have occurred almost two thousand years ago. Except for certain serious crimes, i.e., murder, we have statutes of limitation that bar any claims that are too old and dependent upon evidence likely too stale. But our purpose here is not to punish someone for a crime or compensate for harm caused by another; it is to find out whether our very lives have any meaning or purpose beyond what we can give them in this life. And we really have no other way of finding an answer to our question than to assess the evidence in the same

way that a jury does at the conclusion of a trial. Our only alternative is to simply avoid the question of whether the central claim of Christianity is true. Avoidance of the most important question we face doesn't make a lot of sense. So, let's at least see where it gets us.

In a trial (other than a trial to the court), a jury is selected to decide the questions of fact that must be determined in order to resolve the case. A jury consists of citizens from the court's geographic jurisdiction who can be fair and impartial. None of the members of a jury can be a witness to the events in question, or else they would not be on the jury; they would be on one side or the other's list of witnesses. In other words, a juror is in the same position as we are; none of us has any personal knowledge of whether the Resurrection actually occurred. So, how do the members of a jury decide a case? They listen to the testimony of the actual witnesses to the events in question, and any other relevant evidence, and then, aided by the closing arguments of the attorneys, they try to figure out which witnesses are telling the truth.

At the beginning of a trial, the judge usually instructs the jurors that perhaps the most important job they have is to assess the credibility of witnesses—to determine who's telling the truth in whole, in part, or not at all. Unless they first do that, the jurors cannot begin to decide the case. At the end of the trial, the judge gives the jury an instruction that tells how to determine credibility, but it's really a matter of common sense and experience. Here's what a typical instruction says:

Testimony of Witnesses (Deciding What To Believe)³⁰

Part of your job as jurors is to decide how believable each witness was, and how much weight to give each witness' testimony. You may accept all of what a witness says, or part of it, or none of it. Some factors you may consider include:

- the age of the witness;
- the intelligence of the witness;
- the witness' ability and opportunity to see, hear, or know the things the witness testified about;
- the witness' memory;
- the witness' demeanor;
- whether the witness had any bias, prejudice, or other reason to lie or slant the testimony;
- the truthfulness and accuracy of the witness' testimony in light of the other evidence presented; and
- inconsistent or consistent statements or conduct by the witness.

The first thing we need to ask ourselves, then, is whether there are any witnesses to the Resurrection. There obviously aren't any witnesses still alive, given the amount of time that has passed. Nor were there any eyewitnesses to the Resurrection itself; the tomb, except for the body of Jesus, was empty and sealed at the time the Resurrection occurred. But there were many witnesses to the events surrounding the Resurrection—to the crucifixion and death of Jesus, and to his appearances and activities after his death. They include his apostles and disciples. This quotation from 1 Corinthians that immediately precedes Paul's test of the faith quoted above, gives some idea of the numbers:

Now, I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you

³⁰ Seventh Circuit Pattern Civil Jury Instructions, No. 1.13, available at <https://www.insd.uscourts.gov/sites/insd/files/7th%20Cir%20Pattern%20Civil%20Jury%20Instructions%20Aug%202017.pdf>

are saved, if you hold fast—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all of the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

We also have the account in the four gospels, as well as the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles. These writings are clearly intended to present eyewitness accounts. John is explicit as he ends his gospel with the statement: “This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things and who has written these things; and we know that his testimony is true.” John 21:24.

Similarly, Luke begins his gospel account with this statement: “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.” Luke 1:1-4. Luke similarly begins his account of the early Church in Acts by recalling Jesus’ resurrection and his commission to his apostles just before his Ascension when he tells them that “you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:1-9.

Peter, too, in his first letter opens with a declaration that having been “born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,” 1 Peter 1:3, and identifies himself as “a witness to the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed.” 1 Peter 5:1.

This emphasis on the importance of the testimony of witnesses reveals a clear intent on the part of the writers to pass on what they were claiming as real, not merely a hope or aspiration. One can also see in the gospel accounts the authors’ realization that what they were claiming required strong evidence to be believed. After all, they were claiming a person who died came back to life. Even Jesus’ disciples did not believe he had risen when Mary Magdalene first reported it: “When they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.” Mark 16:11. And, of course, who could forget “doubting Thomas,” who when told by the others that they had “seen the Lord,” responded that he would not believe “unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side”? John 20:25.

Another fact that becomes clear from reading the gospels is that contrary to the modern claim that the resurrection was added long after Jesus's death, it was really the central event. According to one estimate, one fourth of each of the gospels focuses on the 72-hour period of his entire life: his Passion and Resurrection, and much of the rest explicitly leads up to that event. Thus, those who view Jesus as simply an influential moral teacher are missing the central

point of the gospels. Moral teachers come and go. It wasn't Jesus' moral teaching that led to the reordering of history around the date of his birth.³¹

Nor can it be reasonably argued that the gospels were not intended to be historical, or biographical, accounts of Jesus' life and death. To be sure, myths or symbolic stories are one of the literary styles used in some of the books of the Bible, but that is not the style of the gospels. These accounts are not fairy tales that begin in a "time long, long ago" and in "a land far, far away." Matthew states that the birth of Christ took place in the Town of Bethlehem in Judea when Herod was King. Matthew 2:1-5. And Luke tells us that Jesus began his public life "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas" Luke 3:1-3. One does not usually provide these kinds of geographical and historical details as to time and place when he's telling a fairy tale or making up a myth.

It is also worth noting that several non-Christian contemporaneous historians confirm at least some of the basic facts of the gospel accounts. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who was born four years after the resurrection, is considered "the most comprehensive primary source on Jewish

³¹ Mark Shea, "If Christ Has Not Been Raised: Evidence for the Resurrection." available at: <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2003/if-christ-had-not-been-raised-the-evidence-for-the-resurrection>

history that has survived from antiquity and done so virtually intact despite its voluminous nature (the equivalent of 12 volumes).”³² Among the early accounts attributed to him is the following:

At this time there was a wise man called Jesus, and his conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. Many people among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive. Accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah, concerning whom the prophets have reported wonders. And the tribe of the Christians, so named after him, has not disappeared to this day.³³

According to Paul Meier, a professor of ancient history, passages from Josephus, “along with other non-biblical, non-Christian references to Jesus in secular first-century sources—among them Tacitus (Annals 15:44), Suetonius (Claudius 25), and Pliny the Younger (Letter to Trajan)—prove conclusively that any denial of Jesus’ historicity is maundering sensationalism by the uninformed and/or the dishonest.”³⁴

So, let’s now turn to how a jury would assess the credibility of the witnesses to the resurrection we’ve identified, beginning with the first three factors in the jury instruction quoted above—the age and intelligence of the witnesses, and their ability and opportunity to see, hear, or know the things the witness testified about. Our original eyewitnesses were adult men and women

³² <https://www.namb.net/apologetics-blog/josephus-and-jesus/>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

who, though not formally educated in the sense we think of today, certainly knew the difference between life and death. There were no machines at that time that could maintain a body's vital functions long after its ability to do so on its own had ceased and thereby cloud the line between life and death. Then, as today, people certainly understood that when you're dead, you're dead, and once you're dead, you do not get up, walk around, talk with your friends, and sit down with them for a meal. Yet, this is exactly what the Apostles and early Christians were claiming Jesus did after his brutal death by crucifixion.

Christ's disciples were far closer to the actual events than we are. The fact that they were simple and unsophisticated makes it even less likely they would concoct such a strange story. They knew Jesus well as a person, some having followed him for the three years of his public life. Their testimony is not based on a one-time fleeting glimpse of a person running away from a crime scene in the dark of night, as can be the case in a modern trial. All of Jerusalem was aware of, and many watched, Jesus' horrible death. And as recounted in the Gospels, Paul's letters, and Acts, Jesus was seen thereafter not by one person, but by many, even hundreds, on multiple occasions over the forty days before his Ascension. The witnesses thus had the ability and opportunity to see, hear, and know the things they testified about.

As for their memory and whether they would likely recall the event, someone rising from the dead is not the kind of occurrence one would forget. Some biblical skeptics argue that by the time they were written down, the

eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life, death and alleged resurrection were completely distorted from the original accounts. They analogize the process to the game of "telephone" in which a message is passed on through a long line of people until at the end it bears little resemblance to the original.³⁵ The analogy makes no sense here, however, given the number of people who claimed to have seen the risen Christ. In addition, Jesus' death first shocked and demoralized his followers, and his multiple appearances thereafter amazed them and changed their lives forever. People don't forget events that have that kind of impact on their lives and the lives of so many others. Moreover, they were expressly commissioned to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." Matthew 28:19-20. They would have wanted to get it right.

The fifth credibility factor, the witness' demeanor, refers to the way a witness appears when he testifies. Is he looking down and trying to avoid eye contact? Is he sweating, or does he appear unduly nervous? Is he answering questions in a clear, confident voice? Obviously, we can't personally observe the demeanor of witnesses who are long dead and buried. But we can get some idea of what their demeanor must have been like from looking at the impact their testimony had on the people who did see and hear them.

³⁵ Pitre, Brant, *The Case For Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ*, pg. 3-4. (Image 2016)

We can see from Acts that people who saw and heard what the apostles said clearly believed them and thought they were telling the truth. On the day of Pentecost, we are told Peter and the other apostles went out into the marketplace and told all the people gathered there of the death and resurrection of Jesus, saying that they crucified the chosen one of God. According to the account in Acts, those who heard were “cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’” Acts 2:37. Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Acts 2:38. The account continues, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” Acts 2:41. In a later chapter, on another occasion of Peter’s public testimony, we are told “many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to about five thousand.” Acts 4:4. Though perhaps exaggerated, these accounts suggest the forcefulness with which the early gospel was preached.

Peter and the rest of the apostles became so popular that the authorities feared riots if they punished them. Acts 4:21. The other apostles, and Paul in particular, moving out from Jerusalem to the known world met with similar success, starting communities of believers everywhere they went. Sociologist of religion Rodney Stark describes the rapid growth of Christianity in his book *The*

Rise of Christianity.³⁶ Stark estimates that for the first three centuries, Christianity grew at roughly a rate of 40 percent per decade. He maintains that Emperor Constantine did not so much ensure Christianity's success as acknowledge it. In Stark's view, "Constantine's conversion would be better seen as a response to the massive exponential wave in progress, not its cause."³⁷ Stark concludes that "the primary means of [Christianity's] growth was through the united and motivated efforts of the growing numbers of Christian believers, who invited their friends, relatives, and neighbors to share the 'good news'."³⁸

The remarkable and rapid growth of Christianity in its early years strongly suggests that the demeanor of the original witnesses to Jesus' resurrection was quite convincing. Pope Benedict XVI makes this point in part two of his three-part series, *Jesus of Nazareth*:

Indeed, the apostolic preaching with all its boldness and passion would be unthinkable unless the witnesses had experienced a real encounter, coming to them from outside, with something entirely new and unforeseen, namely, the self-revelation and verbal communication of the risen Christ. Only a real event of a radically new quality could possibly have given rise to the apostolic preaching, which cannot be explained on the basis of speculations or inner, mystical experiences. In all its boldness and originality, it draws life

³⁶ Stark, Rodney, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton University Press 1996)

³⁷ Ibid at 10.

³⁸ Ibid at 208.

from the impact of an event that no one had invented, an event that surpassed all that could be imagined.³⁹

Perhaps the most important factor to consider in assessing the credibility of witnesses at a trial is whether they had any reason to fabricate their story. Have they shown any bias or prejudice? What benefit did they get or what harm did they avoid by telling everyone that Jesus rose from the dead? Why would they have said he did, and continued to maintain it, if it was not true? In a criminal trial, it is unfortunately true that a prosecutor will often be required to offer a reduced charge or sentence, in other words, a “deal,” to one defendant to obtain his testimony against a co-defendant. The prosecutor is required to disclose any such deal before trial so the jury can take it into consideration in assessing the witness’ testimony. Well, did any of our witnesses to the resurrection “get a deal” in return for their testimony?

As far as we can tell, Jesus’ apostles and disciples got nothing but hardship, at least in this world, and some were even tortured and killed. Keep in mind, Christianity was not a powerful, warlike religion that rewarded its followers with plunder and sexual slaves, on the one hand, and punished those who rejected it with slavery or death on the other. Its message was salvation through suffering and self-sacrifice, and it had a stricter moral code than

³⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, pg. 275 (Ignatius Press 2011).

certainly the pagan religions of the day. It was not a privileged religion. In a genuinely counter-cultural way, it lifted the status of women with its teachings about Mary; Jesus' close friendships with Martha, Mary and other women; and its prohibition of polygamy, and divorce and remarriage. Beginning with the stoning of St. Stephen shortly after Pentecost, with St. Paul initially leading the way, and continuing up into present times, the martyrs are innumerable. The apostles left everything behind to follow Jesus, and tradition has it that all but one of the apostles died a martyr's death. Unlike more recent times, a person living in the first century could not start up a new religion and hit the airwaves as a televangelist in a money-making enterprise. Why would the apostles and the disciples tell such a story and risk their lives if it was not true?

Another factor to consider in assessing the credibility of a witness' account of an event at a trial is how the witness describes his own conduct. In a criminal trial, for example, the prosecutor will often call as a witness a cooperating witness who was involved in the same crime as the defendant but has agreed to testify in return for a lesser charge or reduced sentence. If such a witness tries to minimize his own involvement or appear heroic, he is far less credible than a witness who admits his own failings. The same consideration comes into play in other areas. How believable do people find the hagiographies of cult leaders like the "Fearless Leaders" of North Korea or Stalinist Russia?

Now, consider how the witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection are portrayed in the biblical accounts. All the apostles except John, run away at the

first sign of danger. Jesus' closest friends can't even stay awake with him as he prays in the garden waiting for Judas to betray him. Peter, the "Rock" on whom the Church is to be built, when he's not bragging about how he won't allow anything happen to Jesus, denies even knowing him three times during the show trial before Caiaphas and the high priests, and then runs away weeping. It's the women and the youngest among them who remain with Jesus to the end. And then, even when Jesus rises from the dead, the apostles are embarrassingly slow to realize what has happened, despite the fact he'd been dropping hints all along. The first to discover that he has been raised are women, who would not have been considered ideal witnesses in first century Jewish culture. When they tell the men, as already noted, some don't believe it. When they finally do realize that Jesus has been raised, they hide in a back room fearing for their own safety. That these inconvenient and embarrassing facts appear throughout adds to the credibility of the gospel accounts. They are not the kinds of details the disciples would include about themselves if they were making it all up.

These facts not only cut against the argument that Jesus' apostles and disciples concocted the story of the Resurrection, but also the claim that the resurrection was the product of wish fulfillment, a mass hallucination, or the inability to accept the reality that Jesus was dead. People who are psychologically unable to accept the fact their leader died would jump to the conclusion that he was still alive. They would not express disbelief upon first being told he is alive. They would not insist on touching the wounds in his hands and placing their

hand in the hole in his side before they will believe; they would already think he is alive. And hundreds of people do not share the same hallucination over a forty-day period.

Next, let's consider "the inconsistent or consistent statements or conduct by the witness[es]." Though there are differences in the details in each of the gospel accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection, each tells basically the same story. He was tortured and crucified by the Roman authorities at the insistence of the leaders of the Jews and an assembled mob. He died, was placed in a tomb, and rose on the third day. The differences in details throughout the gospels reflect the fact that the accounts were written down by different people for different audiences with different perspectives at different times. A good lawyer would argue that the differences in details add to the credibility of the essential story because they show that the witnesses did not get together and make sure their stories matched before telling it to the police or testifying in court. Juries typically see through rehearsed testimony. As far as the conduct of the witnesses, we've pretty much covered that. Leaving all you own behind and going out to spread the "Good News," at the risk of being laughed at, at best, but more likely tortured and even killed, is not the kind of thing people do if they are making up a story. This is especially true for simple and unsophisticated people with no history or experience of public speaking.

Finally, our jury instruction tells us to consider "the truthfulness and accuracy of the witness' testimony in light of the other evidence presented."

What other evidence is there? Well, how about the many prophecies in the Old Testament pointing to Christ? As Jesus explains to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” Luke 24:25–26. Luke continues: “And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.” Luke 24:27. It is difficult to read Isaiah, especially chapter 53, verses 3–5, and not see a foreshadowing of Jesus. This is why the Catechism, quoting St. Augustine, tells us “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.”⁴⁰ Scripture scholars are especially adept at explaining how the events of the New Testament are foreshadowed throughout the old.⁴¹

We may also want to consider the rapid spread and two-thousand-year history of Christianity, the creation of universities and hospitals, the amazing intellectual tradition of philosophy and theology, and the end of such barbaric practices as human sacrifice, infanticide, chattel slavery and the subjugation of women. Mindful of how shocking this last statement might seem to those educated and immersed in our post-modern, secular culture in which the

⁴⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed. 1997) (CCC), 129.

⁴¹ Duggan, Michael W., *The Consuming Fire: A Christian Guide to the Old Testament* (Our Sunday Visitor 2010).

Church is all too often portrayed as the enemy of education, science, human freedom, and democracy, you may wish to consider the other side of the story as told by historian Thomas E. Woods, Jr., in his book *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*, and others.⁴² The more classically educated might also consider the fact that today, the Church appears to stand as the strongest defender of reason in a world seemingly made blind by post-modernism and scientism to the higher truths about the human person and human freedom.⁴³

Lastly, we might consider post resurrection miracles. On this last point, I must admit that in the past I did not personally find miracles and private revelation very convincing, since the psychological forces at work on the human mind are difficult to discount if one did not personally witness the event in question. But having read more about some of these events, in particular the still existing tilma that Juan Diego wore and that bears the imprint of the mystical Lady of Guadalupe he met outside Mexico City in the sixteenth century,

⁴² Woods, Thomas E., Jr., *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (Regnery 2005); see also Crocker, H. W. III, *Triumph: The Power and Glory of the Catholic Church, A 2000-Year History* (Three Rivers Press 2001); and Hitchcock, James, *History of the Catholic Church: From Apostolic Times to the Third Millennium* (Ignatius Press 2012).

⁴³ See, e.g., *Fides et Ratio*, Pope St. John Paul II's encyclical on Faith and Reason, which grew out of the Pope's desire "to defend the capacity of human reason to know the truth. This confidence in reason is an integral part of the Catholic intellectual tradition, but it needs reaffirming today in the face of widespread and doctrinaire doubt about our ability to answer the fundamental questions: Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?" (Ad Limina Address of October 24, 1998, n. 5); see also George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God* (Basic Books 2005).

some of the medical miracles at Lourdes, the miracle of Fatima,⁴⁴ and the so-called “incurruptibles,”⁴⁵ I’m less confident of my skepticism. Like most Catholics, my faith does not depend on the truth of any of these later miracles, but it is difficult to dismiss all of them.

None of this is to deny the evil that has been done by Christians, even popes, bishops and priests professing to be acting in the name of the Church. As we are continually reminded, the best arguments against Catholicism and Christianity in general are Catholics and Christians in particular. But that just means that Jesus did not change human nature or take away free will. The Church claims to be an institution that is both human and divine. The human part is all too often plainly and sadly visible; it is the divine part that is at times hard to see. To see that part, we need to look at what the Church teaches and the lives of the saints, those who not only profess belief but have lived lives that reflect the teachings of Jesus. We should also be careful not to uncritically accept all the accusations about what Catholics and Christians have done in history. There have been many throughout history who have hated the Church, and they are especially prominent today. Because the Church’s teachings on human

⁴⁴ Robert J. Spitzer, S.J., Ph.D., “The Science (or Lack Thereof) Behind Juan Diego’s Tilma,” article at Magis Center, available at: <https://magiscenter.com/contemporary-scientificallly-validated-miracles-associated-with-blessed-mary-saints-and-the-holy-eucharist-2/>

⁴⁵ Cruz, Joan Carroll, *The Incurruptibles: A Study of the Incorruption of the Bodies of Various Catholic Saints and Beati* (TAN Books 2012) (original copyright 1977).

sexuality are so counter to the prevailing cultural view, the number of people who despise the Church, especially in the West, has grown.⁴⁶ Many are only too willing to exaggerate the number and nature of the sins committed during the Inquisition, the Crusades, and the so-called “Wars of Religion,” but ignore the fact that the death counts for officially atheist “workers’ paradises,” or secular nations where the State takes the place of religion, dwarf those supposedly committed by the Church and sincere Christians.

In conclusion, I submit that the evidence for the Resurrection is more than sufficient for reasonable people to conclude that what the Church has been teaching for almost 2000 years is not only the "Good News" of all time but is true: That Christ has been raised from the dead and our faith is not in vain. The consistent testimony of the Apostles and the early disciples, and the witness of their lives given in sacrifice for what they saw and believed, constitute strong evidence for the Resurrection if one carefully considers the criteria we commonly use to assess the credibility of witnesses at modern trials. Those who nevertheless do not believe may find comfort in the thought that there are no rules other than those we make up for ourselves and that death brings with it not a final judgment, but a deep and eternal sleep without even a nightmare to disturb it. But to those who accept the testimony of so many who have gone

⁴⁶ For a detailed examination of the reasons behind those teachings and the consequences of rejecting them, see Jennifer Roback Morse, PhD., *The Sexual State: How Elite Ideologies Are Destroying Lives and Why the Church Was Right All Along* (TAN Books 2018); see also Kuby, Gabriele, *The Global Sexual Revolution: Destruction of Freedom in the Name of Freedom* (Angelico Press 2015).

before comes the realization that we are not the accidental byproducts of an unthinking process that did not have us in mind, that this life is but prelude to the next, that no one's life is insignificant, and that we are made for eternal happiness. May all of us, with the grace of God, come to see and embrace His plan for us and endeavor to share the great gift of Faith with those we encounter in our lives.