

ZONDERVAN

A Skeptic's Guide to Faith

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A Note from the Author

I wrote this book for people who live in the borderlands of belief, a phrase first suggested to me by the writer Mark Buchanan. In regions of conflict, such as the Korean peninsula, armies on both sides patrol their respective borders, leaving a disputed territory in between as a buffer zone. Wander into that middle area and you'll find yourself in a "no-man's-land" belonging to neither side.

In matters of faith, many people occupy the borderlands. Some give church and Christians a wide berth yet still linger in the borderlands because they cannot set aside the feeling that there must be a spiritual reality out there. Maybe an epiphany of beauty or a sense of longing gives a nudge toward something that must exist beyond the everyday routine of life – but what? Big issues – career change, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one – raise questions with no easy answers. Is there a God? A life after death? Is religious faith only a crutch, or a path to something authentic?

I also meet Christians who would find it difficult to articulate why they believe as they do. Perhaps they absorbed faith as part of their upbringing, or perhaps they simply find church an uplifting place to visit on weekends. But if asked to explain their faith to a Muslim or an atheist, they would not know what to say.

What would I say? That question prompted this book. I wrote it not so much to convince anyone else as to think out loud in hopes of coming to terms with my own faith. Does religious faith make sense in a world

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of the Hubble telescope and the Internet? Have we figured out the basics of life, or is some important ingredient missing?

To me, the great divide separating belief and unbelief reduces down to one simple question: Is the visible world around us all there is? Those unsure of the answer to that question—whether they approach it from the regions of belief or unbelief—live in the borderlands. They wonder whether faith in an unseen world is wishful thinking. Does faith delude us into seeing a world that doesn't exist, or does it reveal the existence of a world we cannot see without it?


I “think out loud” by putting words on paper, and out of that process this book emerged. I begin with the visible world around us, the world all of us inhabit. What rumors of another world might it convey? From there, I look at the apparent contradictions. If this is God's world, why doesn't it look more like it? Why is this planet so messed up? Finally, I consider how two worlds—visible and invisible, natural and supernatural—might interact and affect our daily lives. Does the Christian way represent the best life on this earth or a kind of holding pattern for eternity?

I am at times a reluctant Christian, buffeted by doubts and “in recovery” from bad church encounters. I have explored these experiences in other books, and so I determined not to mine my past yet again in this one. I am fully aware of all the reasons not to believe. So then, why do I believe? Read on.



PART ONE

WHAT ARE WE MISSING?



Every ant knows the formula of its ant-hill,
every bee knows the formula of its beehive.
They know it in their own way, not in our way.
Only humankind does not know its formula.

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

CHAPTER ONE

Life in Part

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

More than ten million people in Europe and Asia have viewed a remarkable exhibition known as Body Worlds. A German professor invented a vacuum process called *plastination*, which replaces individual cells of the human body with brightly colored resins and epoxies, much as minerals replace the cells of trees in a petrified forest. As a result, he can preserve a human body, whole or stripped away to reveal its inner parts, and display the cadaver in an eerily lifelike pose.

I visited Body Worlds in a warehouse art gallery in London after an overnight flight from my home in Colorado. I was feeling the effects of jet lag until, on entering the gallery, I encountered the exhibition's signature piece: a man all muscles, tendons, and ligaments, his face peeled like a grape, with the entire rubbery organ of skin, flayed and intact, draped over his arm like a raincoat. Sleepiness immediately gave way to a morbid fascination.

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For the next two hours I shuffled past the sixty preserved bodies artfully arranged among palm trees and educational displays. I saw a woman eight months pregnant, reclining as if on a couch, her insides opened to reveal the fetus resting head-down inside. Skinned athletes – a runner, swordsman, swimmer, and basketball player – assumed their normal poses to demonstrate the wonders of the skeletal and muscular systems. A chess player sat intently at a chessboard, his back stripped to the nerves of his spinal cord and his skull removed to reveal the brain.

One display hung the pink organs of the digestive system on a wire frame, descending from the tongue down to the stomach, liver, pancreas, intestines, and colon. A placard mentioned five million glands employed for digestion, and I could not help thinking of the combination of cured salmon, cinnamon rolls, yogurt, and fish and chips – sloshed together with at least a quart of airline coffee – challenging those glands inside me at that moment. Moving on, I learned that babies have no kneecaps at birth, that the body's total volume of blood filters through the kidneys every four minutes, that brain cells die if deprived of oxygen for even ten seconds. I viewed a liver shrunken from alcohol abuse, a tiny spot of cancer in a breast, globs of plaque clinging to the walls of arteries, lungs black from cigarette smoke, a urethra squeezed by an enlarged prostate gland.

When not observing the plastinated bodies, I observed the people observing the plastinated bodies. A young girl wearing all black, her midriff bare, with orange hair and a lip ring, roses tattooed on her arm, alert to all live bodies but barely noticing the preserved ones. A Japanese woman in a flowered silk dress and straw hat with matching straw platform shoes, very proper, staring impassively at each exhibit. A doctor ostentatiously showing off his knowledge to a beautiful young companion twenty years his junior. A know-it-all college student in a jogging suit explaining wrongly to his girlfriend that “of course, the right brain controls speech.” Silent people pressing plastic audio wands to their ears, marching on cue like zombies from one display to the next.

The sharp scent of curry drifted in from outdoors, along with the throb of hip-hop music. Local merchants, sponsoring a curry festival, had blocked off several streets for bands and dancing. I moved to a window

and watched the impromptu block party. Outside the gallery, life; inside, the plastinated residue of life.

Wherever Body Worlds had opened, in places like Switzerland and Korea, organized protests had followed, and the exhibition had papered one wall with news accounts of the demonstrations. Protesters believed that it affronted human dignity to take someone like a grandmother, with a family and home and name and maybe even an eternal destiny, and dissect and plastinate her, then put her on display for gawking tourists.

In response, Professor Gunther von Hagens had posted a vigorous statement defending his exhibition. He explained that the cadavers/persons had before death voluntarily signed over their bodies for precisely this purpose. Indeed, he had a waiting list of thousands of prospective donors. He credited Christianity as being the religion most tolerant of this line of scientific research and included a brief history of the church and medicine. Bizarrely, the exhibition ended with two splayed corpses, all muscles and bones and bulging eyes, kneeling before a cross.

That groggy afternoon at Body Worlds highlighted for me two distinct ways of looking at the world. One takes apart while the other seeks to connect and put together. We live in an age that excels at the first and falters at the second.

The cadavers, dissected to expose bones, nerves, muscles, tendons, ligaments, blood vessels, and internal organs, demonstrate our ability to break something down – in this case, the human being – into its constituent parts. We are *reductionistic*, say the scientists, and therein lies the secret to advances in learning. We can reduce complex systems like the solar system, global weather patterns, and the human body into simpler parts in order to understand how things work.*

*René Descartes stated the motto for reductionism: “If anyone could know perfectly what are the small parts composing all bodies, he would know perfectly the whole of nature.” Francis Crick, codiscoverer of the structure of DNA, applies the formula to human beings: “You are nothing but a pack of neurones... You are ... no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.”

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The recent digital revolution is a triumph of the reducers, for computers work by reducing information all the way down to a 1 or a 0. Nearly every day a friend sends me jokes by email. Today, I got a list of questions to ponder, including these: Why is “abbreviated” such a long word? Why is the time of day with the slowest traffic called rush hour? Why isn’t there mouse-flavored cat food? People with too much time on their hands come up with these jokes, type them into a computer, and post them electronically for the amusement of the rest of the world.

I think of all the steps involved. The jokester’s computer registers a series of keystrokes, translates them into binary bits of data, and records them magnetically as a file on a hard disk. Later, communications software retrieves that file and translates it into a sequential code, which it sends over a modem or broadband line to a computer server sitting in an isolated room. Some user plucks the joke for the day from the server, imports it to a home computer, and forwards it to a list of email contacts. The cycle goes on and on, with bits of joke data streaming over phone lines and wireless signals, even bouncing off satellites, until at last I log onto the Internet and download my friend’s attempt to bring a smile to my face.

Masters of the art, we can reduce not just jokes but literature and music and photographs and movies into digital bits and broadcast them around the world in seconds. On the ski slopes of Colorado I meet Australians who email snapshots of their ski vacation back to friends and family every night. A few minutes on an Internet site will let me search and locate any word in Shakespeare or view the artwork hanging in the Louvre museum.

Have we, though, progressed in creating content that others will someday want to store and retrieve? Does our art match that of the Impressionists, our literature compare with the Elizabethans’, our music improve on Bach or Beethoven? In most cases, taking apart what exists proves easier than creating what does not yet exist. Think of the best artificial hands, built with state-of-the-art technology, yet clumsy and mechanical in their motion compared to the human body’s.

Life in Part

School textbooks used to report that the chemicals constituting the human body could be bought by catalog for eighty-nine cents, which of course does nothing to explain the magnificence of an athlete like Michael Jordan or Serena Williams. A junior high sex-education study of fallopian tubes and the vas deferens hardly captures the wonder, mystery, and anxiety of marital sex. And the impressive displays at Body Worlds in London pale in comparison to the ordinary people chewing gum, sipping Starbucks coffee, and chatting on cell phones as they file past.

We reduce into parts, but can we fit together the whole? We can replace the cells of a human body with colored plastic or slice it into a thousand parts. We have a much harder time agreeing on what a human person is. Where did we come from? Why are we here? Will any part of us survive death? The people on display at Body Worlds – do they endure as immortal souls somewhere in another dimension, perhaps peering whimsically at the line of tourists filing past their plastinated bodies? And what of an invisible world reported by the mystics, a world that cannot be dissected and put on display in a gallery? Knowing the parts doesn't necessarily help us understand the whole.

I once heard the missionary author Elisabeth Elliot tell of accompanying the Auca woman Dayuma from her jungle home in Ecuador to New York City. As they walked the streets, Elliot explained cars, fire hydrants, sidewalks, and red lights. Dayuma's eyes took in the scene, but she said nothing. Elliot next led her to the observation platform atop the Empire State Building, where she pointed out the tiny taxi cabs and people on the streets below. Again, Dayuma said nothing. Elliot could not help wondering what kind of impression modern civilization was making. Finally, Dayuma pointed to a large white spot on the concrete wall and asked, "What bird did that?" At last she had found something she could relate to.

I have visited the tip of Argentina, the region named Tierra del Fuego ("land of fire") by Magellan's explorers, who noticed fires burning on shore. The natives tending the fires, however, paid no attention to the great ships as they sailed through the straits. Later, they explained that they had considered the ships an apparition, so different were they from

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anything seen before. They lacked the experience, even the imagination, to decode evidence passing right before their eyes.

And we who built the skyscrapers in New York, who build today not just galleons but space stations and Hubble telescopes that peer to the very edge of the universe, what about us? What are we missing? What do we not see, for lack of imagination or faith?

Søren Kierkegaard told a parable about a rich man riding in a lighted carriage driven by a peasant who sat behind the horse in the cold and dark outside. Precisely because he sat near the artificial light inside, the rich man missed the panorama of stars outside, a view gloriously manifest to the peasant. In modern times, it seems, as science casts more light on the created world, its shadows further obscure the invisible world beyond.

I am no Luddite who opposes technological change. My laptop computer allows me to access the text of every book I have written in the past twenty years, as well as thousands of notes I have made during that time. Though I am holed up in a mountain retreat, using this same computer I have sent messages to friends in Europe and Asia. I pay my monthly bills electronically. In these and other ways I gratefully enjoy the benefits of the reducers' approach to technology and science.

Yet I also see dangers in our modern point of view. For one thing, reductionism, the spirit of our age, has the unfortunate effect of, well, reducing things. Science offers a map of the world, something like a topographical map, with colors marking the vegetation zones and squiggly lines tracing the contours of cliffs and hills. When I hike the mountains of Colorado, I rely on such topographical maps. Yet no map of two dimensions, or even three dimensions, can give the full picture. And none can possibly capture the experience of the hike: thin mountain air, a carpet of wildflowers, a ptarmigan's nest, rivulets of frothy water, a triumphant lunch at the summit. Encounter trumps reduction.

More importantly, the reducers' approach allows no place for an invisible world. It takes for granted that the world of matter is the sum

total of existence. We can measure and photograph and catalog it; we can use nuclear accelerators to break it down into its smallest particles. Looking at the parts, we judge them the whole of reality.

Of course, an invisible God cannot be examined or tested. Most definitely, God cannot be quantified or reduced. As a result, many people in societies advanced in technology go about their daily lives assuming God does not exist. They stop short at the world that can be reduced and analyzed, their ears sealed against unconfirmed reports of another world. As Tolstoy said, materialists mistake what limits life for life itself.

I have a neighbor who is obsessively neat. He lives on ten forested acres, and every time he drove up his long, winding driveway, the disorderly dead branches on the Ponderosa pine trees bothered him. One day he called a tree-trimming service and learned it would cost him five thousand dollars to trim all those trees. Appalled at the price, he rented a chain saw and spent several weekends perched precariously on a ladder cutting back all the branches he could reach. He called the service for a new estimate and got an unwelcome surprise. "Mr. Rodrigues, it will probably cost you twice as much. You see, we were planning to use those lower branches to reach the higher ones. Now we have to bring in an expensive truck and work from a bucket."

In some ways, modern society reminds me of that story. We have sawed off the lower branches on which Western civilization was built, and the higher branches now seem dangerously out of reach. "We have drained the light from the boughs in the sacred grove and snuffed it in the high places and along the banks of sacred streams," writes Annie Dillard.

No society in history has attempted to live without a belief in the sacred, not until the modern West. Such a leap has consequences that we are only beginning to recognize. We now live in a state of confusion about the big questions that have always engaged the human race, questions of meaning, purpose, and morality. A skeptical friend of mine used to ask himself the question, "What would an atheist do?" in deliberate mockery of the What Would Jesus Do (WWJD) slogan. He finally stopped asking because he found no reliable answers.

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Eliminating the sacred changes the story of our lives. In times of greater faith, people saw themselves as individual creations of a loving God who, regardless of how it may look at any given moment, has final control over a world destined for restoration. Now, people with no faith find themselves lost and alone, with no overarching story, or meta-narrative, to give promise to the future and meaning to the present. To regard nature as beautiful, humans as uniquely valuable, morality as necessary – these are mere “constructs,” we are told, invented to soften the harsh reality that humans play an infinitesimal role in a universe governed by chance.

Most people in history have experienced this world with its pleasures and pains, its births and deaths and loves and passages, as linked to the sacred, invisible world. No longer, or not for many, at least. Now we are born, play, work, accumulate possessions, relate to one another, and die with no consolation that what we do matters ultimately or has any meaning beyond what we assign it.

Jacques Monod bluntly states the modern plight: “Man must learn to live in an alien world that is deaf to his music and is as indifferent to his hopes as it is to his sufferings or his crimes... Man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he emerged only by chance.”

Einstein remarked that the modern age has perfect means but confused ends. Physicists have reduced matter to subatomic particles and software engineers have reduced most of what we know about the world to bits of information. We know how things work, but not why. We seem bewildered, actually, about why anyone makes any given choice – whether to love their kids or beat them, whether to study for a test or binge-drink. Why do we act the way we do and make the choices we do?

The new science of evolutionary psychology has arisen to assert that we simply act out the script of our DNA. Advocates propose a single principle, the “selfish gene,” to explain behavior, and evolutionary theorists

herald this insight as the most important advance since Darwin. I do what I do, always, to perpetuate my genetic material. Even individual acts that do not benefit me personally will benefit my gene pool.

In a sour twist, these thinkers view all goodness as a form of selfishness. Altruism, proclaims Edward O. Wilson, is purely selfish: a person acts in an apparently noble way toward the goal of getting some reward. Goodness depends, he says, on “lying, pretense, and deceit, including self-deceit, because the actor is most convincing who believes that his performance is real.” Challenged to explain Mother Teresa’s behavior, Wilson pointed out that, believing she would get her reward from Christ, she acted on that selfish basis.

Although specialists may believe this selfish-motive theory, for most people it does not ring true. Therapists who spend all day listening to people’s stories know that the choices we make do not easily reduce to a single explanation. Parents learn by hard experience that no reward-and-punishment scheme can guarantee the results they want.

What drives us, any of us, to become the persons we are? What makes some students responsible and conscientious while others drop out of school? What drives some people to become millionaires, others to become missionary nurses, and others to watch television all day, leeching off their parents? No single explanation of purpose or motive tells the full story.

The reducers face their greatest challenge in trying to find a stable ground for morality. Not long ago, two evolutionary psychologists roused the ire of feminists by presenting rape as a normal part of natural selection, a technique males use to spread their seed as widely as possible. Given their selfish-gene assumptions, this distasteful theory made good sense.

Another leading evolutionary theorist, Frans de Waal, says, “We seem to be reaching a point at which science can wrest morality from the hands of the philosophers.” He looks to nature for examples of “ethical” behavior, and they abound: whales and dolphins risking their lives to save injured companions, chimpanzees coming to the aid of the wounded, elephants refusing to abandon slain comrades.

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Well, yes, but it all depends on where you aim your field binoculars. Where do you learn about proper behavior between the sexes, for example? Each fall outside my Rocky Mountain home, a bull elk bugles together sixty to a hundred cows, bullies them into a herd, and uses his magnificent rack of antlers to gore all male pretenders. Nature offers relatively few examples of monogamy and fewer still of egalitarianism. Should our females, like the praying mantises, devour the males who are mating with them? Should our neighborhoods resolve their disputes as do the bonobo chimpanzees, by engaging in a quick orgy in which all the neighbors mate with one another? Why not, if we learn our morality from other species?

Or consider violence. Zoologists once thought murder a peculiarly human practice, but no longer. Ground squirrels routinely eat their babies; mallards gang-rape and drown other ducks; a species of African fish, the cichlid, feeds on the eyes of other cichlids. Hyenas get the prize for ruthless cannibalism: within an hour, the stronger of newborn twins will fight its baby sibling to the death. Some evolutionary psychologists concede that humans are genetically scripted to further this cycle of violence.

We feel outrage when we hear of a middle-class couple “dumping” an Alzheimer’s-afflicted parent, or when kids push a five-year-old out the window of a high-rise building, or a sniper opens fire on strangers, or a ten-year-old is raped in a hallway, or a mother drowns her two children because they interfere with her lifestyle. Why? On what grounds do we feel outrage if we truly believe that morality is self-determined or scripted in our genes? And if morality is not self-determined, then who determines it? How do we decide?

In a widely publicized case a year before the famous “Scopes Monkey Trial,” attorney Clarence Darrow successfully defended two university students against the capital offense of murdering a boy for the intellectual experience of it. Argued Darrow, “Is there any blame attached because somebody took Nietzsche’s philosophy seriously and fashioned his life on it? . . . Your Honor, it is hardly fair to hang a nineteen-year-old boy for the philosophy that was taught him at the university.”

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In short, the reducers offer little compelling reason why we humans should rise above the behavior of beasts rather than mimic it. Adolf Hitler said it well: “Nature is cruel, therefore we too can be cruel.”

Not always, but often, the act of reducing the world around us also dilutes pleasure. I would guess that an uneducated Masai warrior, standing on one leg, leaning on a staff, gazes at a lunar eclipse with a greater sense of wonder than I do after studying the scientific explanation in the day’s newspaper.

Some famous reductionists readily admit the atrophy of a pleasure sense.* Charles Darwin poignantly describes the process:

Up to the age of thirty or beyond it, poetry of many kinds ... gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare... Formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great, delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry: I have tried to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost any taste for pictures or music... I retain some taste for fine scenery, but it does not cause me the exquisite delight which it formerly did... My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts... The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.

Uneducated, “primitive” people intuit something mysterious and sacred behind the world of buffaloes, scarlet macaws, orangutans, and giraffes. Often they even make nature an object of worship. In contrast, those who reduce the world to matter risk withering the sense of wonder.

*A reducer of an altogether different sort, Vladimir Lenin, could not tolerate a flower in his room. “I cannot listen to music too often,” he confessed after attending a performance of Beethoven’s “Apassionata” sonata. “It makes me want to say kind, stupid things, and pat the heads of people. But now you have to beat them on the head, beat them without mercy.”

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I stood once in a field in Finland, shivering in the cold, and watched a brilliant display of aurora borealis, the northern lights. Waves of luminous green arced across the heavens, covering perhaps one-seventh of the dark dome above. Tendrils of green light assumed the shapes of puffy clouds, then split into segments, then pulsed and slid together like the interlocking teeth of a giant comb. They floated in the heavens, defying gravity, blocking stars. It amazed me that a marvel so magnificent and vast proceeded in utter silence; no roar of volcano or growl of thunder accompanied this celestial fireworks show. I found myself wondering how such a spectacle would have struck the ancient Norsemen, who knew nothing of sunspots, solar wind, and electromagnetic disturbances.

The biblical psalms celebrate the created world as the expression of a Person, a masterpiece of artistic creation worthy of praise. But how can we ascribe beauty to a world assumed to be an accidental byproduct of collisions of matter—especially when our sense organs also result from random collisions?

For years I have been receiving the magazines that come with membership in the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, and National Audubon Society. Reading them usually leaves me depressed because most issues devote many pages to accounts of how we are fouling our water and air, bulldozing wilderness, and consigning animal species to extinction. I find it surprising, though, how often the authors of these articles use words like “sacred,” “hallowed,” and “immortal” in their impassioned pleas for corrective action. As one environmentalist said about saving a stretch of river in Montana: “It’s ours to preserve for progeny. It would be sacrilegious not to.”

The Sierra Club was founded by John Muir, an eccentric naturalist who had a well-developed theology of nature. To him, it showed God’s handiwork. Hiking through the Cumberland forests of the southeastern U.S., he wrote,

Oh, these forest gardens of our Father! What perfection, what divinity in their architecture! What simplicity and mysterious complexity of

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detail! Who shall read the teaching of these sylvan pages, the glad brotherhood of rills that sing in the valleys, and all the happy creatures that dwell in them under the tender keeping of a Father's care?

Most of Muir's heirs as leaders of the Sierra Club have abandoned his theology. Yet just as the founders of the United States appealed to "unalienable rights ... endowed by their Creator," environmentalists still grope for some transcendent authority, a Higher Power, to sanction our reverence for creation. Hence they borrow the musty metaphor of "sacred," even after rejecting the reality, and continue to draw on the biblical concept of stewardship. Otherwise, what inherent value can we assign to a snail darter or a redwood forest?

Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, a survivor of a communist culture that earnestly tried to live without God, stated the problem:

I believe that with the loss of God, man has lost a kind of absolute and universal system of coordinates, to which he could always relate everything, chiefly himself. His world and his personality gradually began to break up into separate, incoherent fragments corresponding to different, relative, coordinates.

Havel saw the Marxist rape of his land as a direct outgrowth of atheism. "I come from a country where forests are dying, where rivers look like sewers, and where in some places the citizens are sometimes recommended not to open their windows," he said, tracing the cause to the "arrogance of new age human beings who enthroned themselves as lords of all nature and of all the world." Such people lack a metaphysical anchor: "I mean, a humble respect for the whole of creation and awareness of our obligations to it... If the parents believe in God, their children will not have to wear gas masks on their way to school and their eyes will not be blinded with pus."

We live in dangerous times and face urgent questions not only about the environment but also about terrorism, war, sexuality, world poverty,

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and definitions of life and death. Society badly needs a moral tether, or “system of coordinates,” in Havel’s phrase. We need to know our place in the universe and our obligations to each other and to the earth. Can we answer those questions without God?

Modern literature exalts as a hero the rebel who defiantly stands his ground in a meaningless universe. Evolutionary philosophy holds up *homo sapiens*, a species much like any other, destined to live out the script of selfish genes. What if both views of the world are missing something large, important, and portentous for our future – like the natives of Tierra del Fuego who simply ignored Magellan’s ships sailing past?

Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness ...
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

T. S. ELIOT