The issue of honesty and integrity in assessing the evidence for God's reality and God's involvement in your life so far

F1: Let's Start with The Lady of Shalott…

Imagine you are looking at this image of Waterhouse's *Lady of Shalott* on the screen of a computer with somebody next to you.

And the following conversation takes place:

> **You**: I just love this image—the symbolism, the complex intertwining of motifs, the careful staging on the boat and the waves – just a masterful work of art!

> **Other**: Huh? Not sure what you are talking about … All that is actually in front of us is a grid of dots—pixels with variations in color. 655,360 dots to be exact -- a grid of 1024 by 640 dots. It's just dots – there are no visible connections between them at all. One can project some patterns on them – e.g. some of the reds are next to one another, but that doesn't mean that they are PURPOSEFULLY there.

> **You**: What? Can't you see her face there? The hand here, the headband? The ripples? The wind in her hair? Or the crucifix at the front of the boat?

Other: Sorry, but it's just dots – there is no reason to 'see' a face there, nor symbolic elements, nor—for that matter—no reason to imagine some artist behind this, deliberately arranging these dots in this way. I have been seeing faces in the clouds all my life—but I have never needed to believe the clouds were deliberately ARRANGED like that! That just goes beyond the evidence. All we have visible are the material dots. They could have been generated by some explosion in the paint store or some monkeys having a paint fight.

You: But don't you think it supremely unlikely that some random processes produced something with these shapes and colorations and shadings and patterns? The odds of this exact pattern emerging from randomness is at least 640 times 1024 times 8 (8 bit color depth) or 1 in 5,242,880! I cannot accept that this beautiful image was created randomly!

Other: You are obviously bad at math and statistics! If I exchanged one pixel with any other pixel, or exchanged every pixel with some other pixel (scrambling the image into nonsense), that pattern would have the EXACT SAME 'unbelievable odds' of happening. Would you argue that that nonsense image also MUST HAVE an artist behind IT—because of the extreme odds? I doubt it. Means absolutely nothing. There is just nothing WITHIN THE DOTS THEMSELVES that can be used as evidence for some 'invisible artist' behind it, and—without such an agent—there is no reason to project meaning, design, craftsmanship, or intention 'onto' these dots… you are just taking some blind leap of faith to believe in something that you cannot see (an artist) and to believe that arbitrary groupings of these dots are things like 'faces' or 'symbols' or 'shadows of something'. And—as for the spiritual-sounding word 'beauty'—don't get me started on how you were ARBITRARILY conditioned by cultural and genetic factors to call something 'beautiful'—slighting other random patterns of bits as being 'non-beauty'. There is nothing objectively 'real' about 'beauty'—nothing 'in the dots' that we can isolate and put under a microscope and tag it as 'one unit of beauty'… Totally without physical basis in some grid of dots…

You: You are strange. You probably recognize faces in your job or school or family EVERY DAY—based upon discrete photons hitting individual retinal receptors in your eyes. You don't doubt that THOSE dots are connected and that you can group them into faces, and then interpret those faces as mad at you or delighted at you… why are you not applying that 'default' and proven process to THIS pattern of dots? Seems inconsistent to me…

Other: Well, I am sort of forced to do it to exist in the real world, but since I don't have to here, I can use this materialistic argument to avoid admitting that somebody is better than me at producing art… Besides, I have been to those science museum exhibits where they have something random going on (like wheels turning in opposite directions), that the observer projects a pattern onto … when there is not one there… so that makes me skeptical of such arguments.

You: But surely you can tell the difference between such a simple pattern and THIS amazing work of art! Layers and layers of interlocking complexity---They are worlds apart—

Other: They don't seem that far apart to me… I have seen elephants in the clouds and doughnuts in smoke rings and alphabetic letters in random stones in a pasture … I can connect the dots and find ANYTHING I want there—which means there is NOTHING really there… You WANT to see meaning and design and intention and artistic expression in this grid of dots, so you talk yourself into believing that… I just choose to see dots – the only REAL THINGS in front of our eyes. YOU have to import a backstory into this to turn it into something other than what it is – a random grouping of dots hitting our retinas.

You: Wow, that is sad – you are missing so much beauty and depth and meaning and enrichment. If you were as smart as you seem to think you are, you might even try to find the artist behind this image and ask them to help YOU create better art – just takes a little humility and openness— and maybe a little searching around for them…

Other: Nah. Don't like the humility thing – don't like the feeling … and again, I don't see a compelling reason to even BELIEVE there is this 'artist' that you imagine created this dot pattern* … the patterns certainly don't PROVE such an agent exists or is responsible in some way for these dots… so, there is no reason to believe this 'imaginary friend' of yours is superior to me either… I am perfectly content without all this non-material beauty and depth and richness of which you speak, and see no reason to even desire to improve my artistic abilities— and certainly not at the level to temporarily become 'humble' because of some alleged invisible friend's excellence….

You yourself can see it perfectly clearly – and are enriched by it – but there is no way you can convince somebody who is radically-reductionist and stubbornly resistant. You – as an artistic person yourself – could NOT BEGIN TO DOUBT the existence of the artist, but you could never PROVE this to somebody else. In fact, you can see so much more IN the dots than a less artistically-sensitive, non-reductionist person could (e.g. me!). You are not imagining those things, but you can't even point them out to me in a foolproof way, since I might not have enough artistic sensitivity to 'get it'. Doesn't mean you are WRONG or MAKING STUFF UP…

This is what is involved with the path of search before you here.

I will point you at a series of "pictures/patterns" and ask you "can you explain this TO YOURSELF better/more fully WITH OR WITHOUT a pattern-maker?" and if not, then 'what CHARACTERISTICS would be required of a pattern-maker to produce this?' [E.g. could a transcendent-but-non-cognitive force like magnetism produce this complex image, or would it require a cognitively-complex agent, to USE a combination of mindless forces like gravity and magnetism to create it?].

This is a familiar task to everybody – like in the example above, we do this constantly, every day, in interpreting the behavior of others (back to their intentions), in anticipating traffic situations, and/or in building scientific theories from discrete bits of data.

This will—I emphasize here for the first time of many—NOT explain the 'how' (e.g. how did the painter create that image), but only create a reasonable presumption that he/she DID somehow—affirming their existence and consciousness and artistic ability.

So, with this in mind, let's look at some 'scenes'…

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*Minor note: If you felt like 'soiling' your experience of the moment of beauty, by sinking down into argumentation with the OTHER, you could rip the epistemological rug out from under this person by arguing back from a Kantian perspective:

"Well, you are being a bit hypocritical then, to believe there ARE even any OBJECTIVE dots in front of us. You don't really 'see' DOTS, your retinas are just being hit by photons – and you have no proof that those photons came from something 'outside your eyes' – much less this specific pattern of dots! Your perspective forces you to admit that you have ZERO real contact with ANYTHING outside of your body's surfaces… you don't hear ME talking – you just are experiencing vibrations at the surface of your eardrums—with NO JUSTIFICATION to assemble those into syllables, words, semantic units (no real 'meaning' in those vibrations – just vibrations, you would have to say…), and to assign them to a speaker (that you cannot really see EITHER—see above!)… if you are going to be consistent, then close up into solipsism … you can try to dig back out, but you cannot – they SHOULD call that the Myth of Solipsis (but that phrase is sort of already taken)…

The issue of honesty and integrity in assessing the evidence for God's reality and God's involvement in your life so far

F2: Integrity, conscience, fairness, thoroughness

My purpose. This is my attempt to summarize what I have learned in 40 years of pursing truth—both transcendent and immanent.

It is focused solely/mostly on helping you think through the same matters **critically**, **impartially**, **courageously**, **QUICKLY**, with an **open mind**, and with **intellectual integrity**.

My personal hope is that this process will somehow remove any MAJOR intellectual barriers stopping you from appealing for Special Help with your non-intellectual challenges (anxiety, ED, social comfort, physicality, self-control, etc.).

But that is my personal near-term hope. The goal of this project, though, is to provide you with information about the MAIN issues in a mature worldview (for your long-term success), and to present my PERSONAL positions on those issue – based on a lifetime of deep research and reflection.

So, I will bring to your attention (1) facts/realities/events that require interpretation; and (2) my personal interpretation of those facts.

It will be easy to present you with information about other interpretations/worldviews than mine, but I cannot imagine you finding an easy-to-access, comprehensive, educated, robust source for a credible Judeo-Christian truth-system alternative to myself. (I wouldn't even know where to SEND YOU for somebody that would have worked through as wide a range of issues as I have… if I DID, I would have somebody to take over my work on the Thinktank…smile.)

Not everybody faces these issues with an open-mind – if ever or if at all. People on the same path as mine – in pursuit of truth – WORK HARD at continual self-review, in an effort of the conscience to move closer and closer to being REALLY open-minded. It is—of course—a challenge to avoid pat answers, facile conclusions, and smug intellectual complacency.

Some people grow up in families or environments where these issues of God, ethics, purpose in life, values, consciousness, and goals are either ignored, trivialized, made fun of, or considered 'optional' (at best) or 'evil' (at worst) or 'pathological' (in the mainstream).

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You cannot really avoid facing this. The issue of truth, and honesty with the facts, and intellectual integrity is something you MUST face (you already know this).

It is 'too late' for you to be able to avoid it or ignore it without honest evaluation of the issues (not the religious expressions, trappings, or aberrations)—WITHOUT a major lapse of intellectual integrity or a deliberate choice of living in ignorance (i.e., only a partial adoption of truth—only those elements which you could adopt uncritically – due to convenience, social approval, path-of-least-resistance, etc.).

I know that you haven't had the time, skills, or resources yet to have done an evaluation (of the truth status of the theocentric base of my worldview).

And to claim you are a materialist or atheist or animist at this point [even though you don't claim that, according the most recent email] cannot mean more than "I have not really EVALUATED the data for a theistic worldview—all I really KNOW <u>somewhat</u> is some version of materialism, etc." But you haven't **had the time, skills, or resources yet to** evaluate materialism or secularism **either**, as 'a better explanation of EVERYTHING than the alternative that 'Glenn holds' (as you understand it).

[You know there are brilliant scholars holding this position—you read some of their works in earlier projects you had to do in the past for/with me. There are scholars on almost every conceivable position. They/we can all be WRONG, but we all cannot be RIGHT! -- LOL]

Although the **first set of data will deal with your experiences** in the context of "Glenn's version" of the Judeo-Christian God (e.g. answered prayer), the main focus of the argument is to provide data that:

(1) An ultimate/unconditioned reality 'exists'—i.e. that materialism is not 'all there is' [**That THERE IS SOMETHING "BEHIND" THE DOTS**], and that;

(2) This Unconditioned reality is a conscious agency instead of an unconscious 'force' (theism; **THE SOME<u>THING</u> BEHIND THE DOTS IS A SOME<u>ONE</u>**).
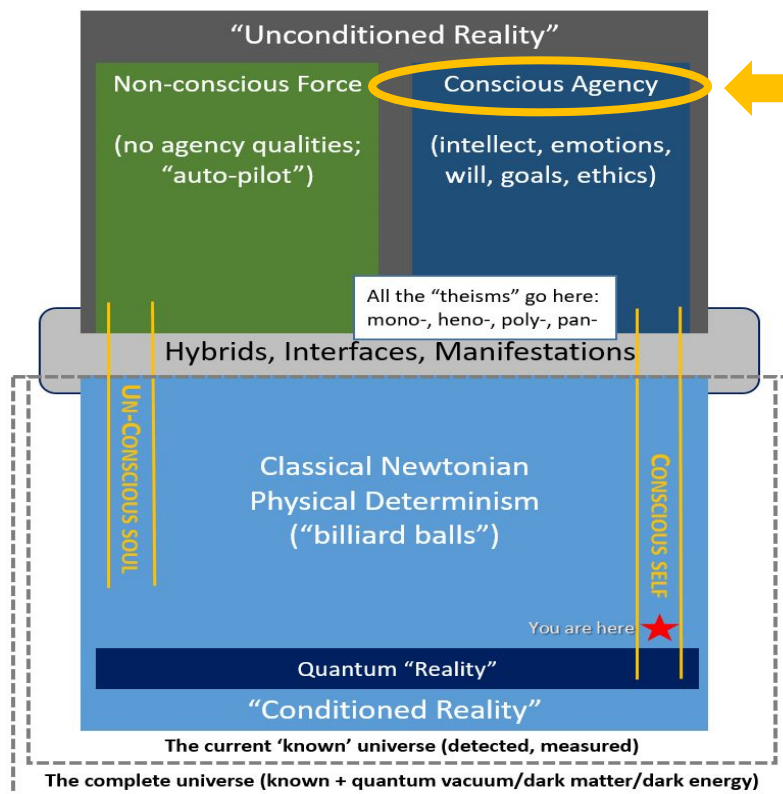
This reasoning would only result in the belief of <u>at least ONE conscious higher power</u> – which could be Zeus's creator Chaos or an unknown god or Yahweh, etc.

[There are fewer options than you might think here (e.g. the Hindu ultimate cannot/does not 'answer prayer' according to their main theologies; most Eastern religions can only pray to ancestors or derivative spirits—their ultimate reality does not have a 'mind' or 'will' as such.)]

There will be a section of data that—although mostly focusing on providing evidence for something 'beyond the natural' [e.g. "Theism" of some flavor] -- will <u>incidentally</u> be connected with the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition (who answers prayers and does the "providence thing" –smile).

In fact, I suspect that some of the data, arguments, and logical requirements I bring to you will be INTUITIVELY OBVIOUS to you—and NOT require much research on your part to evaluate them.

How important IS intellectual integrity, open-mindedness, and a good conscience to you? Although your integrity and conscience mandates that you DO evaluate this, you might still question the worth of 'feeling honest' or 'being open-minded' or 'thinking critically' or 'accepting (possibly) unpopular truth'.

So, how important IS integrity and honesty to you? Do you really care about knowing the TRUTH about reality – and the claims that some ultimate consciousness/personality "created" all of the reality you experience – including you? And that this entity LOVES you and seeks to be a conduit of blessing/fulfillment into your life?

This is the biggest question of them all: Do you really want to know and embrace the truth? Or could you be somehow happier and more 'fulfilled' by being knowingly deluded—independently of the issue of a post-mortem accounting for your life before some truth-centric deity?

Integrity and a clear conscience at any cost? We need to understand this clearly—it involves a choice UP FRONT to accept whatever the evidence and logic compels one's conscience to believe—whether it is pleasant or distressing, peace-making or burdensome, air-tight or just 'the best explanation so far'.

This is a little like growing up and learning that your position on something is WRONG, even though you are comfortable with it and have a lot invested in it. Changes in politics, ideology, values, and social issues are all like that. We call some of those changes 'hard choices'.

Assessment: How important of a value IS intellectual integrity, a clear conscience, and fairness (and thoroughness) in your evaluation of these matters – on a scale of 0-10:

- 0 – Not important in the least, not enough to even consider these matters – I will accept a compromise of integrity in exchange for the 'path of least resistance'

- 5 – Neutral, I could live with some level of unease about my judgement, but an 'intellectually casual' stance is something I could live with (all other things being 'ok' in my life, enough). If the amount of effort required to come to a conscience-friendly conclusion is TOO HIGH, though, I could live with total suspension of judgment, at the risk of being wrong on the fundamental issues/purpose of life, and missing something very valuable.

- 10 – Critically important to my self-image going forward – cannot live with myself if I do not evaluate these claims with honesty, objectivity, reduced 'selfishness', and commitment to making a non-superficial or self-serving judgement.

Your self-assessment number here: _____

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F3: Evidence/Logic versus Consequences of a Choice

But integrity about a position requires some judgment of certainty/probability. Of course, not all questions about reality (both ultimate and derivative) can be answered in a 'compelling way'. Sometimes the data/logic is mixed to the extent that no explanation seems compelling 'enough', and if a question has no consequences of such magnitude that a position MUST be taken, conscience should generally lead you <u>to suspend judgement</u> on such a matter.

One can have a clear conscience about competitive positions—WITHOUT deciding on any one of them—<u>as long as</u> the data is insufficient support for EACH position, and <u>as long as</u> the decision IS NOT REQUIRED.

Some choices REQUIRE a decision, and sometimes NOT choosing <u>IS a choice</u> for one or the other. If, however, the <u>difficult-to-decide</u> question DOES have MAJOR life-impacting consequences, then you should ideally investigate OTHER questions/issues <u>which will impact the evidence for THIS question</u>. If one cannot find any <u>other</u> set of evidence to help, then a choice must be made – even with a divided conscience.

Note carefully, however, that the choice must be between **FEASIBLE** competing alternatives – both/any/all of which <u>could</u> be adopted with a good conscience. This is <u>not</u> between something that is 'probably probable' and something without ANY or with LITTLE evidence to support it.

Can you choose to believe something (i.e. make yourself believe something) based on CONSEQUENCES and not just on EVIDENCE? There is a famous argument in history known as Pascal's Wager. It depends on what is now called game theory, decision theory, and/or rational choice theory. It argues that making a <u>choice between inconclusive-but-unavoidable</u> alternatives could (maybe not 'should') rationally/legitimately be made on the basis of <u>consequences</u> alone. There are many such situations in life that could fall into this category. Peter Kreeft gives a couple at his site:

> "Suppose someone terribly precious to you lay dying, and the doctor offered to try a new "miracle drug" that he could not guarantee but that seemed to have a 50-50 chance of saving your beloved friend's life. Would it be reasonable to try it, even if it cost a little money? And suppose it were free—wouldn't it be utterly reasonable to try it and unreasonable not to?
>
> Suppose you hear reports that your house is on fire and your children are inside. You do not know whether the reports are true or false. What is the reasonable thing to do—to ignore them or to take the time to run home or at least phone home just in case the reports are true?
>
> Suppose a winning sweepstakes ticket is worth a million dollars, and there are only two tickets left. You know that one of them is the winning ticket, while the other is worth nothing, and you are allowed to buy only one of the two tickets, at random. Would it be a good investment to spend a dollar on the good chance of winning a million?
>
> No reasonable person can be or ever is in doubt in such cases."

These cases suggest that some choices between 'inconclusive and uncertain' alternatives could be seen as a 'wager' or 'bet': "*I will pick A rather than non-A, because I have much more to lose --- if I am wrong – by choosing non-A*". This is when there is no significant difference in the evidence between A and ~A.

Pascal's wager argument was something like this:

- If I chose to believe in God, and God does not exist, then my <u>loss is only finite</u> (no eternal consequences)
- If I chose to believe in God, and God DOES exist, then my <u>gain is infinite</u> (full eternal consequences)
- If I chose NOT to believe in God, and God does not exist, then my <u>gain is only finite</u> (no eternal consequences)
- If I chose NOT to believe in God, and God DOES exist, then <u>my loss is infinite</u> (full eternal consequences).

Thus, Pascal would argue that:

> "But deciding whether to believe in God is a case like these [above], argues Pascal. It is therefore the height of folly not to "bet" on God, even if you have no certainty, no proof, no guarantee that your bet will win." (Kreeft again)

There are <u>many</u> criticisms of Pascal's argument but the strongest (in my opinion) is **that one cannot simply 'choose' to believe.** One might believe that they 'had BETTER believe' ("or else"!), but belief is an epistemic 'thing', not a purely volitional one.

(Pascal knew this already and argued that one could 'grow a belief' by acting like it was true. Not sure I can believe that, since that reeks of self-delusion if one didn't have any 'rational evidence' for that belief.)

Assessment: How well do you understand and agree with the **principle that NOT investigating or NOT deciding is STILL a decision/choice** – on a scale of 0-10?

- 0 – I do not understand why suspension of judgment (BEFORE evaluating the evidence and logic) could be considered a choice. I don't see a difference between suspension of judgement AFTER having weighed all the data/arguments and suspension of judgement BEFORE even looking at the data or listening to the arguments.

- 5 – I understand the point of the principle, but am not sure I agree with it. I would think there would be situations (apart from obviously legitimate suspension of judgement choices) where postponement of judgement might be warranted – especially if only part way through the evaluation.

- 10 – I understand the principle and agree that it is basically a universal principle. IOW, that in ALL areas of life that confronts us with important choices, a 'choice to not choose from A or B' is truly a choice.

Your self-assessment number here: _____

F4: Where to consider Consequences

What Pascal's Wager does for us in this case. However, for our purposes here, this Wager does contribute something – but <u>not</u> towards belief <u>itself</u>. It strongly forces us, though, **to pursue TRUTH**. The argument might not incite us to 'choose' between competing beliefs, but it SHOULD incite <u>us to ruthlessly investigate those alternatives to 'break the tie'</u> so that we are NOT forced into choosing between "EQUALLY inconclusive and uncertain" alternatives.

It also argues that we should <u>consider</u> consequences of our conclusions, but not be <u>dominated</u> by them.

What are some of the consequences to consider in this case? Some of the practical consequences (and implications) of the classical <u>theistic position</u> I am presenting are quite significant:

1. **If** this "God" made you and knows you better than yourself, **then** this Creator has a privileged position in knowing what you need, will be fulfilled by, should avoid, should embrace, etc.
2. **If** this "God" made the universe, **then** everything in it has value.
3. **If** this "God" created agents who can freely resist him/her/them/it, **then** we should expect some mixture of good/evil, truth/falsity, and beauty/anti-beauty in the reality we experience and have experienced in our past.
4. **If** this "God" created agents that are in some sense 'analogues' of God, **then** some of their unique (qualitatively or quantitatively) characters should reveal something about the Creator (e.g. we build Rose Gardens of extreme beauty, we mount social justice campaigns out of empathy/sympathy, we create/discover artificial mathematics for building amazing technologies, we gravitate toward and unconsciously support human community, we care and have affection for species other than ourselves—pets and animals in captivity).
5. **If** this "God" actually cares about their creation (especially the agents therein), **then** we should expect some interventions, for the benefit of that creation/those agents.
6. **If** this "God" is truly the ultimate good/true/beauty, **then** we might expect a relationship (of the kind that 'imports' some of this goodness/truth/beauty into our lives, society, and universe) to perhaps be available.

And of course there are 'negative consequences' that could accrue as well! To identify as a 'theist' in today's Western intellectual subculture MIGHT open yourself up to possible censure or ridicule or marginalization (depending on locale). And if you dare to go so far as to even identifying as 'Christian', it CAN get much worse.

Think honestly about how YOU often/sometimes look at ordinary Christian people—you generally manifest and express a disdain, mistrust, and lack-of-respect for their intellect, ethics, and cultural habits (and not just the organized 'church' part). Think about how your past or present online group members/friends would treat you differently. Think about the stereotypes such terminology might invoke in your teachers.

I personally have been on the 'abuse end' of such judgments, even in cases where my intellectual integrity, genius, performance, and depth was clearly manifest (and generally superior to my 'judges') in my job performance, my writings, reports, interactions, and research prowess.

But this sentiment might be a little paranoid, or overgeneralizing, or **possibly outdated now**—based on my own experiences. I do know that Christian professors in Philosophy have taken over the Academy since my days in college. And Christian professors are fairly well-represented now in Western universities.

So, the hostile social environment that I am describing is probably <u>less prevalent in the university</u> now, and more obvious/experienced in <u>the 'popular culture' strata</u>—where it is 'fashionable' to ridicule "overt Christians', based upon the admittedly deplorable actions/words of some.

In fact, the sociological belief that education/science/secularization would kill off mainstream religion in the modern world has been more or less abandoned, even by the early founders of the secularization perspective (e.g. Peter Berger). The data is fairly strong that **awareness of God or Higher Power is confessed by those with higher education.**

First, the 2009 Pew research study showed that – regardless of religious orientation (including 'nones')—the **majority of scientists** (US) believed in the existence of God (or 'a higher power'). [NOTE: the more recent the education, the higher the belief in God was.]

Religious Belief among Scientists

| | *Believe in…* | | |
	God	Higher power	Neither
	%	%	%
All scientists	33	18	41
Men	33	16	44
Women	35	24	36
18-34	42	24	32
35-49	37	14	42
50-64	32	18	44
65+	28	18	48
Field			
Biological and Medical	32	19	41
Chemistry	41	14	39
Geosciences	30	20	47
Physics and Astronomy	29	14	46

Figures read across.

Second, The 2017 Pew report on Education and Religion gave these tables:

Believe in God?	All U.S. Adults	College Degree	PostGrad Degree
Yes, absolutely certain	63	57	52
Yes, less certain	26	26	30
No	9	14	15
Other/Don't know/Refused	2	3	3
	100	100	100

Thirdly, a 2007 study by professors from Harvard and George Mason, focused on actual PROFESSORS in academic institutions.

Here is a chart from their published work:

Belief in God by Type of Institution
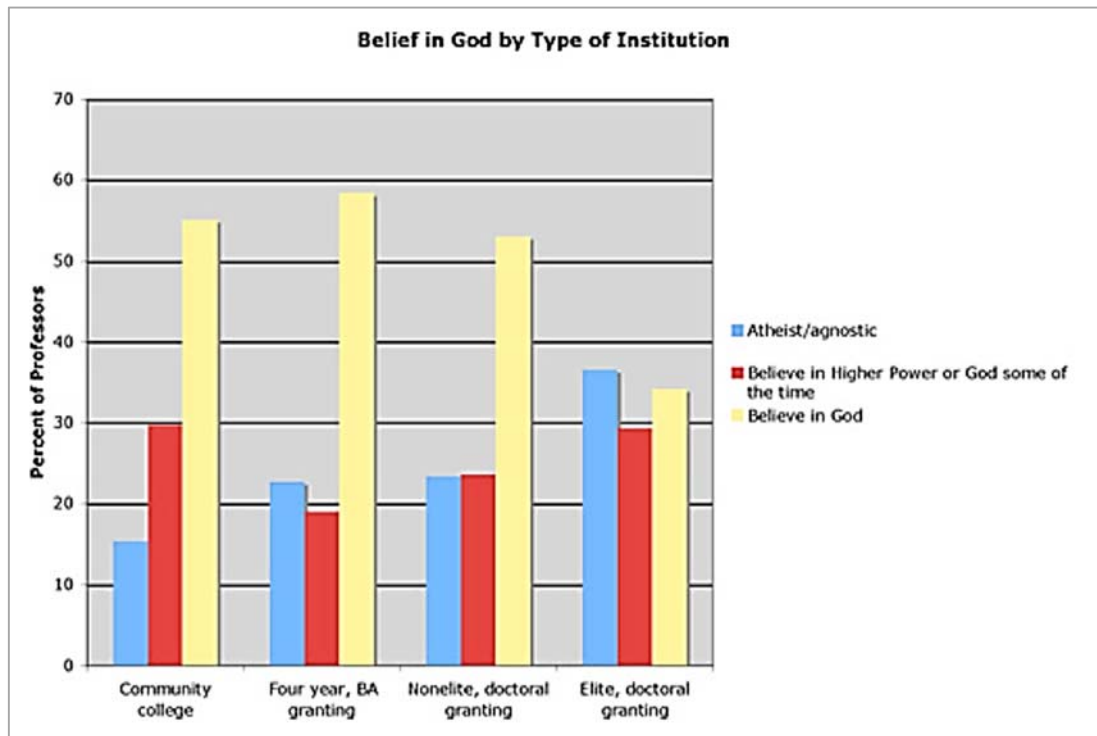
The totals of the YELLOW and RED columns reach **well over 60+ percent**.

[Note: "46.2 percent of **ART professors** … say they have no doubt that God exists."]

Finally, using census data and Pew research,we can do some approximate calculations::

- About 10.85% of US adults have a post-graduate degree (=26,201,665)
- About 9% of US adult Christians have a post-graduate degree (=15,344,275)

This means that **58.6% (more than half) of all US post-graduate degrees are held by Christians**.

Of these 15+ million Christian adults with post-graduate degrees, almost one-half (49%) are YOUNGER THAN 50 years old.

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"Outspoken" scientists span most fields: https://scientistchristians.com/ .

There are specific organizations of scientists who are intellectually Christian. The one I am most familiar with is The American Scientific Affiliation (77 years in operation; 2019 worldwide membership = 1,978; 34 local chapters in US+CA).

They have affiliate organizations, such as Christian Women in Science, Canadian Scientific & Christian Affiliation, Affiliation of Christian Geologists, the Emerging Scholars Network, and Christian Engineers and Scientists in Technology.

Of course, we base our conclusions of what is true based on evidence and logic, and NOT by 'counting noses'. That being said, though, if 96% of the people you respect (or SHOULD respect) say X, and you come up with not-X, then the 'number of noses' should WARN you to 'triple check your results'!

But –at least as far as academic noses go—you should be aware that all peer-reviewed publications are ultra-conservative in nature. They support the *status quo* in a given field and it takes FOREVER for new paradigms to get acceptance. [This is where books on the sociology of scientific efforts and on the philosophy of science provides a corrective to absolutizing or deifying "Science"—but that is another subject altogether.]

Of course, on our best days, we would hope that the 'favor of people' and 'judgments of others' **would not be given the same weight as** honesty, integrity, thoroughness, and accuracy would! But it IS a fear-factor and a very real one. Sadly, we ALL KNOW that the opinions of people (whether accurate or just a bunch of malicious lies!) can RADICALLY affect how we see ourselves and the world…sigh.

The issue of honesty and integrity in assessing the evidence for God's reality and God's involvement in your life so far

F5: Bias in assessing alternatives

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But remember that consequences/implications are NOT evidence *per se*. But—as I have noted here—these POSSIBLE consequences are not in themselves 'evidence' of the existence of such a being. They 'suggest such' (perhaps) and they certainly MIGHT make that position 'attractive' from a psychological center, but they are not enough by themselves to base a choice on.

Fortunately in our case, there is a wealth of data and logic that many have found 'more compelling' and 'most resistant to attacks' than any alternatives (one of which must be chosen before death).

Your conclusion must be defensible for your conscience to be satisfied with your intellectual integrity. The pursuit of truth I am focusing on here is toward a <u>conscience-pleasing and defensible (perhaps to the level of being 'unavoidable') belief</u>, and **not** at all for a blind-faith or arbitrary choice (neither of which would satisfy YOU or ME).

But returning to the issue at hand: is truth – regardless of consequences—important enough for you to pursue, never settling for less or for 'juicy rationalizations' or 'a convenient and socially acceptable worldview or 'self-serving ethics' or 'groundless estimate of self-worth" or "culturally-defined nature of the self"…

Truth is about the 'real' in opposition to the 'phony'; the deep instead of the shallow; the solid instead of the facile; the core instead of the appearance. The 'unexamined life is not worth living' is true—on many levels (especially for a mind like yours)—but it is not as 'comfortable' as self-delusion, social-delusion, 'partial intellectual integrity', or subculture conformity. These positions might be more 'comfortable' but they will be less grounding, less fulfilling, of less impact in the community/world, and of 'shorter value' than truth. When it is us who are wearing the Emperor's new clothes, eventually the 'comfort' turns to regret, self-shame at being fooled or being dishonest, etc.

Of Critical Importance: This is a 'relative comparison' of beliefs: Whatever beliefs you have and <u>end up with about this</u> must be able to stand up to the same level of sustained criticism that the alternatives have. We are comparing these worldviews as to which one 'makes the most sense out of' (1) your personal experience; (2) the facts of nature/existence; and (3) the facts of history. [This is known as the 'argument to the best explanation' approach, which is a basic tool of science. E.g., "which theory predicts and retrodicts the most data?".]

It must offer both POSITIVE evidence in its favor, and provide a PLAUSIBLE explanation of counter-evidence. And it will have to offer a plausible defensible explanation for the information in all three areas, as well as marshal some evidence to support it. In other words, not only must the alternative advance an explanation of how "X COULD HAVE HAPPENED", but there must be some EVIDENCE that "X DID HAPPEN". (Like in a law court, the prosecution must do more than simply show that a perp had a MOTIVE to do X and

the MEANS to do X. It would have to give evidence that the perp actually ACTED on that MOTIVE and actually USED those MEANS in the 'doing of X to Y'.)

So, the 'winning' belief system has to provide:
1. A **PLAUSIBLE explanation** of the data of nature, social history, and your personal history
2. A explanation that is **SUPERIOR to OTHER** plausible explanations
3. **Positive evidence** that it **DID IN FACT** 'cause' the data it purports to explain.

Example: advancing animism as 'best explanation'. Take, for example, some basic form of animism, in which all objects, places and creatures are alive, possess a soul or spirit, and have feelings and intentions.

It would have to give (for a simple example) **a plausible and superior explanation of, and evidence for**:

1. It being able to create a universe, and doing so (data from nature)

2. That it produced (within a specific historical process) the future-telling prophecies of the Hebrew Bible about the Messiah or world events (data from history);

3. How several of your God-directed prayers were answered in such a complex, coordinated fashion (data from your personal experience).

It would give an explanation of some things well, perhaps, and other things not so well. It might be able to produce evidence of acting (e.g. shamanistic rituals?) in some cases.

Assessment: How clear is it to you that belief systems are actually 'competitors' requiring data/resources to be brought to the 'competition' and that one must be FAIR and OBJECTIVE in evaluating these – on a scale of 0-10?

- 0 – I am not convinced that objectivity and fairness mean the same as all this 'data' and 'evidence' stuff. If one worldview is 'easier to live with' or 'more popular' or 'adopted by more people like me' then it doesn't NEED as much defending as a worldview I don't find 'attractive'. I don't want to be dishonest with the facts, but I will trust my 'intuitions' or 'feelings' more than facts, logic, or data— even if they disagree.
- 5 – I don't want to be dishonest with the facts, but I am not sure how to balance out 'intuition' and evidence (when they disagree). I would probably stop evaluating a worldview if it had a lot of factual problems or vagueness, even if I 'liked it'. I do not want to be self-deluded or superficial, but I also don't want to 'justify' some position based on facts that might be questionable if I dug further in. But at the end of the day, I DO want to be fair – in spite of any bias or prejudice I had going INTO this evaluation.
- 10 – I am pretty sure that I am committed to being FAIR and OBJECTIVE to 'all comers' in the area of belief systems. I value objectivity, honesty, and thoroughness highly—as part of my core commitment to intellectual integrity and need for a clear conscience. All worldviews probably have something in them that I WILL NOT like or find appealing, but that is no excuse for dishonesty (there might be a perfectly good explanation or alternate understanding for something like that – if it rankles me, it probably rankles others too.)

Your self-assessment number here: _____

The issue of honesty and integrity in assessing the evidence for God's reality and God's involvement in your life so far

F6: How much 'vagueness' and/or how many 'unanswered questions' are allowed?

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Continuing the example:

Defending and/or drilling-down on Animism. But then it would need to withstand the questioning and 'attacks' from other positions. How far down in granularity is the locus of a soul found? If all 'objects' and 'places' have a soul or life, do quarks have their own? Do atoms? Do individual molecules of water in a river have one? Do the souls combine to make hyper-souls (e.g. water molecules become a 'river' soul?). Are dead animals still alive (as objects) in the same way they were when they were biologically alive? Do souls divide when an amoeba divides?

This is not to pick on animism (and there are more advanced versions of this—e.g. panpsychism, universal quantum consciousness—that would 'do better' in explaining things than 'basic animism'), but just to demonstrate the scope of what must be done.

Precision is required at the level of articulating what it PREDICTS and RETRODICTS. You just cannot leave the belief system in a 'vague state'—it has to be detailed enough for being able to say that what it AFFIRMS is the case and what it DENIES is NOT the case.

Vagueness—although often VERY 'comfortable'—borders on the 'shallow' or 'superficial' side of 'irresponsible'.

Believing in some kind of 'higher power' (without more detail than that) or some Jedi-type 'universal unconscious force' (without some account of how it "got there", operates, recognizes the semantic content of a prayer request, etc.) might function as a starter set, but couldn't be held with confidence until it was articulated in enough detail to BE CRITICALLY EVALUATED and to PASS SCRUTINY.

Ditto for any other system. Materialism would also need some account of how it "got there", how even the rules work, how it recognizes the semantic content of a prayer request, how it can account for both consciousness AND quantum mechanics –which HAS NO 'material' IN IT--etc.)

[Wishful thinking, foggy platitudes, and blind-sincerity is not enough to ground something to base one's life, moral framework, sense of worth, and sense of purpose on!]

Are 'ethics' part of 'factual'? The factual evaluation includes some type/level of 'ethical' or 'moral' component, but this is harder to judge that stuff about facts and logic and such.

For example, the moral center of classical Yin/Yang – as articulated well by **Luke Skywalker** – has to be considered. He makes the argument to the young Jedi that she should NOT fight evil (the dark side) because

it brings the 'system out of balance' and that therefore <u>more evil would just rise up</u> to bring the system back into balance again. No reason to fight, eliminate, or even reduce evil in that system. No amount of fighting social injustice, domestic violence, abuse, school shootings or terrorism would do any good, so don't even try—in that system.

And, if you were on the evil side and had a change of heart, no sense stopping the evil you are doing-- because somebody else just as evil will spring up to take your place and to continue your evil work…

For some people, they might could live with that. I personally can't. I personally think 'more good than evil' is more important than 'balance of good and evil'. But that is not enough IN ITSELF to overturn any hard evidence, clear and stubborn facts, and/or irrefutable logic FOR the position – if such support for the position was significant.

There are <u>no</u> positions without many, many unanswered questions and unresolved puzzles (least of all is the position of 'taking no position'!). Theism in its various forms is no exception, nor is materialism, nor are any of the systems that have an unconscious ultimate/unconditioned reality something. We are reasoning and thinking toward a 'least problematic belief system', in which our <u>conscience can find rest</u> and our risk-aversion has the most 'peace'. Smile.

But how many unanswered questions are TOO many? When should you discard a possible worldview out of the running because of these?

The general approach is just like we would do in science theories. You assess how WEIGHTY and how CENTRAL the questions are. If they are some of the core questions that RADICALLY AFFECT the meaning and/or content of the theory, then they cannot go answered. If there are no reasonable proposed solutions, you skip that worldview—but only if an answer SHOULD BE expected. It is more a question of the SERIOUSNESS of the question than the QUANTITY of questions.

Of course, if NONE of the worldviews have a decent answer to some question, then maybe the question has to be thrown out as a criterion. Maybe the question is unanswerable—for all systems.

Assessment: How important is it to your conscience that a worldview be fairly explicit and robust enough to address most of the questions (and 'attacks' on it) before you accept it as a candidate– on a scale of 0-10?

- 0 – Since no worldview has all the answers and since no worldview can be completely precise, I don't use these criteria at all in deciding which worldviews are candidates for my adoption and commitment.
- 5 – I would like a 'nice and tidy' worldview to understand and believe in and live by, but I don't have a lot of confidence in my ability to JUDGE whether a worldview DOES a good job or not. I may have to take a 'half leap of faith' to accept anything.
- 10 – I have to believe that I have a firm understanding of a position BEFORE I adopt it—in ANY area of life. I don't like finding out I am wrong on something important, nor do I like somebody ELSE to point that out to me! So, I really want to make sure I know the pro-and-cons of systems I am considering. I do NOT want 'blind faith' or even 'near-sighted faith'—I want something clear and distinct.

Your self-assessment number here: _____

F7: When is agnosticism warranted (in part or whole)?

Final introductory point – WHEN IS AGNOSTICISM WARRANTED?

To a careful thinker, the prospect of EVALUATING and then DECIDING that one view is the 'best' can be daunting. We are <u>not</u> able to gather ALL the data – to eliminate uncertainty – <u>nor</u> are we equipped to actually EVALUATE all the data to the depth we would like to. But, again, it is a matter of conscience. At some point in the process of looking at the facts and positions, the conscience will 'tip over' and point toward the best-explanation one (for more scrutiny, perhaps).

But the conscience COULD be so troubled by some incompleteness of data or weakness of argument that even the BEST CANDIDATE still does not seem strong enough to accept.

Of course, the conscience might also do the opposite: putting pressure on you to accept one that IS STRONG and STRONGER than the others, but which still has some troubling aspects to it.

In my view, agnosticism is warranted when

(1) The conscience says that the search has been done thoroughly, honestly, and with careful self-critical reflection; and

(2) The conscience would not be embarrassed with that position if/when it stood before a higher power in post-mortem judgement (saying basically 'it was too hard to decide—honestly')

All of the current theistic worldviews, some of the non-theistic worldviews (e.g. Hinduism), and some of the ancient worldviews (e.g. Egyptian religion) have a 'moral evaluation' done at time of death, with complete transparency a major characteristic of this 'courtroom scene'.

And many (if not, most) of these systems have **the conscience as a 'witness'** at this judgment. When a soul 'stands before' a theistic god, our explanations for our behavior/beliefs are either affirmed or denied by our conscience (as a witness standing next to us). In the ancient Egyptian religion, it was the ba/ka ('soul', 'spirit') that functioned as the 'tattletale' or confirming 'witness'. In Hinduism the process is automatic with the karma (not 'fooled' by the excuse of 'it was too hard to decide') slotting one into the next reincarnation to pay for it.

I personally expect the Judeo-Christian God to 'excuse' some agnostics because of the ambiguity of their total experience (e.g. massive abuse and brainwashing), but for many others their excuse will be exposed as either a laziness or an avoidance of responsibility or a desire for a lifestyle that wasn't seen by them as 'compatible' with that worldview.

One REALLY has to watch out for 'self-serving decisions' or 'convenience values' or 'willful self-delusion' here—they won't 'stand up in court', they won't be able to gag-order the conscience indefinitely, and they

will left one empty, disillusioned, and regretful later in life. The pull may be very strong and yet very subtle in its voice. Be aware of the danger here, and face this issue squarely.

Of course there will be many points WITHIN a worldview that you will HAVE to suspend judgement on (either because they are relatively unimportant—e.g. type of baptism; do I pick Vishnu, Shiva, Kali or Druga as my main god—or because they require too much specialist research). But it is the overall SUM of the supporting data that speaks to your conscience. And this voice MUST BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY.

You already make judgements based on 'conscience'—but conscience can be WRONG if it does not have ENOUGH solid data to work with. The more information you have, the more accurate your conscience and intuition becomes. In the absence of real facts and logic, the conscience will choose on the ONLY INFO it has—which might be emotions, need for social acceptance, etc. – giving a judgment based on incidental factors rather than on germane ones.

Assessment: How confident are you that you have enough familiarity with the 'veracity' of your conscience, to know when it should be trusted or when it should be told to 'wait'– on a scale of 0-10?

- 0 – My conscience is notoriously confused and sometimes anti-Me (e.g. ED voice), and I cannot distinguish the good voices from the bad voices enough to use this to help me know when I have enough data to make a fair and competent decisions.
- 5 – I have occasionally (but rarely) been misled by my conscience, so I will consider it but not depend on it for final conclusions. I will try NOT to let it make me stop my evaluation prematurely, in some appeal to 'time to rest'.
- 10 – I have had enough experiences with 'false witnesses' from my conscience (include the ED voice) that I will be careful in making final decisions SOLELY on it. I will insure that I can marshall the logic and facts in support of my choice FIRST and then work that until my conscience agrees with that, or points out some flaw in my reasoning.

Your self-assessment number here: _____