

# IS GOD THE SOURCE OF MORALITY?

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## OPENING REMARKS

I come not to praise God but to bury him along with the dead gods of now forgotten religions. Not to praise him as the source of all that's good in the world, and hence the ultimate guide to human morals, but to indict him as the self-confessed source of all that's wrong with it. When the Christian God says in his Holy Scriptures, that he is the creator of evil, I am prepared to take him at his word.

I will assume the role of prosecutor in providing grounds for agreeing with God's self-indictment. And having conducted God's trial in accord with the principles of morality and logic, I will hope to see him put, first, into a straightjacket, and then forever in his grave, no longer to command the belief of men.

Matt will act on God's behalf as counsel for God's defence, what theologians call an "apologist".

## THE DEITY IN THE DOCK:

I'm going to indict God on four categories of charges. Each category has scores, if not hundreds or thousands of instances. If God is guilty of even *one* of these instances, that alone would be grounds for his conviction. Drawing upon evidence provided by God himself in his so-called Holy Scriptures, I hold that he's guilty of them all.

### A. Crimes against Humanity

The pagan religions typically invoked various gods as supernatural causes of natural phenomena: earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, lightning, plagues, famines, and so on. The biblical god takes over the same sort of role, only he claims to be responsible for the lot. He boasts of repeatedly using natural events such as these to injure, maim, starve, drown, and in other ways kill off millions upon millions of people. Disease and disaster are God's weapons of mass destruction.

### B. War Crimes

This god is guilty of the crime of genocide. According to the story of Noah and the flood he wipes out "every living thing on the face of the earth". In his role as Commander-in-Chief of his chosen people, God is guilty of ethnic cleansing. He orders the slaughter, without compassion, of hundreds of thousands of women, children, and suckling babes. He

condones the taking of orphaned virgins for use as sex slaves by his conquering soldiers. He threatens, too, to have unborn children ripped out of their mothers' wombs; and seems to relish the prospect.

### **C. Licensing Moral Mayhem and Murder**

This God prescribes the death penalty for at least 15 alleged offences. These include being a stubborn and rebellious son (Deuteronomy 21:18-21), hitting or cursing one's father and mother (Exodus 21:17, Leviticus 20:8), desecrating the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14), being a woman who cannot prove she was a virgin prior to marriage (Deuteronomy 22:20-21), being a woman who did not protest loudly enough when she was being raped (Deuteronomy 22:23-24), being a blasphemer (Leviticus 24:16), being an adulterer (Leviticus 20:10-12), worshipping some other gods (Deuteronomy 13:6-9), and being a homosexual (Leviticus 20:13). God's recommended penalty? Stoning, usually.

God tells us unambiguously that he's committed all these crimes and countless more. And he never says sorry for any of them or even shows a trace of regret.

But all of these crimes pale into insignificance compared with that for which I'm now about to indict him. For all of these are finite in duration, whereas the next is supposed to go on and on for all eternity.

### **D. Crimes of Torture**

This god, in the person of his son, Jesus, commits the vilest of all crimes: torture of infinite duration in the fires of hell. For whom and why? The majority of the human race for the simple alleged offence of not having the right religious beliefs.

There are at least thirteen passages in Matthew alone in which Jesus talks about the fate of those who will go to hell—a fate that he describes as “eternal”, as “fiery”, as a place of “unquenchable fire”, as a place where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth”. The apostle Paul (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9) looks forward to the time when, in his words, “the Lord Jesus Christ shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God.” And the author of Revelation paints a picture of hell in all its voyeuristic obscenity when he reports that all whose names were not written in the book of life would be “cast into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15), a place where all non-believers will, in his words, “be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb, and the smoke of their torment ascendeth for ever and ever” (Revelation 14:10-11). The expression “the Lamb”, scholars and theologians agree, refers to Jesus. Nice to know that Jesus will watch

the eternal tortures of the damned, i.e., of many like me, and hosts of unbelievers like some of you.

Is it any wonder that Christians who take God at his word have tortured themselves with fear about their own eternal prospects, have burned heretics at the stake so as to save their souls from eternal perdition, or have dashed infants' brains out on the stones so they wouldn't have a chance of becoming non-believers? Yet God, by virtue of his omniscience, knew all this.

Is it any wonder that televangelists are able to use the fear of hellfire to bring money into their coffers?

Who today, you may ask, would take this sort of moral primitivism seriously? Well, many Muslim fundamentalists certainly do: the Taliban, for instance. Arguably, the moral laws they and other Islamic fundamentalists seek to enforce are little more than the Islamic versions of the Old Testament, which Mohammed drew upon freely.

Ditto with many Christian fundamentalists—the Christian Reconstructionists, for instance. Comprising a sizable and increasingly influential proportion of the Southern Baptist Convention—itsself the most potent force for evangelical Christianity—the extreme Christian Right, like their Muslim brethren, demand their country become a theocracy and unflinchingly acknowledge that implementing God's commands would inevitably result in the death of tens of millions of their fellow citizens: over 45 million, on one estimate. Welcome to a replica of Sharia Law.

It's not just the ultra-fundamentalists of theistic religions that take God's precepts seriously. Even the relatively liberal branch of the Christian church--as represented by the Church of England and its Episcopalian offshoot--are troubled enough by God's word to agonise over some of them, what he has to say about homosexuals in particular: that they are an "abomination" who should be killed in this world and spend the next in hell. Hence the prospect of another great schism in Christianity, and the pathetic excuse by gay bishop, Bishop Gene Robinson that the church is "still trying to figure out God's will" on the subject. Robinson and Archbishop Rowan Williams (who's on the other side of the debate), should read the Bible. It reported God's will long ago.

Has God changed his mind about any of his moral dictates? If so, he has kept it to himself. Yet acclaimed Christian philosopher and apologist, William Alston, claims God still communicates with sincere Christians. Could it be that all those sincere Christians who--for about two thousand years--have gone on crusades with God's word on their lips, are listening to themselves, not God.

Why don't any ever report having heard God say clearly "Stop! You've got me wrong."

The biblical god is not what Saint Anselm thought he was: that than which no greater, no more morally perfect, can be conceived. Out of his own mouth God condemns himself as that than which no viler, no more evil, can be conceived.

"God is love" is a sick joke. The pleasantry, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you", is little more than propaganda to cover up God's true nature. The Golden Rule we might applaud, as a rough rule of thumb. But it's a bit rich, don't you think, coming from the mouth of someone, Jesus, who would send most of us to hell? No moral reciprocity there!

How do God's depictions of his own behaviour square with the belief that he's perfectly good? Or that he's the source of what some call "The Moral Law"? They don't.

### **PUTTING GOD AND HIS DEFENDERS IN A LOGICAL STRAIGHTJACKET**

The fact that God himself chronicles all his crimes--often in graphic and gruesome detail--falsifies the belief that he is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. His self-revelation places both God and his followers, such as Matt, in a logical straightjacket. For there is no way of escaping from the following set of five mutually inconsistent propositions:

- 1. What God proposes for our belief--including beliefs about what we ought to do--is what we ought to believe or do.**
- 2. In his holy scripture God proposes for our belief that he has caused, committed, condoned, or laid down commands for us to obey, every one of the four types of crimes of types A, B, C, and D.**
- 3. It is morally wrong to cause, commit, condone, or command any of the crimes of types A, B, C, D.**
- 4. God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.**
- 5. A morally perfect being would not do anything that is morally wrong.**

Theists believe in all five. The trouble is that these five statements form an inconsistent set such that from any four one can validly infer the

falsity of the remaining one. Thus, one can coherently assert (1), (2), (3) and (4) only at the cost of giving up (5); coherently assert (2), (3), (4), and (5) only at the cost of giving up (1); and so on.

The problem is to decide which of these five statements to give up in order to avoid contradiction.

To deny (1) would be to deny that we ought to do what he says we should believe as to matters of morals, or matters of fact. It would be to deny, for instance, that we ought to obey God's commandments, such as those instanced in category C. It would be to deny that God is the ultimate authority on what is true or false, right or wrong.

To deny (2) would be to deny the authority of scripture. It would be to say either (a) that God didn't know how to say what he meant or (b) that he really meant what he so clearly said. But the first alternative would entail denying his linguistic competence and hence his omniscience. On the other hand, the second alternative would entail that we have to rely on human interpreters to tell us what he really did mean. That's where the art of apologetics comes in. But in that case, the so-called Word of God becomes the word of man subject to rival, subjective, interpretations. All pretence of objective moral truth is then abandoned. We would then place ourselves in the same sort of position as primitives who wait on witch doctors to tell them what the chicken entrails really mean.

To deny (3) would be to assert that it is morally permissible to cause, commit, condone, or command some of the vilest crimes imaginable. It would be to ally oneself with moral monsters like Ghenghis Khan, Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot.

To deny (4) would be to deny that the god we are talking about has the properties that theologians regard as the defining, and distinguishing, properties of the Christian God. In short it would be to deny the core belief of theism.

Finally, to deny (5) would be to deny a virtual truism. To deny it would be to license the use of the word "good" so as to mean the equivalent of "evil". It would be to play word games, like Humpty Dumpty who thought he could make words mean whatever he wanted them to mean--including their opposites.

Which, I wonder, will Matt deny so as to avoid contradiction?

Let's wait and see.

## REPLY TO MATT

I hope everyone is aware of what Matt's been up to. He's used his research into ancient literary conventions and current use of metaphors like "Knock his block off" to make God's actions seem innocuous and so to divert attention from the grave charges his God faces. These are:

- that no-one is above the moral law, not even God;
- that the God of the Bible is a thoroughly evil God, and self-confessedly so;
- that one ought not to obey the commands of such a God just because he issues them.

Matt claims that God is *above* the moral law since it's God that lays down that law, or as he puts it "he has no duties."

Matt uses this dodge when he tries to escape my logical straightjacket by exploiting what he calls an ambiguity in claim [3] that it is morally wrong to cause, commit, condone, or command any of the crimes of types A, B, C, D.

He says that this isn't universally applicable. It doesn't apply to *all* persons, he says, only to human ones. God is exempt because--although he's a person--he isn't a *human* one.

But this makes a mockery of the idea that truth and falsity are objective matters, not relative to persons. Matt wants to make moral truth relative to a person's *status*.

You see, the claim that truth is objective says that truth *isn't* relative to persons, to places, or to times. Truth is absolute, not relative; objective, not subjective. Just as the truth of the heliocentric hypothesis--that the earth goes round the sun rather than vice versa--doesn't depend upon what any one (even God) says, or the place and time at which they said it, so moral truths aren't relative to persons, places, or time. Hence, moral truths can't be dependent--as Matt is claiming--on the whims of a supernatural God.

Here beginneth the first logical lesson: Matt accuses me of begging the question by assuming that God, as person, has moral obligations to do and *not* to do certain things. But the idea that God is exempt from moral law had already been ruled out by Matt's own commitment to the objectivity of truth. No fallacy on my part. Just an inconsistency on his.

Matt betrays the notion of moral objectivity again when, in trying to escape from the strictures of my straightjacket he relativises the applicability of God's commands by claiming that many of them applied only to people of the *past*, not to us *today*.

But which ones? Are we still to obey his commands to stone to death witches, whores, adulterers, homosexuals, maidens who can't prove they're virgins, rebellious sons, followers of other gods, and infidels like me? If he hasn't changed his mind about killing all such persons, ought Christians obey him today?

Set aside the fact that Christian Reconstructionists believe *they* are morally obliged to obey all such commands.

How about *you*?

I ask you: "Who among *you* will cast the first stone?"

Matt tries to sidestep these problems by arguing that God is by *definition* "omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good." So defined, he argues, it is logically impossible for God to cause, commit, condone, or command any of the atrocities listed in my four categories.

But, bless my soul, those are precisely the sorts of thing the Biblical God says he *has* done! Describe for me an evil God. The Biblical God fits the description perfectly.

Besides, this definitional move is a logical fraud. You can define something as having any properties that you like. But this doesn't mean that there is something that has those properties.

You can define the greatest prime number as that than which no greater prime number exists. But it's provable *logically* that no such a number exists. You can define the perfect Rolls Royce as one that can do a thousand kilometres on 1 litre of gasoline, and exists! But it's provable *empirically* that no such vehicle exists.

So does a morally perfect God exist? Maybe some morally perfect god does. But on the God's own say-so, he isn't the one.

This is where my four types of crime come in. Matt tries to defend the Biblical God against just three of them.

First of these is God's command to exterminate the Canaanites by slaughtering them *all* without mercy. Now watch his two-fold strategy.

He says, first, that there are other passages in the Bible that say, to the contrary, that *some* Canaanites actually survived. But this is to jump from the frying pan of criminality into the fire of contradiction.

Hence his second ploy, that of claiming that God didn't really mean what he said; he was indulging in a bit of hyperbole. "Kill all" just meant, "Kill most".

Does this make God any less guilty?

What sort of perverted morality would lead one to conclude: "Not all of them? Oh! I suppose that's OK then"?

Matt's tries to deal with the issue of capital punishment in a similar way by arguing that God didn't mean anyone to take him at his word. Apparently "stoning" doesn't really mean stoning.

So what exactly does it mean? Can we substitute some other form of capital punishment? Or was God just using language irresponsibly while in full knowledge, by virtue of his omniscience, of the consequences over the next few millennia?

As for the doctrine of eternal hell fire, Matt offers the same sort of word play. "Unquenchable fire", he says, just means "fire that consumes and will never be put out." But that is cold comfort (or should I say *hot*?) for those of us who don't or can't believe in Jesus as saviour--perhaps because they've never heard of him--and hence will be so consumed.

Can you buy into this sort of sophistry?

And by what sort of word-play will Matt try to prove God innocent of causing plagues to kill millions, and events like Noah's flood to drown all but a few life-forms on our planet?

So I have two simple questions for Matt:

1. Will he say that the whole Flood story is factually true and that near-universal drowning did occur?
2. Will he say that talk of drowning was mere metaphor or hyperbole since the story of a universal flood has been scientifically shown to be false?

I await Matt's answers with baited breath.