

Dr.s Shermer, Johnson, and Gary Jensen Engaging with Each Other

This document reflects a three-way conversation between two skeptics and me. I did not alter either the language or the grammar that the other two employed.

Readers, you may be interested in listening to the recording of a debate between astronomer Hugh Ross, and Skeptic magazine editor Dr. Michael Shermer. It can be found at www.reasons.org. This recording is the basis of the interchange that follows.

[Having listened to the debate between Michael Shermer and Hugh Ross, I was struck by the Mr. Shermer's condescending and sarcastic tone. The following initial letter I wrote to him will bring into further detail my disagreement with not only his tactics, but also his manner of presentation. It is important for the reader to know that my choice of words (in particular, "silly you" from par. 2) was a direct echo of his choice of words to Dr. Ross.

Dear Dr. Shermer,

Although I was not in attendance, I listened to your "debate" with Dr. Ross in Boise, Idaho. I was not impressed with you. I do not question your intellect. But I do question your sense of judgment. Wit and sarcasm are no substitute for intelligent discussion. Calling others silly is not the equivalent to rational argument. Your portion was riddled with absurdities that include the following three:

First, as to your opening question whether the audience would abandon Christian belief if the fine-tuning argument were discredited, you framed your question poorly. Silly you. Since Christians base their beliefs in God on a variety of grounds, and not just one, your question was dishonest and unfair. Would you apply such an absurd criterion to your own position?

Second, I simply do not believe you hold that the findings of physics have no relevance to the existence of God. Of course science and theology are different areas of discourse. Philosophers for the last four hundred years or so have debated the nature of the differences and just where the "demarcation" lies between them. I have questions for you on this matter. Do you believe Darwinism has no implications with respect to the existence of God? If it could be proven that life both began and evolved randomly (I know you do believe that) you would actually argue that that has no bearing on the existence of God? That would involve an absurdity on your part. Either that or you would have to charge every agnostic and atheist beginning with Huxley with silliness for their appeal to Darwinism as support for their unbelief. Or are you actually asking for a double standard? It appears that whatever implications from science that are damaging to theism are for you legitimate, but whatever implications from science that

support theism, are illegitimate. The point of this paragraph is not whether "design" perceived in nature is only apparent or real. It is rather to say that it is intellectually dishonest for you to have it both ways. If science has no bearing on the existence of God (an argument I do not accept), then the implications are the same for both theism and atheism. Now I am not a consistent reader of your magazine--I have only read a few editions--but it seems that the only point for printing your articles is that you believe the findings of science really do impinge on the question of belief in the supernatural. Clearly you believe that the arguments are on your side. I don't fault you for that. But I ask for honesty. You ought to come clean on this matter. Finally, I believe, with Dr. Ross, that the Big Bang, pointing as it does to a beginning of the universe, is a problem for the atheist position. Sarcasm, inconsequential hair-splitting over the word "atheist," and talking down your opponent as you did, will not explain away either the matter of the singularity pointing to a transcendent beginner, or the over 150 factors in the universe that are clearly fine-tuned for the existence of life, pointing to a designer.

Third, you charged that the marshalling of evidence in support of Christian belief is not legitimate since these arguments come after a decision is already made. This argument also is rather silly. First of all, the best philosophers of science point not to one model of inquiry, but to many, in the scientific endeavor to understand the universe. As for the average person, while wishful thinking does exist in the world (not only for some believers but also for some skeptics--maybe even for you!) there is no demonstrable connection between wanting to believe something and the truth or falsity of the object believed. Honesty would lead one to actually test the evidence, not decide in advance that it is false just because it is desired. I am curious about why you hold your position, and when you began gathering evidence to support your atheistic position. According to your logic, which, again, I don't accept, the only arguments you can legitimately hold as an atheist are those you collected prior to your coming to unbelief. Everything after is just the gathering of arguments that conform to your prior position, isn't it? At what age did you become an atheist? Have you for the sake of honesty discarded all insights that occurred to you subsequent to that date?

I tried to call you at the number posted on your website. I would much rather discuss in person, hear your answer, and respond accordingly. But the number did not connect. For the sake of full disclosure I am a pastor of a Lutheran Church and also a trained apologist for Reasons to Believe. I am writing to you on my own behalf, however.

Sincerely,
Gary Jensen, Pastor
St. Paul's of Shorewood Lutheran Church
11620 21st. Ave. S.W.
Seattle, Washington 98146
206-244-2112

Subj: **Re: Debate with Hugh Ross**
Date: 10/26/2002 8:52:18 AM Pacific Daylight Time
From: [SKEPTICMAG](#)
To: [GJensen549](#)

Gary:

Here is my next column in Scientific American, that I wrote on this very subject. This will address some of your comments.

SKEPTIC JANUARY 2003

Fidgets and Digits

Is the Universe Fine-Tuned for Life?

Michael Shermer

*There was a young fellow from Trinity
Who took [the square root of infinity]
But the number of digits
Gave him the fidgets;
he dropped Math and took up Divinity.*

In this limerick physicist George Gamow dealt with the paradox of a finite being contemplating infinity by passing the buck to theologians.

In an attempt to prove that the universe was intelligently designed religion has lately been fidgeting with the “fine tuning” digits of the cosmos. “It is not only man that is adapted to the universe,” physicists John Barrow and Frank Tipler proclaim in their 1986 book *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*, “The universe is adapted to man. Imagine a universe in which one or another of the fundamental dimensionless constants of physics is altered by a few percent one way or the other? Man could never come into being in such a universe.”

The Templeton Foundation even grants cash prizes for such “progress in religion.” In 2002 mathematical physicist and Anglican priest John C. Polkinghorne was given one million dollars for his “treatment of theology as a natural science” and who “has invigorated the search for interface between science and religion.” In 1997 physicist Freeman Dyson took home \$964,000 for such works as his 1979 book *Disturbing the Universe*, in which he writes: “As we look out into the universe and identify the many accidents of physics and astronomy that have worked to our benefit, it almost seems as if the universe must in some sense have known that we were coming.”

Mathematical physicist Paul Davies won the 2000 Templeton prize for such observations as those made in his 1999 book *The Fifth Miracle*: “If life follows from [primordial] soup with causal dependability, the laws of nature encode a hidden subtext, a cosmic imperative, which tells them: ‘Make life!’ And, through life, its by-products: mind, knowledge, understanding. It means that the laws of the universe have engineered their own comprehension. This is a breathtaking vision of nature, magnificent and uplifting in its majestic sweep. I hope it is correct. It would be wonderful if it were correct.”

Indeed, it would be wonderful. But not any more wonderful than if it was not correct. If life on Earth is unique, or at least exceptionally rare (and in either case certainly not inevitable), how special is our fleeting Mayfly-like existence; how important it is that we make the most of our lives and our loves; how critical it is that we work to preserve not only our own species, but all species and the biosphere itself. Whether the universe is teaming with life or we are alone, whether our existence is strongly necessitated by the laws of nature or it is highly contingent and accidental, whether there is more to come or this is all there is, we are faced with a world view that is breathtaking and majestic in its sweep across time and space.

Even atheist Stephen Hawking sounds like a supporter of intelligent design when he writes: “Why is the universe so close to the dividing line between collapsing again and expanding indefinitely? If the rate of expansion one second after the big bang had been less by one part in 10¹⁰, the universe would have collapsed after a few million years. If it had been greater by one part in 10¹⁰, the universe would have been essentially empty after a few million years. In neither case would it have lasted long enough for life to develop. Thus one either has to appeal to the anthropic principle or find some physical explanation of why the universe is the way it is.”

One explanation is that our universe is not the only one. We may live in a multiverse in which our universe is just one of many bubble universes all with different laws of nature. Those bubble universes whose parameters are most likely to give rise to life occasionally generate complex life with brains big enough to achieve consciousness and to conceive of such concepts as God and cosmology, and to ask such questions as Why?

Another explanation can be found in the properties of *self-organization* and *emergence*. Water is an emergent property of a particular arrangement of hydrogen and oxygen molecules, just as consciousness is a self-organized emergent property of billions of neurons. The evolution of complex life is an emergent property of simple life: prokaryote

cells self-organized into eukaryote cells, which self-organized into multi-cellular organisms, which self-organized into...and here we are.

Self-organization and emergence arise out of *complex adaptive systems* that grow and learn as they change. As a complex adaptive system the cosmos is one giant autocatalytic (self-driving) feedback loop that generates such emergent properties as life. We can even think of self-organization as an emergent property, and emergence as a form of self-organization. How recursive. Complexity is so simple it can be put on a bumper sticker: LIFE HAPPENS.

Michael Shermer is the publisher of *Skeptic* magazine (www.skeptic.com) and the author of *In Darwin's Shadow*.

Dear Dr. Shermer,

Your quick response failed to answer the specific challenges I laid before you. And your up-coming essay failed to make your case. Rather, the Scientific American article, "*Fidgets and Digits: Is the Universe Designed for Life?*" amounts to an admission that atheism has no answer to Big Bang Cosmology and the fine-tuning of the universe. I must ask at the outset, since you fashion yourself as a skeptic how can you possibly believe your own article you have just written?

Instead of confronting the evidence for fine-tuning directly, you attempt to brush the universe aside as one fluke out a multiplicity of universes. Why? What evidence do you have for the so-called "multiverse theory?" Is yours not an argument from desperation? Indeed your appeal to a multiverse is a prime example of the "god-of-the-gaps" argument. Where you cannot draw on actual data to support your position, you appeal to that which is unknown and indeed cannot be known even in principle (Einstein's general theory of relativity forbids such interaction between so-called parallel universes). All we actually do know is that our universe, the only one we can know, is fine-tuned with breathtaking precision.

I am led to turn back onto you your first question to the Christians that night in Boise. If you were presented with evidences that approached certainty that the fine-tuning argument is true, would you be prepared to reject your atheism? That your answer is "no" is quite apparent. Rather, you seem to prefer all possible ways of escape, no matter how "weird" –your word of choice.

Your second appeal to "the properties of *self organization* and *emergence*" involve confusion of the terms *observe* and *explain*. You seem to believe that *observing* self-organization is the same as *explaining* or *accounting* for that pattern. But that is the very question being discussed. Setting aside whether

self-organization does occur beyond the level of crystallization, how can a mindless ground *account* for design that inspires awe in the observer? In other words, how can a random beginning account for the existence of even the single cell whose complexity exceeds our greatest technology?

Your third appeal confuses the category of non-living and living systems. Please remember that the context of your article is the fine-tuning argument prior to, and independent of, life, not Darwinian evolution following after the first appearance of life. How, I ask, can *non-living* systems "*learn*" as they change?" Using the most current learning theory would you please explain how hydrogen, or a red giant star learns? It's difficult enough to get humans to learn! However bizarre ancient non-Hebraic creation myths may have been, they never stooped to the absurdity of ascribing personality to inanimate objects.

Sincerely,
Gary Jensen, pastor
St. Paul's of Shorewood Lutheran Church
Seattle, Washington

Subj:	Re: Debate with Hugh Ross
Date:	10/31/2002 5:43:54 AM Pacific Standard Time
From:	SKEPTICMAG
To:	GJensen549

How do you think the universe came about? (Other than just saying "God did it.")

Michael

October 31, 2002

Dear Dr. Shermer,

I put your question back on you. Why do you prefer absurdities over even considering the God hypothesis? Your article provided no positive arguments for your position that can withstand scrutiny. Why, except for purely prejudicial reasons, do you dismiss the theistic option out of hand? Now the theistic position may or may not be true. The question is, how is that all-important question decided? On the basis of prior definitions? I would use the analogy of a forensic doctor setting out to determine the cause of death of a corpse found in the field. What would you think of his work if he proclaimed, prior to his investigation, that he would not even consider murder? Shifting back to theology, to dismiss the possibility of a creator of the universe on the basis of pre-

determined parameters of what scientists will accept, is comparable to the doctor dismissing the murder hypothesis (an intelligent agent) from forensic investigation because he prefers a different (natural causes) explanation. Murder may or may not be the cause of death of the corpse found in the field. That determination comes not out of prior definitions, but instead out of carefully considered conclusions when every alternative has been rigorously scrutinized.

Sincerely,
Gary Wayne Jensen, Pastor
St. Paul's of Shorewood Lutheran Church
Seattle, Washington

Subj: **Re: Debate with Hugh Ross**
Date: 10/31/2002 2:13:33 PM Pacific Standard Time
From: [SKEPTICMAG](#)
To: [GJensen549](#)

In a message dated 10/31/02 9:37:34 AM, GJensen549 writes:

<< Why, except for purely prejudicial reasons, do you dismiss the theistic option out of hand? >>

I haven't. In fact, I used to be a theist. A born-again Christian, in fact. All this is recounted in my book *How We Believe*. Do you have a copy?

Michael Shermer

Dear Dr. Shermer,

Am I to understand that you actually do entertain the God-hypothesis as a possibility? I know of no other way to interpret your last comment. Yet your prior history as a Christian actually has no bearing on the manner in which I used the word "prejudice." If you recall, I used it in the context of *how* and *when* one decides to exclude the God-hypothesis regarding origins. Nothing about your prior Christian history is relevant to this context. The fact is you haven't answered a single question of mine, including this very one. Neither have you presented a positive case for a naturalistic origin of the universe out of nothing plus its subsequent fine-tuning factors. I have not read and don't have a copy of the book you mention. I do have a copy, and have read the relevant portions of, "Why People Believe Weird Things."

Sincerely,
Gary Wayne Jensen, Pastor

St. Paul's of Shorewood Lutheran Church
Seattle, Washington

[I sent a manuscript of my debate with Dr. Shermer to the husband of a Christian friend. Although he was a self-described agnostic, we had had conversations about Christianity before. I had thought that since he was a medical doctor specializing in gynecology he would give this interchange serious attention. And I had thought from previous conversations that his response would be respectful. The following is what the medical doctor wrote to me.

“The TRUE BELIEVER is an archenemy to three things, all for the same reason. He believes totally in what he totally believes in. Hence he is an enemy of himself, of truth, and of all that cross his path.” -Eric Hoffer

“For my people are foolish, they don’t know me, they are stupid children.”-God
Jer. 4:22

“Preachers err in trying to talk people into belief.” –Mark Twain

STEELE’S EPISTLE TO THE SHORWOODIANS

After carefully reading your correspondence with Dr. Shermer and then spending almost two hours on the internet listening to the entire exchange between Dr. Ross and Sherwin, I am forced into the following conclusion: SILLY YOU! (Your phrase).

I now understand the basis of your inflexible opinions, your tortuous reasoning, and your fundagelical beliefs. Thank you for enlightening me/us to the fact that you are a “trained” apologist for Reasons to Believe Foundation. Reasons to believe: what a marvelous oxymoron! It almost approaches “the virgin birth” or the classic one of St. Augustine: “O FELIX CULPA”, which implies that God is present, or exists, because HE-SHE-IT needs us rather than the other way around-sort of what is also suggested in Romans 11:32.

Despite David Hume’s elegant proof that there is no such thing as a rational belief, I, personally, would consider occasionally taking your theological beliefs seriously, but that would, unfortunately, insult your intelligence. Your apparent premise of using the road of scientific reason to “find” your way to God intrigues me. Tell me, Pastor Gary, how many benighted souls have you converted to Christianity via the Theory of Relativity? How many spiritually bereft people have found salvation through Quantum mechanics? How many sick, grieving, and emotionally lost individuals have been given hope, purpose, love, and happiness by having you explain the “veracity” of the Design Theory of the Universe to them? What you have done, Pastor Gary, is to abandon the fundamental principle of religion and mythology; the importance of our sense of AWE of the universe. The awe of the unknown, the unexplainable, the transcendent, permanently resides in the psyche of all of us (You call it God, I’ll call it “Dancing Energy” after the delightful term of Alan Watts. You attempt to explain this unknown in terms of history

and science. It can't be done. Robert Ingersoll (a hero of mine) said: "When religion becomes scientific it ceases to be religion and becomes science. Religion is not intellectual. It is emotional. It does not appeal to reason." No matter how advanced mathematics, science, astronomy, or physics will become, they will never explain your God. Joseph Campbell (another hero of mine) makes a wonderful point when he states: "Christianity has degraded myth to a science and a history. When myth becomes confused with history, it loses its ability to reach the human soul. The tragedy of the Christian History is its failure to draw life from the Christian Myth and unlock its wisdom."

Your clever ripostes, non-sequiturs, and tendentious arguments, which evidently "qualify" you as a "trained" apologist, fail to convince me, or any other intelligent or well read (your terms) individual. In fact, I find most of them intellectually offensive! Euripides said: "Cleverness is not wisdom." What you appear to have done in your zealotry is not to address the needs of the soul, but instead to have mastered the art of casuistry. Ignatius Loyola and his fellow Jesuits would be proud of you. Where were you when the Clinton Administration could have benefited from your talents? You have the techniques down cold! Here are a few examples:

- 1) SESQUIPEDALIANISM: Boggle your opponent with esoteric and complicated technical verbiage and then unjustifiably switch gears, claiming that this farrago of technology "proves" your theological point.
- 2) POOR-ME PLOY: Claim that your opponent is "not fair" or is not engaging in a "mature, reasonable, or cordial" argument, and then sully him by using the same weapons that you accuse him of employing against you.
- 3) CRYPTIC SYLLOGISMS: refer to arcane principles and complex disciplines superficially to make your point when, in fact, you have only a sciolistic awareness of what you are talking about. (My good friend and fishing partner has a double doctorate in Quantum Mechanics and Nuclear Physics. He would just love to discuss your comments regarding Einstein's Relativity Theory with you—but only after he stops laughing!)
- 4) THE SPIDER'S WEB TRAP: Claiming to welcome "an intelligent" discussion regarding scripture or religion in general, yet knowing full well that you are unprepared and, indeed, incapable of altering your convictions. The meretricious offer of "welcoming" a discussion is merely a screen to hide your adamant commitment to either convert your opponent or destroy his argument. Tolerance is not an alternative for you.
- 5) HALF-THE-TRUTH (...is often a great lie-B. Franklin)-GAMBIT: cite only one side of an equally balanced secular or scientific argument to posit the "proof" of your argument, and then refuse to accept the other half of it if it is not in accord with your beliefs.
- 6) FALSE ANALOGIES: Your analogy in reference to the forensic doctor's search for the "cause" of death is ABSURD! (your word). It is not the possibility of murder that should be considered to qualify your analogy, but the possibility of a supernatural, unproven God that caused the death.
- 7) CIRCLE-JERK ARGUMENT: Using the Bible to defend itself. Example:
Apologist: The bat is a bird
Rationalist: No it isn't. The bat is a mammal.

- Apologist: The Bible states (Leviticus 11:13-19) that the bat is a fowl-bird.
- Rationalist: You, science, and I know that the bat is not a fowl but a mammal. How can you prove that the bat is a fowl?
- Apologist: Because the Bible says so.
- 8) **PROJECTION**: The classic psychiatric tactic in attributing to your opponent the very traits you employ yourself. Your arguments are riddle (your word) with it. You still don't get it, Pastor Gary! Rationalists don't have to prove there isn't a God. You have to prove there IS!
 - 9) **ATTACK THE ATTACKER**: An obvious technique. You use it right away against Dr. Shermer in your first two paragraphs. "Silly you!" (your phrase).
 - 10) **BAIT-AND-SWITCH GAMBIT**: Attribute a nebulous (and thoroughly unbelieved by you) "positive" trait to your opponent, such as stating, "I respect your intelligence (when you really don't) and then follow up with the "singer": **BUT**, your judgment, reason, morality, etc. is wrong, silly, stupid, illogical, etc."
 - 11) **THE HYPOCRITE'S DELIGHT**: Demand that specific references from a multitude of secular and scientific sources be cited by your opponent to justify his position, and then refuse to comply with your own criteria when asked by him to justify your argument, referring, rather, to revelation, "divine knowledge" or ecclesiastical hocus-pocus to defend your beliefs.
 - 12) **I "WON" IN THE PAST...THEREFORE**: Claiming unproven so-called "victories" in past discussions to support your present one.
 - 13) **CHARACTER BASHING**: Usually subtle-but still character bashing. (ex: phrases like: intellectual dishonesty etc)
 - 14) **MISINFORMATION (LIES)**: Your vituperative comment to Dr. Shermer in regard to your premise that inanimate objects can not have "personality" or human characteristics particularly nettled me. What about "THE EUCHARIST"? What about the church being referred to as "THE LIVING BODY OF CHRIST"? I must admit, however, that the finer points between Transubstantiation and Consubstantiation have always eluded me.
 - 15) **THE ULTIMATE, IRREGRAGABLE, UNARGUABLE, END-ALL-FURTHER DISCUSSION ARGUMENT**: I know that I am right because God/Jesus **TOLD** me so!!!! How? Why, by revelation, faith, delusion, psychoses, visions, drugs, and dreams!.....and then woe to the world for having to suffer yet more horrors in the name of "inspired" theology!

Frankly, Pastor Gary, I consider you, Dr. Ross, and all the rest of your apologetic ilk as nothing more than pseudo-intellectual fideists who attempt to overwhelm ignorant people with a gobbledy-gook of faux-science and technical mish-mash, in an attempt to convince them of the existence of your great white, cannibalistic PUPPET MASTER in the sky. You apparently see yourselves as a group of Apologetic Shepherds, Saving Errant Sheep from perdition and doom. You really are, in spite of the acronymic bon mot, n different than Torquemada, Sprenger and Kramer, or any other of the Inquisitors or heresy-hunters who have so blighted the history of our world. Thankfully you can no longer use the rack or the stake, but you still have the iron fist of fundamentalism hidden behind the velvet

glove of rhetoric. Your “rack” is the paradigm of misogyny: The Bible. You “use” it to promote the concepts of sin, guilt, superstitious absurdity (your word), and hallucinatory silliness (your word again).

Pastor Gary, you say that you are committed to: “Defending the Faith.” That’s Bull! What you are doing is imposing your faith (read: dogma) onto others and then making them dependent upon you. You say yourself: “God can defend himself!” Sadly, you apparently don’t feel comfortable with the concept that spiritual fulfillment can come from accepting a Transcendent God, one that is Immanent, that exists within us, has no definition and, therefore, needs no defense. Spinoza states this beautifully: God is unknowable by reason and exists in everything.” Even your Bible says: “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). The Gospel of Thomas says the same: “the kingdom of the Father lies spread over the Earth, but men do not see it.”

A true divinity of intellect, Voltaire, (a super hero of mine) said, “It is clear that there are still unfortunates who are the victims of a spiritual disease and afraid to be cured.” Pastor Gary, I sincerely hope that at some time in your life you will find “THE WAY” (coined by the cynics) and accept “THE GOOD NEWS” (coined by Marcion) that Reason, Knowledge, and the true spirituality of being AT ONE-MENT with the universe will always be superior to the dogmas of faith, opinion and mere beliefs.

In the name of:
The: Penis of Stone
The: Preacher of Hell
And: A FFLATUS
(signed)

PS Having swum with sharks most of my adult life, I recognize an alpha-male when I see one. It doesn’t take a supererogatory command of Aristotelian logic, therefore to predict that my humble epistle will elicit one of two responses from you: Fight, or Glight. Correct? I further predict that the possibility of you choosing the latter-and, in effect, abandoning your positions on Fundamentalist Religion-would be commensurate with Linus giving up his blanket. Thus, if I predict correctly, I must steel myself (is that a phonetic tautology?) to the probability that I will soon be regaled with a litany of epistemological arguments defending “The Faith”, or a jeremiad of accusations in re (or, INRI?) to my lack of Christian knowledge, “civility,” general awareness of the techniques polemised at the Reasons to Believe Institute, or,.....whatever! Correct again? You, of course, feel the need to do this to again justify to yourself the strength of your convictions and, more importantly, to convince yourself (even though you don’t convince me) that you, in your mind, will be victorious over the Rationalists and Nonbelievers. This is basic ego-maintenance!

So! Shoot your best ecclesiastical shot-so to speak-to “Christian me” into “The Truth” via your logic, proof, Biblical references, expert witnesses, history, science, and technology. I do feel, however, that it will be a total waste of your time and absolutely nothing will be settled by it. Your arguments will only be won in your mind, not mine. Neither you nor I have slightest chance of changing our respective beliefs. I will, however, suggest a “truce”, of sorts, Pastor Gary. If you will refrain from parading your so-called “victories” against the Atheists before me, I will agree not to point out the

absurdities (your word) of Christianity to you. Then, perhaps, in the future we could climb a secular mountain together in the spirit of tolerance and camaraderie. Well, it's a thought.

PAX FRATER
(initialed)

PPS Pastor Gary, don't you realize that Dr. Shermer is jerking your chain? He's poking fun at you! The whole ridiculous argument of design doesn't have anything to do with a personal, anthropomorphic, Christian God at all. Design poses an interesting metaphysical argument-and that's all! I go along with what J.B.S. Haldane said, "My own suspicion is that the universe is not queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose."

SO.....RELAX! Your God loves you!
(initialed)

The following letter was never sent to Steele. Instead, a much shorter one, which will be found at the end, was sent.

Dear Steele,

Some have advised me not to respond to your letter. And you threatened me that if I persist in my "nonsense" I may lose the privilege of hiking with you. You think I have an interest in climbing a mountain with someone who imagines me an idiot? That perception, in itself, is purely a fruit of your own imagination! Is that how you would choose your companions anyway? I am not impressed with your huffing and puffing. Indeed, I expected far more from you. I was not aware you would descend to the level of shouting "stupid" in such a variety of ways. But what do you think you were going to accomplish by empty insults? You say you were "giving me a taste of my own medicine." You might check your judgment. I apparently need to instruct you that there is no comparison between my letter to Dr. Shermer and your letter to me. I am not faulting you for expressing sharp disagreement with me. But my letter to Shermer didn't rest on name-calling and it didn't stop with rebuke. I went on to substantively explain my disagreements and to ask for substantive responses (which Shermer never supplied). In spite of your perceptions, I did not question his intellect. You, on the other hand, appeared to let your anger with me get out of control in ways I just described. That is no way to discuss anything with anyone.

I was struck in two ways when I read your letter. First, it was utterly inconsistent with the personal conversation the two of us had just a few days ago. So again, I was extremely disappointed by your letter. Which is the true Steele? The converser who gives and takes and then reasonably asserts at points and concedes at others? Or the screamer who hurls insults at every turn (I almost closed my ears while reading your

words)? I was also struck by how different your letter was from the writings of those “heroes” you cite. The major skeptics I have read (including your “heroes”) never descended to the tactics you have chosen to use. Had they attempted such we wouldn’t even know of their writings. They would rightly have been discarded long ago.

Are you aware that your letter descended almost entirely to the level (the pit) of personal attacks, some descending even to the gross, and that the closest you came to actually addressing my position was to refer **uncritically** to your personal “heroes?” No one questions Hume’s intellect. But the fact is critics immediately followed him, beginning with Kant. Hume in fact involved himself in a self-contradiction at the end of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* so blatant that he effectively condemned HIS OWN WORK to the trash, as Sir Karl Popper noted in his *Logic of Scientific Discovery*, (Harper and Row, 1968), p.35, n.3). And in fact multitudes of scholars have written in direct answer to Hume’s famous works. His flaws are pointed out not merely by Christians but also by other deists (see note 35 in my essay on the resurrection).

I have my first exercise for you. Would you please review your letter and underline those parts that actually qualify as legitimate argument? Personal attacks don’t count. Clobbering me with Voltaire won’t work either. I would never get away with such methods and neither should you. I will give you a hint as to where this exercise is heading. In reality **there is nothing at all of substance** in your letter for you to underline.

Now I have a few issues I would like you to respond to.

- Why the double standard? Why is it that skeptics are entitled to present their evidence against the God of the Bible, but Christians are not entitled to put forth their evidence in favor of God’s existence? You can’t have it both ways. I accept the attacks on Christianity and attempt to address them. Why are you so sensitive to a challenge of your *sacred* secularists? If you don’t like the evidence Christians put forth, rebut it (which, again, you did not do). Don’t whine that there are people who don’t believe your heroes (in fact your heroes (Hume, Campbell, in particular) don’t remotely agree with each other). It almost seems that you are throwing mud, without examining its contents, at a wall in the hope that perhaps something will stick. But I return to my earlier question, why your double standard?
- Please do not presume to decide that I am ignorant on a particular matter when you do not know my reading and my understanding. The mere citation of your “heroes” does not qualify you to be my judge. The other day you suggested I acquaint myself with the “enemies” of Christianity. Thank you for the challenge. I have already held myself to such standards. If you remember, I challenged you on the same matter. At the time you admitted you had not done so regarding the New Testament. Since you agree with me that this is an important aspect of being informed, may I suggest a second exercise? I am able to say I have looked deeply into the lion’s (the enemy’s) throat. Do you desire to see a list of authors I

have studied that do **not** support my position (which include nearly every one of the authors you mention)? Here then is my second exercise. Would you in turn please list all of the authors you have read that do not merely confirm your former opinions? I suggest for your reading assignment that you begin with N.T. Wright who has debated some of your contemporary “heroes,” including John Dominic Crossan and other members of the Jesus Seminar.

- It is true, since you put the question so specifically, I have not personally converted anyone on the basis of the theory of relativity. No such personal claim was made by me. But your question is utterly irrelevant here. Its answer has absolutely no bearing on whether Einstein’s theory is consistent with your position or mine. On the other hand, multitudes of people have, in fact, come to faith because their intellectual barriers to the God of the Bible were removed. These include many scientists. Hugh Ross became a Christian on the basis of the scientific evidence. His observation is that many of his fellow physicists and astronomers are Christians. As for historical evidence, the list of skeptics coming to faith in Christ is long. Some people have come to faith through me because of my writings on the resurrection of Jesus.
- I will not retract my reference to Einstein. Indeed I would be comfortable hearing in the presence of your double-doctorate physicist friend whether he agrees that Einstein’s general theory of relativity permits access to knowledge of other universes, should they exist at all. The answer is “no.” That question is not decided by comparing academic degrees, but by getting to the facts of the case. Badgering me with empty threats of laughter accomplishes nothing. Really, Steele, are you suggesting that one cannot refer to authorities outside one’s own field? Do you see where such “logic” leads, and where it leaves you, if true? If that were really the case, how could your opinions remain with respect to the Bible, theology, mythology, philosophy, etc. since they are outside *your* professional field?
- I find your choice of authorities puzzling in your attempt to undermine my so-called inappropriate use of reason in relation to faith. Since Ingersoll, Hume, Mark Twain, Voltaire, etc. did not believe in the God of the Bible, isn’t it rather silly to suggest them as models for how I should really believe in God? Aren’t they actually better examples of how *not* to believe? I find your “logic” breathtaking in the suggestion that non-believers are the best examples for what “real” faith in God is actually like. Yours’ is the intellectual equivalent to citing Adam Smith as a model for getting people to become Marxists. I would have thought it more effective had you chosen Bible-believing people who disagree with me, to reprove my interest in evidence. Then I would have to come to terms with the challenge. But really Steele, shouldn’t we clarify the all-important division between us instead of dancing all over the place? Like it or not—and it’s clear you don’t—Christianity makes claims about the transcendent that deism does not. We claim that God is personal and holy love, and that this love expressed itself in personal communication with His people over time, and in the

sending of His Son in the fullness of time. This claim implies acts within history. Historical claims are the realm for historical evidence. Since the above-mentioned people do not believe these acts happened, then it is, of course consistent for them to reject the alleged Christian evidence. But it is absurd for these same people to forbid such an enterprise for Christians who make far more bold claims about God than do the deists.

- You are quite entitled to your position on what arouses awe within you. But I am also entitled to mine as a Christian. I find it utterly awe-inspiring that the God of the universe, in love, entered history in Jesus Christ. I am not alone in my sense of awe. The men of Riverton tell me every time we meet how much it matters that I join others in proclaiming the God of redemption, whose power alone has changed their lives.
- You caricature my position on the role of reason in faith. For reasons that are theologically complex, I do not believe that you “find your way to God” through scientific reasoning. In part, the reasons for this failure involve both our finitude and our sin. No human being is objective, not even the scientist. Self-interest enters into every human inquiry about the nature of God and His demands. To put it bluntly, that is why the self left to his/her own opinions “finds” a god who will “bless” their pet sins; not the Lord of holy love and mercy. So I agree with the absolutely fundamental distinction between rationalism, that is, the quest to master the big questions out of our own autonomy and finitude, on the one hand, and the rational, on the other. By the latter is meant that one’s position squares with the known facts. On this latter position I stand as a Christian with respect to the question of God. Neither, secondly, do I claim that by science one “explains” God. What I do believe is that many of the findings of science are consistent with the Bible’s claim that God is creator and designer of the universe. There is a world of difference between my convictions and your portrayal of them.
- My analogy of the forensic doctor is not false. You have missed its simple point. The only thing I would change would be to have the body found at the end of an alley where suspicion is more natural, as opposed to in the middle of the field. I repeat my central question whether it is valid for an investigator to decide prior to the evidence that the person died of NATURAL causes, or whether there might rather be an intelligent agent involved in the death. You laugh my scenario off on the grounds that there is no possible reason to consider evidence contrary to your position of naturalistic causes for the cosmos. But I find your line of argument strange. Your whole letter is premised on a): my bearing the burden of proving God exists so that others will consider him and b): my being in violation of religion for suggesting there is proof. This is a contradiction. Incidentally, contrary to Flew’s essay, “*The Presumption of Atheism*,” I do not believe the burden of proof is on the theist. Ideally both sides ought to be open to the range of possibilities and consider which choice gives the best account of the evidence. You are guilty of “stacking the deck.” Who do you really think is willing to play

with an opponent who gets to pick the choice cards face-up and decide the rules arbitrarily and haphazardly? Indeed, what in the world are your rules?

- It is telling that *most* of your “examples” of my “argument techniques” came with NO EXAMPLES. Some that did include an example (7) bear NO-RELATIONSHIP with anything I have ever said to anyone. Your challenge of my level of tolerance in number 4 is completely unsupported. Yet amazingly your entire letter illustrates non-tolerance of virtually everything I wrote. (Incidentally, I hardly ever use the word “tolerance” anyway. Typically, users of the word catch themselves in their own self-contradiction the next moment they open their mouth in their judgment on their “non-tolerant” opponent). Moving on, please clarify where I claimed “I ‘won’ in the past...therefore,” in number 12. Please locate in my writing where I said to Dr. Shermer, “I know I am right because God/Jesus told me so.” And finally, Steele, please explain the logic of your charge that Reasons to Believe people are “pseudo-intellectual fideists?” You earlier said RTB is a “marvelous oxymoron.” Since Reasons to Believe is all about the validity of reason and the presentation of evidence (whether or not we are successful), isn’t it rather inconsistent to charge us with fideism? In other words, you just committed an oxymoron.
- Finally, I have noted your tendency to quote people out of context. Your reference in Jeremiah 4:22, for example, to God referring to His people as stupid, is not directed at their faith in Him, but rather to Israel’s tendency to wander into idolatry, that is, toward the false gods of Israel’s neighbors. This would be the opposite of your interpretation. Did you pull this passage out without actually reading the surrounding paragraphs? Secondly, your reference the other day to the Apostle Paul being a gnostic is simply impossible. You appeared at that time to confuse the words “acquaintance” and “embrace,” that is, the acquaintance Paul would have had with Greco-Roman mythology was treated by you as the same as his embracing it. But again, that did not happen. Michael Grant, an Oxford historian of classical history writes, “*Judaism was a milieu to which doctrines of deaths and rebirths of mystical gods seems so entirely foreign that the emergence of such a fabrication from its midst is very hard to credit...Modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory. It has again and again been answered and annihilated by first-rank scholars.*” (Jesus” a Historian’s Review of the Gospels. (Scribner’s 1977), p.199, 200). The text you quoted from 2 Corinthians 3:6, contrasting the written code with the life-giving Spirit, has to do with the pervasive idea in St. Paul that the commandments alone do not make a person holy. They tell us the right way to live, but they don’t give us the actual *power* to live it. A close analogy would be that the written code is the road and the traffic signs while the Holy Spirit is like the driver behind the wheel operating the gas and the brake appropriately and steering the car in the right direction. We must open ourselves up to the power of the Holy Spirit if we are to have power to live God’s way. And this life in the Spirit is neither an ecstatic experience in line with Greco-Roman mysticism, nor a private privilege in line with gnosis, but a public, community event involving repentance and openness to the Lordship of

Christ. I suspect you did not arrive at your conclusion about Paul by sitting down and reading the Apostle Paul in context. It appears instead that someone with an axe to grind has put these thoughts into your mind and you haven't bothered to raise the question for yourself (that is, think independently and critically) whether they really fit. To put this into a historical context, it was Rudolf Bultmann who popularized the notion that the New Testament writers were indebted to the Greco-Roman culture. But Bultmann's own disciples scrapped such notions, recognizing that the New Testament only makes sense interpreted in Jewish categories and in light of Jewish history. You tell me the authorship of many of the New Testament Books is uncertain. While I consider those questions very important, there is one task that is even more fundamental. That is the task of simple, honest reading. I fear people are so enamored with their particular theory that they fail to simply read the text for what it actually says. What is required to understand the New Testament is not a battery of scholarship (although scholarship has its place), but a willingness to read texts according to normal grammatical rules and with the larger context in mind. I repeat what I said the other day in the context of Joseph Campbell, that the appropriate way to read any passage (whether Scripture, or the newspaper, or a lab report for that matter) is to first discern what the author was attempting to do. It is not appropriate to decide from pre-conceived notions that a passage must or must not be poetry just because it is religious. You might on this matter consider Mortimer Adler's devastating critique of Joseph Campbell.

Steele, I am tired. I'm going to bed. I don't know what you will do with this. Should you respond, I will accept no more trashing. If you are going to call me names, at least follow up with actual examples that I can deal with. If you care to honorably discuss these questions further, I am more than willing. "Honorably" is the operative word here. If the personal attacks resume absent substantive argument I will send your letter to the trash where it belongs.

Sincerely,
Gary Jensen

The following letter was actually sent

January 4, 2004

Dear Steele,

I have been advised, for several reasons, not to respond to your letter. But I must say something. I actually have a four-page response to you sitting on my computer. Yet you made it quite clear that you are not open to anything I would say, so I will keep it here until some time in the future when the situation changes. Should you later express an interest in discussing science, mythology, theology, and history in a civil manner, I am entirely open. But that does not seem to be the case for now.

You need to know that I was very disappointed in your letter. I expected far more from you. Since you considered my arguments so weak, you might have actually attempted some kind

of “rebuttal” as you had promised me at your home. Your letter bore no similarity to the conversation we had had in your home where we in mutual respect agreed to disagree agreeably. Neither did it bear much similarity to the writings of those you call your heroes. Do you realize that your letter consisted almost entirely of personal attacks and contained virtually no substantive argument or rebuttal? If you question my judgment on this matter I would encourage you to review your letter to me and underline any semblance of substantive discussion that you find.

Finally, I am curious. Have you asked your double-doctorate physicist whether it is true that Einstein’s general theory of relativity forbids interaction with so-called “parallel-universes”? When the time comes for your conversation, would you do me the justice of letting him read what I actually wrote, and in context? Did I really get Einstein’s notion wrong? Are you sure? Sure enough to ask your friend? And when you ask him will you note that you promised he would laugh his head off at my comment? If he has actually read my letter, just how hard did he laugh? Or did he not laugh at all?

Sincerely,

Gary Jensen, Pastor © March 10, 2021, several decades following the event