

How to Talk to a
Skeptic

An **Easy-to-Follow Guide** for
Natural Conversations and Effective Apologetics

Donald J. Johnson



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For my amazing wife, Kendra

Contents

Introduction: How to Reach a Culture of Radical Unbelief 11

Part One: A Framework for Fruitful Conversations

1. No Selling Required 19
2. The Big Picture 31
3. The State of the Doubter’s Knowledge 45

Part Two: What Skeptics Need to Know About God

4. Love and the Meaning of Life 53
5. The Reason for the Rules 73
6. What Jesus Meant by That Whole “Born Again” Thing 87
7. Why Hell Is Fair and Heaven Won’t Be Boring 105
8. How to Think About the Bible 123

Part Three: Dealing With the Data

9. The God Hypothesis 149
10. Christianity and Pagan Myths 167

Contents

- 11. The World Is Not Enough 187
 - 12. Up Close and Personal With God 207
 - 13. Hypocrisy, Sex, and Other Causes of Skepticism 231
 - 14. Telling the World Its Story 253
- Notes 255

////// Introduction

How to Reach a Culture of Radical Unbelief

On March 3, 2005, *The Washington Times* published an article about the decline of atheism.¹ The author presented several good reasons to believe that godlessness was in trouble and there would be fewer atheists in the future. I distinctly remember the piece because I heartily endorsed its thesis on my radio show that week. Boy was I wrong! While the *Times* certainly presented solid reasons for people to reject atheism,² the prognosis that more people actually were going to do so was clearly premature. Atheism, at least in America, is in ascension, not decline, as more and more people openly reject the existence of God.³

This trend is largely due to the work of a few vocal and aggressive atheist writers, the most popular of whom are Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett. Inspired by the terrorist attacks of 9/11,⁴ the “Four Horsemen” of the new atheism have sold millions of books railing not only against Islam, but religion in general. Along with Hollywood types like Bill Maher, they have made atheism fashionable, particularly among college students.

This movement is part of a larger cultural shift toward religious skepticism in general. While not all skeptics embrace an ardent form of atheism, they all are becoming much more cynical about traditional religion and openly suspicious of any strong claims to revealed truth. As this culture of radical doubt has gained strength, my email inbox has been inundated with requests for help in dealing with it. Christians are running into more and more friends, family members, and co-workers who not only question the faith, but are antagonistic toward it, and they aren't sure how to interact with them.

There are three main areas in which people request assistance.

First, many people want to know how to respond to challenges to Christianity. They are looking for answers to tough questions and rebuttals for difficult arguments. For example, Tim sent me this email:

Hi, Don,

An old friend from high school has looked me up on Facebook. He has abandoned his faith and is an aggressive atheist. He keeps trying to negate my faith, so I've been asking him to come up with something besides just telling me I'm stupid. Finally today he sent a list of supposed errors in the Bible. I am no expert on different manuscripts but . . . Junias the female apostle given a sex change? What? I don't see anything in the Bible about this—am I missing something? If I can trouble you for some input . . .

Tyler was also looking for answers, although in a more general sense:

Dear Don,

I will be beginning my freshman year at a secular college, studying civil engineering, in about a month. I have been reading books such as *Reasonable Faith*, *Tactics*, and *Evidence for the Resurrection* and listening to your podcasts and others like *Stand to Reason*

and apologetics.com for the last year. I am not sure what I will be facing at college, so I wanted to know if there was anything that you know of that would help me with these challenges. Is there a group of things that I should memorize in order to be prepared, or any books/podcasts that I should study both during and before school starts? Any other suggestions that you have would be greatly appreciated.

Tim and Tyler wanted to know what to say in defense of Christianity when faced with a charge against it. Other people are interested in learning how to explain the Christian faith clearly to unbelievers. For example, Louis asked for help in sharing the gospel with a friend of his:

She was raised a Baptist and at one point in her life she became skeptical and suddenly none of the Christian claims made any sense to her. She claims she honestly wants to know, but has yet to hear a coherent answer to her inquiries. She is now a self-proclaimed agnostic. She's embraced pluralism; she feels there's a bit of truth in all religions and no one religion has the exclusive truth because God is too great for us to fully comprehend. When asked how she knows that Christianity isn't true, she says she doesn't, but the whole Jesus thing doesn't make any sense to her. Why did Jesus have to die? How does his death and resurrection "save" us? And why does she have to believe now, in this life? How does that make a difference? If God is a God of love, why not give us a chance to change our minds when we have proof He exists in the afterlife? I have a problem explaining this to her in very simple terminology so she can get it. Can you help?

Some inquiries speak to a more foundational need. A ministry leader came to my office the other day wondering why the old methods of evangelism weren't working for his congregation anymore. "What do we need to change?" he asked. He realized that there was something wrong at a fundamental level, but didn't know what it was.

This book will address all three types of questions, albeit in reverse order. Our focus will move from the broad and philosophical to the more precise and practical. This is necessary because the philosophical provides the foundation for the practical. If you are wrong or unsure about what you are trying to accomplish in a very general sense, you are much more likely to get sidetracked or bogged down in a conversation. So we will start the book by discussing the nature of religion and what that means in regard to the overarching goal of evangelism.

Then we will walk through the initial steps to take in framing a conversation properly. This is a key element to the book and provides an important distinguishing characteristic of my evangelistic model. As much as I appreciate all the apologetic and evangelistic resources available to us, most require immense amounts of memorization and expertise. Also, they leave the Christian on the defensive, always at the mercy of the next question or objection of the skeptic. My approach avoids those pitfalls. It offers a natural model for conversation that allows the believer to direct the discussion and can be implemented organically by almost anyone. Also, it is easily adaptable to various situations. Life doesn't always look like a university classroom and we aren't all trained professors; I try to take that into account in the pages that follow.

In part 2 we will elaborate on some of the most common misunderstandings skeptics have about God and discuss how to gently instruct them in the truth. Learning how to tell the story of the world in a winsome and easily understood way is essential to reaching unbelievers.

Finally, in part 3, we will talk about how to compare worldviews and address objections to Christianity. In doing so, we will learn a few arguments to present in support of the Christian worldview.

Before we begin, let's clarify what I mean by the word *skeptic*. Is this book only good for reaching hard-core atheists and agnostics? Not at all. I use the term in a very broad sense to refer to those who either aren't sure Christianity is true or are convinced that it isn't. That includes everyone from Richard Dawkins to the guy who has been going to your church for fifteen years but is starting to have some doubts about his faith. (It happens more than one might think.) Sceptics come in varying kinds and degrees, and the principles in this book can be applied across a wide spectrum of unbelief. Admittedly, the typical skeptic I had in mind while writing is what we might call a "secularist": an atheist or agnostic who has been soaking in the naturalistic ideas of the Western education and entertainment industry for too long and now has at least a vague sense that Christianity is not intellectually feasible. Most of the skeptics you run into will fall into this category, so that is where I focused. However, you can easily adapt this model to reach members of other religions and even spiritual seekers who are quite open to the faith but just have questions.

I've been talking to all kinds of skeptics for many years now, and I've made a ton of mistakes. I've tried to learn from those blunders, though, and over time I've realized that no matter who you are talking to, the key to a fruitful conversation is to frame the discussion properly and then direct it along a particular path. That is what we will learn in this book.

PART 1

A Framework for Fruitful Conversations



No Selling Required

So you want to have that neighbor with the Darwin fish on her car over for coffee but you're worried about how the conversation might go. Perhaps you've got a business trip planned with that co-worker who has been reading *The God Delusion* on his lunch breaks and you are hoping to get a chance to discuss Jesus with him. Here is the first thing you should know: When it comes to talking about your religion, skeptics will usually expect you to try to sell them something.

That is not to say that your unbelieving neighbor and co-worker will be looking for church raffle tickets or Bibles for sale. I mean that they will assume that you will try to convince them to become Christians based on some benefit that Jesus offers. They will expect to hear about all of the good things that Christianity can do for them. They will view you, at least to some degree, as a snake-oil salesman or shady used-car guy. And even if you are not placed in quite so low a category, the

bottom line is that when skeptics think of Christians doing evangelism, they envision hucksters plying their wares.

Unfortunately, they're not crazy for thinking this way. If your unbelieving acquaintances have spent any time at all around American religion over the past few decades, they probably have been treated as potential customers. The fact is that most churches sell a product, and most people expect them to do so.

Think about your community. If a spiritual seeker moved in and went to all the churches and religious gathering places in town in order to evaluate them and decide which one to join, what would he be told? Chances are he would hear about all the programs that each place offers and what personal needs would be met there. "Want some meaning in life? Inspiration? Peaceful meditation? Moral guidance? A great worship experience? Fun for you and the kids? Come to our church! Join our religion! We have all that and more! In fact, come this Sunday and you can even enjoy a free drink at our upscale coffee bar with this coupon!"

While they may not be aware of what they are doing, these churches are definitely selling a product and obviously believe that this is what people are looking for in a church.

They're probably right about that. According to a recent survey of over 35,000 people by the Pew Forum of Religion and Public Life, people are more willing than ever to change religions. It reported that "44% of adults have either switched religious affiliation, moved from being unaffiliated with any religion to being affiliated with a particular faith, or dropped any connection to a specific religious tradition altogether."¹ As columnist Timothy Shriver noted on the *Washington Post* website, religiously, we're doing what we do best: shopping. "And we're shopping for God." He goes on to say that "what's clear is that

we're not going to accept religion based on the past. It's got to meet our spiritual needs or we'll move on."²

Exactly. Shriver did his own brief survey to find out what those needs are. He asked, "What's on your list when you go shopping for God?" Some people wanted joy, while others longed to be part of a humorous, compassionate, and loving community. One person wanted an "experience that helps me discover magic and peace and the spirit of the universe," while another noted that she is easily distracted and has a hard time focusing; she just wanted a place with some peace and quiet.³ It seems like these folks are the type of people the churches mentioned above were catering to: "Whatever you want, we have it!"

By now you may be thinking, *What is wrong with shopping for God, or at least shopping for the good stuff associated with him? After all, following Jesus and being a part of the church does offer plenty of great benefits.* Indeed it does. However, to present those benefits as the first and primary reason to become a Christian or attend your church is to misunderstand the very nature of religion. More explicitly, to treat it as a consumer product is to fail to realize what religion actually is: a worldview. That is to say, religion is a set of beliefs that answers the big questions of life in regard to the nature of reality.

The term *religion* is notoriously hard to define. Every religion has different characteristics. However, for the sake of our conversation, let's point out something that is common to most: Religions are worldviews; they explain ultimate reality. Worldviews offer propositional truth claims about the most important questions of life. For example, "How did we get here?" "Why are we here?" "Is there a god?" "If so, what is he, she, or it like?" "What is wrong with the world?" "How can it be fixed?" "What happens when we die?" "How should we then live?"

The answers to these questions make up one's worldview. While not every worldview is considered a religion, I think a strong case can be made that almost all religions are worldviews. As such, they are not consumer products. Neither is true Christianity.

Let's spend some time expanding on these two contrasting views of religion in general and Christianity in particular.

Religion as a Consumer Product

On one hand, religion can be understood as a consumer product that meets your needs and desires. In this view, then, religion has value only inasmuch as it fulfills that role. As anyone who has ever operated a retail business knows, the value of a consumer product is whatever people will pay for it. Shoppers value things only according to how much they want or need them. Ultimately it doesn't matter how much the seller values a product, but how much the buyer values it. You may or may not think Starbucks coffee is worth five dollars a cup (or whatever it is going for these days), but evidently quite a few people do, so that is its current value.

On the other hand, let's say you open up a candy store specializing in spinach-flavored chocolate bars for five bucks apiece. Shockingly, nobody wants to buy them and you have to close up shop. You are convinced that each of your spinach bars is worth at least five dollars and probably more, but the potential customers won't give you five cents for them. Who is right about their value? The customer, of course. If people don't want to buy your product, they aren't wrong for rejecting it; they are the ones who determine its value. If customers decide they don't want or need something, there is no way to obligate or convince them to buy it.

If we apply this principle to religion, and see it as a consumer product, it doesn't matter how much the evangelist values his faith, but how much the seeker values it for himself. Therefore,

people can pick and choose any religion they want (or a combination of religions), and nothing the preacher says is going to convince them they are wrong.

For example, let's say Jane Doe has a few needs and desires. She's lonely and a bit depressed; she has some guilt over her past actions; her kids could use some moral guidance, and she carries around a lot of stress from work. She realizes that religion is a good place to get these needs and desires met, so she considers her options. She has several open to her.

First, she might shop around until she finds one church that meets all those needs. An evangelical mega-church might fit the bill: Small groups to take care of her loneliness, a twelve-step program deals with her depression, a solid high school group teaches her kids, a sermon about God's forgiveness every Sunday morning handles the guilt, and a Saturday night meeting with a great band and Starbucks makes her utterly relaxed.

On the other hand, Jane might pick and choose from a variety of religions to meet her needs and desires. Just like we might go to Staples for paper and the grocery store for meat, Jane could treat her city as a religious smorgasbord in order to create just the right combination plate for her.

The Saturday night service and small groups might stay in the mix to take care of the loneliness, but for stress? The Hindu center down the street has yoga classes two times a week that seem to handle it just fine. As for the kids' moral guidance, the Muslim mosque is very strict, so that is a good place for them. What about the guilt? She can certainly find a secular psychologist who will tell her simply to deny it. The fact is, if religion is a consumer product, Jane can go to different places to get various needs met, all without thinking twice about it.

This type of scenario is not uncommon. Take Varun Gauri, for instance. As Stacy Weiner reports, for many years he was

completely irreligious. However, now he has a daughter involved in many spiritual activities at a variety of local churches and schools. “Gauri says he wants to offer Yasmeen the moral foundation and spiritual guidance he believes religion can provide.” Many other nonreligious parents are following suit. They don’t practice any faith, but they “find themselves seeking the psychological, spiritual, and moral blessings they hope a religious background can bestow on their offspring.”⁴

What they aren’t seeking is the truth about reality. As a result they can hop from religion to religion, or claim several religions simultaneously without thinking twice about it. Consider Carol Christoffel of Zion, Illinois. According to Cathy Lynn Grossman in *USA Today*, Christoffel drifted through various Protestant denominations in her youth, dabbled in the Baha’i tradition for several years, and then was drawn into the healing practices of Native American spirituality. But she still calls herself a Christian.

I’m a kind of bridge person between cultures. I agree with the teachings of Jesus and . . . I know many Christians like me who keep the Bible’s social teachings and who care for the earth and for each other. I support people who do good wherever they are.⁵

Christoffel reminds me of Ann Holmes, the former Episcopal bishop from Seattle who claims to be both 100 percent Christian and 100 percent Muslim.⁶ That kind of math is just fine for consumers of religion, as evidenced by the fact that Mr. Gauri and his wife are “dishing up a religious smorgasbord” for their kids:

Islam from one grandma, Hindu from the other, a Quaker school, a Buddhist retreat and a bit of evangelical Christianity via their former nanny. As [Gauri’s wife Ayesha] Khan acknowledges, “Only time will tell if we were creating great confusion or great enlightenment.”⁷

Well, I have a guess on that. But these examples wouldn't bother our Jane Doe because she sees religion as an elixir, something that exists for her benefit. Particular religions have value and should be used, then, according to the extent that they are wanted or needed by Jane. She is the judge of religions, they do not judge her.

In this view, people use religion like they use hair spray: Whatever works for you is just fine and no one has any authority to tell you any different. After all, in sales, the customer is always right.

When talking to a skeptic, while you may not be tempted to use the selling points mentioned above, the fact is that you probably will want to offer some of your own: how Jesus changed your life, gave you hope for the future, forgave your sins. These are all good things that can be used later in the discussion. (We'll talk about them in chapters 11 and 12.) However, as a starting point, presenting these benefits as a reason to become a Christian may lead to this response: "While I am glad you found something that works for you, I have no need of God or religion—I am stronger and more courageous than to have to rely on ancient myths to get me through life." What are you going to say to that? If either of you is approaching religion as a consumer product, the skeptic has a perfectly valid point. If he doesn't want what you are offering, you don't have much recourse.

Religion as a Worldview

Now, if the skeptic you are talking to actually understands religion properly, presenting a list of selling points to him may lead to this response: "I don't really care what the benefits are. I don't think your religion is true, and therefore I am not going to believe it."

Sam Harris offers a good example of this in *Letter to a Christian Nation*. It seems he often gets told that he should become a Christian because Christianity produces moral people. In response he rightly asks, So what if it does? The real issue is whether or not it is true.

Even if belief in God had a reliable, positive effect upon human behavior, this would not offer a reason to believe in God. One can believe in God only if one thinks that God actually exists. Even if atheism led straight to moral chaos, this would not suggest that the doctrine of Christianity is *true*. Islam might be true, in that case. Or all religions might function like placebos. As descriptions of the universe, they could be utterly false but, nevertheless, useful.⁸

This is exactly right. This is the proper view of religion. Religions, by their nature, do one thing without fail: explain ultimate reality. They are not like hair spray. They are like a road map. Like a map, they present what is supposed to be an accurate and objective account of certain aspects of our existence. They tell us what particular parts of the world are like. The most important question we must ask when considering a religion is not “What can it do for me?” or “Do I like it?” but “Is it true?” The one thing we need to know above all else is whether or not this religion accurately describes the nature of our existence. If it does not, it is ridiculous to join it, no matter what aspects of it we may find appealing. And if it does, it is ridiculous not to join it, no matter how many aspects of it we may find unappealing or how much it might help in providing a basis for morality.

C. S. Lewis spoke directly to this issue in an essay he was asked to write about whether or not one can lead a moral life without believing in Christianity. At the beginning of the piece,

he wonders about the state of mind of those who made the request and worries that they are interested in Christianity not because they believe it to be true but that they find it helpful. Lewis derides “foolish preachers” who treat the faith as “a medicine” to help people. They need to realize, Lewis argues, that Christianity

claims to give an account of *facts*—to tell you what the real universe is like. Its account of the universe may be true, or it may not. . . . If Christianity is untrue, then no honest man will want to believe it, however helpful it might be: if it is true, every honest man will want to believe it, even if it gives him no help at all.⁹

Dorothy Sayers seems to have Lewis’s “foolish preachers” in mind in this passage about those who downplay and ignore Christian doctrine in an attempt to sell Christianity’s consumer benefits:

It is worse than useless for Christians to talk about the importance of Christian morality unless they are prepared to take their stand upon the fundamentals of Christian theology. It is a lie to say that dogma does not matter; it matters enormously. It is fatal to let people suppose that Christianity is only a mode of feeling; it is vitally necessary to insist that it is first and foremost a rational explanation of the universe. It is hopeless to offer Christianity as a vaguely idealistic aspiration of a simple and consoling kind; it is, on the contrary, a hard, tough, exacting, and complex doctrine, steeped in a drastic and uncompromising realism.¹⁰

Recently my family and I went on an epic road trip. We traveled through seven states and two provinces, putting over 4,400 miles on our minivan. Before we left I went down to the local office of the Automobile Club of Southern California to pick up some maps and brochures for our journey. I wanted to know

what roads to take and what kinds of attractions we could expect to find along the way.

Imagine for a moment the following scenario: What if, when I arrived at the auto club, the cashier offered me a menu of maps from which to choose, each painting a radically different picture of what Western North America was like? One map portrayed that part of the continent as a swampy marshland with very few roads. Another showed it to be a flat prairie land, crisscrossed with roads every mile or two. A third map made North America out to be a small series of islands, navigable by car only on ferries. A fourth claimed that the geography varied wildly as one traveled inland from the ocean. It was drivable, but I would need to have a powerful vehicle to get across the myriad mountain ranges between me and my destination. Each map was written by a supposed authority in the field, each had its own adherents, and each was presented as an accurate description of the part of planet Earth on which I lived.

The purpose of this thought experiment is to show that this is what religions do; they claim to have accurate knowledge about where we live, where we are going, and what it will take to get there. They claim to know the truth about our existence.

At my imaginary auto club office, each map paints a radically different picture of the landscape and infrastructure on my route. How would I decide which one to use? I sure wouldn't ask, "Which map was printed using my favorite colors?" or "Which map gives me the shortest overall trip?" I also wouldn't respond, "Well, this one would allow me to mountain climb and ski, but this one would allow me to see crocodiles, and this one over here would be easier on gas, so that is a tough call. I guess I'll go with the mountains." Of course I wouldn't do that. The one question I would need to ask regarding the maps is "Which one is true?" It does not matter how much I may like the idea

of having a nice view of the Everglades on my way to Seattle. If they aren't there, they aren't there, regardless of what the map tells me. If a map is false, there is no point in following it, no matter how many aspects of it may "work best for me." And if the map is true, I must follow it, no matter how much I may dislike certain aspects of the reality it describes.

This is true of religion as well. It is absolutely silly to accept or reject a religion based on something you happen to like or dislike about it. "Well, I just don't want there to be a hell, so I have to reject Christianity." That is simply nonsensical. If hell exists, it exists, regardless of your opinions. The bottom line is that we must pick a religion (a worldview) based on whether or not we think it is true.

Religion is not a product, so parishioners should not be consumers and evangelists should not be salespeople. To misunderstand this is incredibly dangerous, because the stakes are so high. Imagine if I tried to reach a vacation spot that doesn't even exist using a map that is completely false. It would be very frustrating, and I would waste a lot of time, effort, and money. That is why we plan our trips carefully and use only trustworthy guides. How much more then, should we search for a trustworthy guide to the journey of life. The destiny of our souls is on the line. It is one thing to be wrong about whether or not a great fishing lake exists and how to get there. It is quite another to be wrong about whether or not heaven exists and how to get *there*.

Are there temporal benefits to religion? Of course. But those benefits cannot be reasons to choose a religion. Should the church be serving others and meeting people's temporal needs? Absolutely. However, this service must be accompanied by evangelism. It is not itself evangelism. Evangelism is proclaiming the message of the gospel and trying to convince people it is true,

because we understand that if a worldview is false, it must be rejected, and if it is true, it must be accepted.

Jesus ran into the consumerist mind-set during his ministry. After he provided food for the people, a large crowd started following him hoping to get more free stuff. Jesus scolded them because they had the wrong mentality. They should have recognized the miraculous provision of food not only as an act of love but as evidence supporting his claim to be the Son of God. They were chasing after food that spoils rather than the bread of life (John 6:26–27). They were in the presence of truth himself, but because they were seeking to fulfill their temporal needs and desires rather than find truth, they missed it.

The only reason to become a Christian is because Christianity is true, and the only reason to reject another worldview is because it is false. This is the mind-set with which you should approach a skeptic. You don't want to frame the conversation as a sales pitch, but as a pursuit of truth. You are not there to debate the good effects of religion versus the bad effects of skepticism. Rather, you want to discuss which worldview is more likely to be true. In the next chapter we will expand on how to have this type of conversation.