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UCO HOSTS GOD DEBATE



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On Friday, September 12th at UCO, students, faculty, and other interested parties jammed the Pegasus Theater to capacity in order to hear arguments for and against the existence of God put forth by two esteemed members of the UCO's own faculty – Dr. Doug Miller of the philosophy department and Dr. John George, professor emeritus of political science.

The event moderator, Mr. Josuha Umar, introduced the resolution of the debate: The "God of the Bible" (the deity described in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures) exists. Dr. Miller argued in favor of this resolution, however, he began his opening statement by noting that it was not possible, in his estimation, to deductively prove the existence or non-existence of God, "If Thomas Aquinas couldn't do it, I don't think I can." Undaunted, Dr. Miller went on to present his argument in the form of a deductive syllogism:

- **If Jesus told the truth, then God exists.**
- **Jesus did tell the truth**
- **Therefore, God exists.**

In order to affirm the crucial premise, that Jesus did indeed tell the truth (and was never mistaken) in all matters on which he spoke, one might reasonably require fairly strong historical evidence. Dr. Miller suggests that such evidence is to be found in Jesus' prediction of his own death and resurrection in the synoptic gospels (Mark 8:31, Matthew 16:21, Luke 9:22) and his literal, historical fulfillment of the same. Dr. Miller went on to claim that there is "sufficient extrabiblical evidence...to suggest that he did in fact rise from the dead" but he did not get the chance to adduce the evidence since he ran out of time at the end of his ten-minute opening statement.

While Dr. Miller based his entire argument on a single historical claim, Dr. George's opening remarks were far more varied and encapsulated several different arguments. He led off his with a variation on the evidential argument from evil, "It is not difficult to conclude that your God enjoys seeing immense amounts of suffering, because that is what we have on this planet...otherwise, why doesn't he put a stop to such horrible things? Maybe your God is indifferent, or maybe your God does not exist." He then went on to attack the notion that life on Earth was intelligently designed, characterizing the human body as "a rather deficient item" and noting that it is easily injured and prone to accidental death. Next, Dr. George vilified the theological concept of hell, noting that the concept arose during times when physical torture was considered a morally acceptable method of dealing with political dissidents and other ideological deviants. Turning then to the concept of petitionary prayer, he claimed that it is pointless to make special requests of an omniscient being who already knows what you desire and what (if anything) in the way of divine intervention is warranted. He went on to challenge the efficacy of prayer, claiming that "If one enumerates the times that a miracle occurs versus the times that we pray for people not to die, well, it seems that nothing fails like prayer."

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Faith–Based Bloodshed

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Amid continuing disingenuous evasions of the fact that mayhem of 9-11 was rooted in religious faith, it's difficult to imagine that in 1999 Buddhist, Christian, Jewish and Muslim religious leaders conferred in Geneva, Switzerland, to discuss religion's widespread role in warfare. Petitioning religious leaders to refrain from invoking religion as a justification for violence, and estimating that 56 conflicts worldwide had religious elements, the conferees signed a document titled "The Geneva Spiritual Appeal."

(Available online at http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_prom.htm)

While giving a precise accounting of religion's role in human carnage is an insuperable undertaking, we can explore why religious conflict heightens passions so intensely, and we can ask whether religion is a force unequaled in its ability to invoke murderous self-righteousness.

Our ready inclination to form enduring group affiliations has enabled us to thrive as a species. Within our groupings, we strive to act virtuously, looking out for each other; outside, however, our baser impulses prevail, especially on occasions when, accompanied by fellow group members, we encounter members of outside groups, with inter-group conflict likely to ensue. Profound emotions impel our desire to dominate other groups: victory over an opponent reaps the physiological reward of hormonal surges.

As I discussed in September's issue, Dr. Michael Persinger has identified unstable neuronal firing patterns in the brain's temporal lobe as the cause of mystical experiences. Directing faint pulses of a mild magnetic field, Persinger has artificially induced mystical/religious experiences, often in the form of a "sensed presence," in 80% of the subjects he's studied in a Laurentian University (Canada) laboratory. In sensitive temporal lobes, the magnetic field triggers electrochemical activity in neurons, or "microseizures." Before undergoing the lab experiment, subjects take a Personal Philosophy Inventory (PPI), a 140-item questionnaire designed by Persinger. Item number 136 on the PPI is: "If God told me to kill, I would do it in His name." The prevalence of affirmative responses demands our attention. (What

if a “sensed presence” gave the order to kill?) Persinger collected 15 years of PPIs, given to 1,480 university students, and found that 7% of the subjects answered “yes.” Holy Writ shows that enjoining his followers to kill is one of the Abrahamic god’s favorite pastimes.

“Although wars may be driven by economic and political variables,” Persinger wrote in the journal *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, “the capacity to maintain the group dynamics is strongly determined by the manipulation of religious beliefs. Religious belief systems, which could be considered the social representation of normal individual egocentrism, encourage an association between personal immortality and the total validity of the culture’s god.” This grandiose sense of proportion is bolstered among the faithful when they vanquish the hated infidels in a self-righteous frenzy. At stake is not merely king or country, but one’s standing in the cosmos for all eternity—a transcendent *casus belli* almost certain to rally the troops, especially among those who already esteem themselves superior beings and thus aggressive and hostile. (Some two decades ago, a sarcastic prankster propounded the ludicrous claim that low self-esteem engenders to aggression, as if the milquetoasts of the world pose a physical threat to our safety; inexplicably, many educators and counselors seized on this outlandish hoax, whereupon they propounded the even more outlandish fantasy that Americans were the victims of a low self-esteem epidemic—a claim tantamount in scope to saying the Pacific Ocean lacks enough water.)

On the Web site of Laurentian University’s Neuroscience Research Group (<http://www.laurentian.ca/neurosci/persinger.html>), Persinger offers that his “research has been encouraged by the historical fact that most wars and group degradations are coupled implicitly to god beliefs and to the presumption that those who do not believe the same as the experiment are somehow less human and hence expendable.”

Their enmity inflamed by their devotion to imaginary gods, the devout have remorselessly taken the lives of countless millions. Since religion is possibly the single most potent source of self-righteousness, as long as religious affiliation remains a common central feature of group identification, the pious will, under certain conditions, continue to exult in faith-based bloodshed.

UCO hosts God debate (continued)

Dr. Miller did not concern himself with rebutting Dr. George's arguments during his five minute rebuttal period; instead, he took the opportunity to bolster his argument for Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. The argument hangs primarily on an absence of evidence, namely, the absence of Jesus' body, "No one doubts that he lived, that he taught, that he was buried, having been condemned under Pontius Pilate, and now begins history's great *corpus delecti* case. What happened to the body?" Dr. Miller went on to note that the creed found in 1st Corinthians was being preached throughout the Roman empire as early as the 50s-60s C.E. and that the enemies of Christianity failed to squelch rumors of Jesus' resurrection in the most straightforward manner imaginable, "The easiest thing in the world for them to have done to nip this thing in the bud would have been to simply produce a body. ... If they did not produce a body I submit to you that it is because they didn't have one."

Of course they didn't! The Romans did not keep the bodies of crucifixion victims; they tossed them in a mass grave or else left them for the dogs and carrion. Even supposing, though, that the Roman authorities defied convention and allowed for the burial of Jesus' body, it would be useless for them to present it as evidence some three decades later. In a world without forensic science, one bag of bones is just as good as any other.

Dr. George's rebuttal did not directly address these problems in any detail, although he did mention that we have no way of knowing what Jesus actually said and did, or even whether Jesus was actually buried, since the only sources we have for biographical data are "propagandists for a new religion" who wrote several generations after Jesus' death. As to Jesus' alleged resurrection, Dr. George pointed out that it was presaged by the mythical death and resurrection of various other saviour-deities such as "Osiris, Attis, Odonis, Mithra, and many others."

After the rebuttal periods, the moderator gave the debaters an opportunity to question one another on various matters, and then opened up the floor to written questions from the audience. The question-and-answer period lasted for over two hours and was filled with valuable insights from both disputants.

If you would like a free copy of the debate, please send a blank DVD or VHS tape to our P.O. Box, or e-mail us at debates@OklahomaAtheists.org.

October 2003 Freethought Calendar

Oct 9th – Church/state meetup – 8:00 pm

Starbucks Coffee at 8500 N. Rockwell Ave
Opponents of the religious right, unite!

Oct 21st – Atheists meetup – 7:00 pm

Please vote for your favorite location at
<http://atheists.meetup.com>

Oct 25th – Agnostics meetup – 1:00 pm

Please vote for your favorite location at
<http://agnostic.meetup.com>

Oct 31st – Labyrinth Deli – 7:06 pm

Food, fellowship, fun! 3214 N. Classen Blvd.



Visit <http://www.CafePress.com/AOK1>
(or AOK2, AOK3, etc. and so forth...)

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