Effective Evangelism: **JAEE323**

GHOSTS FOR THE ATHEIST

by Robert Velarde

In an essay responding to a debate on the existence of God, Dallas Willard uses the phrase, "ontologically haunted universe," adding, "It is haunted by unnerving possibilities."[1] Willard suggests that a successful argument against atheism results in that worldview being ideologically haunted. Rather than merely reacting to atheism—or any sort of skepticism, for that matter— actively engaging in establishing a haunted universe in the world-view of the atheist is a critical component in making the case for Christian theism.

In the world of the occult or paranormal, a haunting refers to a recurring manifestation of a ghost, usually at a particular location such as a home or other building. *Haunting* can also mean to disturb or bother the sensibilities or mind. It is in the second sense that this article will provide "ghosts" for the atheist, not as occult phenomena, but as apologetic arguments intended to nudge atheists from their worldview in the direction of Christian theism by weaving cognitive tensions in the fabric of their view of reality. These tensions can fester, bothering atheists because their worldview becomes haunted by ideas that favor the existence of God.

The recent rise of the so-called new atheism and its associated overt hostility to religion, particularly Christianity, calls out for a rational Christian response rather than merely defensive posturing. While the temperamentally belligerent tone of much of the new atheism is disturbing, the arguments presented are anything but new. In fact, many of the arguments the new atheists present are of the traditional variety, albeit in the guise of antagonism rather than a cordial meeting of the minds determined to discover truth.

As a result, many Christians are on the defensive. We are certainly called to defend the faith, but this does not mean always being reactionary, thus allowing atheists to set the tone and topic of discussion. We need to engage actively on our terms instead of theirs.

What figurative ghosts can Christian apologists provide to haunt the universe of the atheist? There are many, but I will briefly present ten, the first three being traditional natural theology arguments for the existence of God.

Ghost #1: Cosmology. If the universe had a beginning, and if everything that has a beginning has a cause, then what caused the universe? To state that the big bang caused it is not a sufficient answer, as the big bang, if accepted, is an event. But what caused the event? In short, this first ghost is a brief presentation of the Kalam cosmological argument.[2] It argues that the best explanation for the origins of the universe is God.

Ghost #2: Design. Is the universe fine-tuned to support intelligent life? Is it designed? Does apparent design in the universe, both at a macroscopic and microscopic level, suggest chance or design? This is a brief presentation of one form of the teleological or design argument. It suggests that biological life and other factors, such as a seemingly biocentric universe, point to the reality of an intelligent designer behind the cosmos.

Ghost #3: Morality. Do moral standards exist? If so, where do they come from? If they are mere inventions of beings who themselves are the result of time and chance, then there are no real standards of right and wrong. The result is moral relativism or variations of a sort of social contract theory of ethics. Whatever the atheist explanation, it falls short of having ultimate and transcendent authority. If God exists, however, we have a real and transcendent standard of right and wrong.[3]

Ghost #4: Evil and Suffering. Atheists often appeal to the reality of evil and suffering as an argument against God. If God exists, the argument goes, then why does He allow so much evil and suffering in the world? But where does the atheist get the idea of evil? Where does that sense of injustice in the world come from? To call something evil requires some understanding of the reality of good. But where does this standard come from?

Ghost #5: The Intelligent Christian. Another ghost that may haunt the universe of the atheist is the existence of the intelligent Christian. When I was an atheist, I was under the impression that most Christians were idiots. Unfortunately, most of the believers I encountered were intellectually ignorant, unable to articulate why they believed what they believed, much less able to engage with an atheist on more than a superficial level. When I began to encounter intelligent Christians, however, both through their writings and in person, I was haunted by a problem: how seemingly intelligent people embrace Christianity? Yet history is filled with individuals possessed of obviously great intelligence who also embrace Christianity as being "true and reasonable" (Acts 26:25 NIV). Christian thinkers are unlikely to compare to the intellectual greatness of the likes of Augustine. Nevertheless, we can model an intelligent and reasonable Christianity as an example for atheists not of a blind faith, but of a reasonable faith.

Ghost #6: Atheism as Nihilism. Followed to its logical conclusions, atheism ultimately leads to the despair of nihilism. In the end, there is no lasting meaning to life within atheism because within its framework there is no God, no real grounding for morality, no reason for human existence, and no lasting meaning to anything we do. In this regard, atheism has nothing truly positive to offer the world. This is why traditionally it is Christians who help the needy, establish hospitals, and care for the hurting. Atheism has no real foundation to offer help to the world, unless its foundation is borrowed from a justifiably moral worldview such as what is found in Christian theism.

Ghost #7: Reason and Intelligibility. Why are we able to reason? If we are merely the products of randomness rather than intelligence, why do we think our reasoning abilities actually have the power to arrive at truth? This is a version of the argument from reason.4 A somewhat related argument is one from intelligibility, related to the design argument. As Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli wrote, "Either this intelligible universe and the finite minds so well suited to grasp it are the products of intelligence, or both intelligibility and intelligence are the products of blind chance."[5]

Ghost #8: Pascal's Anthropological Argument. Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) argued that Christianity offers the best explanation of the seeming paradox of human greatness and wretchedness. Why is it that we are capable of such greatness, but also of such wretchedness? The explanation is found in Christianity.

The doctrine of the Fall accounts for our capacity for wretchedness, while being made in the image of God accounts for human greatness.[6]

Ghost #9: Explaining Christ. Another ghost for the atheist involves explaining Christ. Given that Christ existed and the New Testament Gospels are accurate accounts of His life, what explanation do atheists offer for Christ? This argument involves going beyond the traditional "Lord, liar, or lunatic" options presented in some popular apologetic works, as there are other options to consider.[7]

Ghost #10: Christianity's Positive Influence. The new atheism revels in pointing to the many supposed failings of Christianity. While there are excellent responses to the typical critiques,[8] this ghost for the atheist concentrates on Christianity's many positive influences throughout history in areas such as humanitarian aid, the arts, philosophy, social reform, science, literature, and more. Far from being a negative influence on the world, Christians have sought to love their neighbors, doing to others as they would have others do to them. The Golden Rule and God's love as the key foundations of Christian ethics are hardly negative, but vastly positive.[9]

Atheists who become Christians generally do so as the result of a series of progressive steps that ultimately lead to theism, then, perhaps after interludes exploring other worldviews, Christian theism. The interludes pose a danger in establishing a haunted universe for the atheist. The atheist may be diverted by another false worldview instead of making it all the way to Christianity. That is why the Christian apologist cannot merely offer arguments for the existence of God without ultimately pointing to Christianity as the solution and best explanation of reality.

Not all atheists, moreover, will be haunted by the same ghosts. An incremental approach to dialoguing with atheists offers a variety of rigorous and well-crafted arguments that will create intellectual tensions in their thinking. Over time, these tensions may move the atheist closer to theism. If Christians can haunt the atheist universe by presenting reasonable arguments, that is not an apologetic defeat, but a significant step towards belief and acceptance of Christ.

—*Robert Velarde*

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notes

1   Dallas Willard, "Language, Being, God, and the Three Stages of Theistic Evidence," in *Does God Exist? The Great Debate*, ed. J .P. Moreland and Kai Neilsen (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 207. The book has since been reprinted by Prometheus Press (1993), while Willard's essay is available online for those who wish to read the original context of his comments: http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=42

2   Perhaps the most vocal evangelical Christian proponent of the argument in our time is William Lane Craig. See his book *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1979). An example of the cosmological argument used by Craig in debate with an atheist may be found in *God?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

3   There are many variations of the moral argument. C. S. Lewis presented a popular version in Book I of *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952).

4   C. S. Lewis presents the argument from reason in chapter 3 of *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1960). It has since been reexamined and defended by Victor Reppert in *C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

5   Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 66.

6   A more detailed presentation of the argument is found in my article, "Greatness and Wretchedness: The Usefulness of Pascal's Anthropological Argument in Apologetics," Christian Research Journal 27, 2 (2004).

7   See, e.g., Kreeft and Tacelli, chap. 7.

8   See, e.g., Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) and Vincent Carroll and David Shiflett, *Christianity on Trial* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001).

9   See my booklet, *What Christianity Has Done for the World* (Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2007).