

The Invitation: To Dad, with Hope

March 10, 1989

Dear Dad:

I trust all is going well with you and Jeanne down there in sunny Florida. Aside from a little flu-bug hanging around our house, we are weathering the final — very prolonged — stages of the Minnesota winter pretty well. But will spring ever come?

Here's something that might interest you. Yesterday I was invited by the Islamic Center of Minnesota to publically debate a very well-known Islamic scholar on the subject of the Trinity at the University of Minnesota. Perhaps against my better judgment, I agreed. This man is a professional debater whose academic credentials are almost encyclopedic! I'm a bit intimidated, but also excited, about this opportunity. It will occur April 13th.

This (sort of) leads me to the main point of my letter. As you know, I teach apologetics here at Bethel. Apologetics is the study of defending the Christian faith against objections which non-Christians have and of presenting positive reasons for the truthfulness of the Christian faith. As academic matters go, it is my first love. My debate with the Muslim scholar in April will be an exercise in apologetics.

What you don't know, because I've never told you, is that I have you to thank for getting me into this field. I want to thank you for this. When I first became a Christian some 14 years ago, you were legitimately concerned that I had gotten myself involved in some sort of mindless cult. (It turns out you weren't very far from wrong at the time!) So you continually challenged my faith with questions and objections. I didn't much appreciate it at the time, but I certainly do now, and I love you for it. You forced me to think seriously and critically, about what I believed and why I believed it. You got me into apologetics.

After about a year, however, our discussions about Christianity came to a halt. Your concern lessened, I think, as my Christianity became more mature and less "cultic" and narrow-minded. On several occasions

since then I have raised up the issue of Christianity in a general sort of way with you, but we've never really pursued the matter in much depth. And this brings me to the point of this present letter.

Dad, I would really love to enter into an in-depth dialogue with you about why I have continued to be a Christian for the last 14 years. This isn't only, or even primarily, because I love apologetics. It is mainly because I love you. No one can blame another person for wanting to share something which is most valuable to them with another person whom they love, and that is what I'd like to do with you. My faith in Jesus Christ, my experience of His saving power and love, is the single most precious thing in the world to me—and I really believe it is the most precious thing any human being on this earth can have. I also believe that a relationship with Christ is the most important thing a person can have since it has, in my view, eternal consequences.

It struck me as odd and wrong that I spend so much time discussing Christianity with others when I have not discussed it in-depth with my own father, whose care and concern got me into this field in the first place! You're 70 years old now, and frankly, I think it's about time that I begin this discussion. It also just seems right, as a part of our father/son relationship, that we be open with one another about our worldviews.

Now I know you, Dad, so I know that my "preaching at you" would do absolutely no good. (I tried that the first year I was a Christian, remember?) Believe me, I have no inclination to do that. What I'd rather propose to you is to engage in an ongoing discussion about Christianity. I'd like to give you an opportunity to share with me all the reasons you have for not being a Christian, and I'd like you to give me the opportunity to share with you all the reasons why I am one.

Would you be willing to do this? I think, at the very least, it would be stimulating for both of us, and we'd get to know each other better. Having one's faith challenged—whatever faith one holds—is always a good thing. If it can't "stand the fire," a faith isn't worth holding—whether it is Christianity or atheism. So, in love, let's challenge one another. What do you say?

Sincerely yours, with hope,

Greg

CORRESPONDENCE 1

Why has *Christianity done so much harm?*

March 13, 1989

Dear Greg:

I received your letter yesterday and found it most thought-provoking.

Let me first say that I'm excited about your debate with the Islamic scholar and wish I could be there to see it. If it is possible, could you get me a tape of it? Let me know.

I find your idea of dialoguing about the subject of Christianity very interesting, and I'd be happy to do it. I've got enough time on my hands. I think you're giving me too much credit though, Greg. My belief (or lack of it) is not based too much on any positive position I hold, but rather, on a host of negative ones. I can find plenty wrong with most religious and political views, but I'm not at all firm on what I personally believe—at least not on religious matters. I really don't have a "faith" or "worldview" of any sort. I only know for sure what I *don't* believe. Also, unlike you, I'm not a trained philosopher, so if you write to me like you wrote in your dissertation, forget it! I won't be able to follow you. So you'll have to keep it simple.

As you know, I admire the education you've pursued, Greg, and I have often wondered how it is that you could continue to believe in this Christianity business in spite of the rather liberal institutions you've attended. It baffles me. I find the whole thing pretty implausible. But I've never been one to pass up an argument, so why start now?

You invited me to raise whatever objections come to mind, so I'll jump right in. Here's one I've wondered about a lot: how could an all-powerful and all-loving God allow the church to do so

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much harm to humanity for so long? Isn't this supposed to be His true church, His representation on earth? That's what I was taught in my Catholic days.

So I'm wondering, where was God when the Christians were slaughtering the Muslims and Jews — women and children included—during the "holy" crusades? Why did God allow "His people" to bum almost the entire population of Jewish "unbelievers" in Spain during the Spanish Inquisition? Why would an all-loving God allow the church to take part in something like the Holocaust (at best it looked in the other direction) — and do all these things "in His name"?

To my mind, this alone is quite enough to prove that the church does not possess any true philosophy. And it was this church, was it not, that decided which books were "divine" and should constitute the "Holy Bible." As far as I'm concerned, this is itself enough to reject the Bible as a joke.

Well, you wanted an objection: you've got one. I look forward to your response.

Give my love to Shelley and the kids.

Love always,

Dad

March 16, 1989

Dear Dad,

Thanks so much for your letter. About my debate, if I can get a tape for you, I certainly will. I know they have even videotaped these debates before (the man I'm debating has on file over 300 such videotapes!),

but I don't know the plans of the Muslim association sponsoring this debate. I'll let you know.

I'm so happy you're willing and interested in having an ongoing discussion about Christianity. I can tell this is going to be engaging and stimulating for both of us. I know you are, as you said, much more sure about what you don't believe than about what you do believe. That's fine. It's always easier to prove a false theory false than it is to prove a true one true, so it is reasonable to have more beliefs about what you think is false than about what you think is true. It's a sign of a healthy, critical mind.

I would only ask that you try to keep an open mind as to the possibility of the truth of at least some of the central beliefs that Christianity has traditionally taught. My only claim—the one I want to attempt to defend—is that the foundational beliefs of Christianity are the most reasonable beliefs to base one's life on. The belief that there is a personal, loving God who is ultimately revealed in and through Jesus Christ, who has provided salvation by grace to the world through this man, and who has inspired the Bible as our means of learning of, and interacting with, Himself: these beliefs, I argue, are more substantiated, and far more fulfilling, than any other worldview one could hold. And my goal, quite frankly, is to convince you of the truth of these beliefs and bring you into a relationship with Christ. I know firsthand the fullness of life, the peace, and the joy that this relationship gives, and I want to share it with you. And, as you requested, I promise to keep my end of the discussion on a layperson's level.

Now the objection you raised in your last letter was a really good one. (I clearly am not, as you humbly claim, giving you "too much credit.") My first and primary response is that I don't think God can be held responsible for what the Catholic Church—or any church, or any religion whatsoever—has done or shall do. From my perspective, the God whom the Bible talks about, and whom Jesus Christ incarnates, is a God of love, and this entails that He is a God of freedom, for you cannot have love without freedom. We were created with the ability to choose love, and thus with the potential to choose its opposite—evil.

To assume that God is responsible for our evil—even the evil committed "in His name"—is, I suspect, to assume that humans are robots who simply act out a divine preplanned program. But if that were the case, we could never be loving beings. I want to argue that, ultimately, all evil in the world comes from free wills other than God. What God wills and does is always good. Whatever is not good has its origin from someone or something other than God.

The fact that it was the "Christian church" which chose to do the evils you write about, and to do them using God's name, in my mind only serves to show that all that goes under the name of "Christian" is not necessarily Christian. Christianity isn't a religion or an institution of any sort: it's a relationship. Within the religion of Christianity there are, and have always been, genuine Christians—people who have a saving and transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. And this fact accounts for the tremendous good Christianity has brought to the world (in spite of the evils). But the "religion" of Christianity, the "institution" of the church, is not itself Christian. Only people, not institutions, can be Christian.

Thus, I want to sharply distinguish between the Christianity I'm defending and the "Christian church": the two need not have anything more than a name in common. I wouldn't dream of trying to defend all that's been done under the label "Christianity." Like you, I am enraged by a great deal of it.

Well, thanks again for responding. I can't tell you how happy I am that we're openly dialoguing like this. Digest my response and give me your feedback. OK?

With love,

Greg