Part 2 of 2: Spiritual Conversations in a Skeptical Context with
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There's an interesting way in which this plays out and so the other question I want to ask and then we're going to open it up to the floor is this. You were interviewed on Fox when you arrived here and one of the questions that got asked was about one of the objections of the Bible is that is a tool of oppression and that there's a lot of suffering in the world. Those were two of the questions that you were asked and I really liked the way you responded to this question in terms of opening up the discussion in terms of thinking about, &quot;Yes there are bad things that have happened in the name of religion but -" So fill that out for us. How do you handle there is suffering and terrible things have been done in the name of Christ throughout history. Someone throws that at you, how do you respond?

Well the first thing is to say, "Yep you're absolutely right." Because any Christian who knows their history know that some terrible things have been done and they were all able to find Bible passages to support them. So we live with that. So my response when asked that question was basically to say, "Yes the Bible has been used to support slavery and war and oppression and bigotry but curiously all of those things are universals across human culture. You found them in Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome. You certainly don't need the Bible to inspire them. So it's not surprising that these universals of human culture, war oppression et cetera, receive justification in Christian lands from the Bible because they're human universals. The more interesting question that has to be asked is what things are not human universals that have been inspired wherever the Bible has influenced culture.
That is a far more interesting question because there can't be any doubt that the unique things the Bible has given Western culture are it's long tradition of charity for the poor, humility, the notion of human rights and we could go on hospitals and so on. These things especially charity for the poor, humility, love of enemy these things. You didn't find in Greece and Rome or Babylon or Egypt. They are unique contributions of the Bible." So I'm trying to distinguish between how the Bible is being used and what it has actually inspired. I sometimes - I didn't have time at the Fox - I was going to say the Foxy Lady - [Laughs] I can't even remember her name now. Anyway, I often say if you heard my nine-year-old attempt the cello suites by Johan Sebastian Bach, you might think Johan didn't really know how to write a tune. Right because you hear it go, "Er, er, er, er." But if you Yo Yo Ma played the cello suites you're in heaven. We know to distinguish between the beautiful performance and the sometimes very ordinary - beautiful composition rather and the sometimes very ordinary performance. And so it's important to do that when it comes to Christian history as well.

**Darrell Bock**

Okay. Now as you think of questions you want to ask John we have two microphones you can see where they are. Go ahead and come over. And we've got a taker right here at the start so we’ll just dive right in.

**Audience Member**

Something I often hear from non-Christians is that religion is a crutch. We rely on it because we need it. It's what foolish people use to make them feel at peace. It's what we use to make us feel at peace about death and dying and all that stuff. How do you best respond to that?

**John Dickson**

I acknowledge that it's probably true but some thirsts correspond to real things that quench your thirst too. So I often just try and point out that it's actually a non-argument because it really comes from Ludwig Feuerbach right, the philosopher in the 1840's and then picked up by Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytical tradition. It basically said that God and religion is a projection of needs. So you particularly Freud in the Freudian version it's parental needs from young you project on to a being. And the more you feel the parental need the more you're going to be a believer in God. That was Freud's position. But of course very clever people at the time just responded with the obvious, once you hear it, the obvious response, "but what about your atheism. Couldn't that just be your attempt to project a kind of aversion to your over bearing father?" Think about it for a second. Of course. It cuts both ways.
Could Christianity be a crutch? Sure it could. Could atheism just be an attempt to get out of having anyone looking over your shoulder? Of course it could. That doesn't resolve anything because some thirsts correspond to real thirst quenchers. If I hold a glass of water and I say I'm thirsty and you say, "You only believe in water because you're thirsty." How good is that? You only believe in water because you're thirsty. Um, but there's also water. So I would put it back to people that it cuts both ways, the atheist and the Christian both have to live with the proposition, the possibility that we've just invented convictions to satisfy urges so you need to therefore because the atheist can't win on this one you need to shift the ground to say, "Well what are the reasons for thinking one thing is true over another?"

**Audience Member**

I've noticed that when I've engaged with atheist or non-believers it tends to be like, they'll ask me a question and maybe I'll give a good response or maybe I won't and they'll be like, "Okay well what about this?" And then it goes back and forth for a while and eventually it will come to a question that obviously I can't answer. And so I found that at least in my experience it tends to be more of an emotional response against Christianity rather than a logical one and so even though I might have all their answers they're still not going to believe or accept it or even consider it as a rational response. So how do you engage that? How do you deal with that? What's your response to that kind of thing?

**John Dickson**

I try and call it out. Sometimes if I'm with an atheist who's really thoughtful I often put to them Aristotle's theory of how persuasion works. And you all have heard of the sort of logos, pathos, ethos, tripod view of persuasion. And Aristotle really in his book on rhetoric spends a lot of time saying, "Good arguments in persuasion needs logos." It also needs a little bit pathos, the emotional dimension but you shouldn’t rely on it too much he said. And then he said there's a social dimension ethos that is we tend to trust those that we trust. If you think about that, we trust those we trust. In other words we trust the statements of those we trust. And this translates into all sorts of things including just the teenager wanting to socialize with his peers ends up believing what his peers does. That's the socialization of knowledge.
And I often talk about this and I say look, "When you hear a Christian tell how they became a Christian you'll often hear them being really honest how it was a little bit of logos, a little bit of pathos, a little bit of ethos. Logos they heard some good arguments that were satisfying intellectually. Pathos, they heard the message of forgiveness and they longed for it, it was like psychologically very attractive. And ethos, they hung out with Christians and they saw what a compelling community of goodness they were and they thought, "Man I want that." You often hear a Christian talk like that. They don't describe it as logos, pathos, ethos. And I put it back to my atheist friend, "Are you honest enough to admit that your unbelief is the result of a similar threefold set of factors. That sure you've got some intellectual things but it seems to me that there are some emotional or aesthetics going on and also some socialization." And we are not being honest with ourselves if we say, "I'm only an atheist because of the intellectual arguments." If there were evidence I'd believe. That's just not the real world of how belief forms.

_Darrell Bock_

I want to chime in here. Let me talk about a goal when you have conversations like this. We did develop this in the podcast. Sometimes when you get in a conversation it breaks down into a debate and you're trying to win a debate. I actually think that it's more fundamental in having these conversations to try and keep it and view it as a conversation in which the goal is not to win the debate or win the argument. The goal is to give the other person pause about how they're thinking. If I can give a person pause about how they're thinking. Get them to consider there might be an alternative et cetera. I'm actually opening them up to a process. And sometimes that is done through a combination of not only what you say but how you say it.
And I think that sometimes in the midst of, particularly when you operate it out of an academic environment with an academic background you push the logos to your term, the logos or the argument side of it, the rational argument of it so hard that you forget that part of what you're trying to do is your actually asking someone to change significantly where they are. And often times that doesn't happen in a moment. Now obviously if Paul meets Jesus on the Damascus road that happens immediately but that's sometimes the exception versus the rule. Usually and if you listen to most testimonies this is true, it's part of a long process in which God - and I'll use a biblical word - drew the person to himself. It came in steps. And so I think changing how we think about, even though being engaged in those conversations is an important part of thinking through what you're doing when you engage a skeptic or an atheist.

*John Dickson*

And as simple as self-accessing, "Have I left this person with the impression that Christianity is not only true but good?" See it's possible to have left the conversation having won the argument and convince them that you had the better arguments but they think that Christians are now jerks. Well, have you conveyed Christianity? I think that there's a question mark over that.

*Audience Member*

The last few weeks there's been a viral video by Steven Fry being interviewed by Guardian concerning the problem of evil, which is certainly nothing new. But I'd like to read a short quote from it and just hear if you were to stand in front of Steven Fry right now how would you approach him and how would we as students, how would you recommend that we approach someone who's deeply impacted by the problem of evil. Let me go ahead and read the quote. Steven says this, "How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault. It's not right. It's utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean spirited stupid God who creates a world, which is so full of injustice and pain?"

*John Dickson*

Yeah. Well it really depends how long we've got right. I mean if I'm locked in a room with Steven Fry for a day - which would be very pleasant right - I'd have a very different strategy from if I were on TV -

*Darrell Bock*

In a four minute exchange.
Yeah. So one of the questions I was asked on Fox yesterday was - was it yesterday?

Darrell Bock
Um-hmm. It was yesterday. Time flys when you're having fun.

John Dickson
Oh yeah. I must be having a whole lot of fun. Was this exact question. And I knew I didn't have a day in a room with Steven Fry. So I said, "Look the Bible does have some things to say about the origin of evil [mic cuts out]the restoration of everything but in the end the most powerful thing the Christian faith has to offer is something that you can't find in any other philosophical tradition. And that is a picture of the God you bring that kind of complaint to. He's one you're allowed to, Steven you are allowed to express those sentiments. The Psalms are full of them. Maybe not in that exact poetic license that enjoys but the same complain, lament of God.

And once more we have a picture in Jesus Christ of God coming so close and sharing in our pain, God himself having wounds. It was Edward Shillito the poet after the Second World War who said, "To our wounds only God's wounds could speak and not a God has wounds but thou alone to Jesus." And for me this is not a whole answer but in a brief time and I think I did say something like this at Fox - when my daughter grazes her knee and runs to me she doesn't say, "Dad what's the origin of this evil?" She just wants to know that I've got her and that I sympathize and I would say regardless of the philosophical answers to these questions, what Christianity offers that no other tradition can offer is a picture of God that would willing give himself on a cross for us. And even if we can't always trace his hand, we can trust his heart with the cross wears that heart on the sleeve right.
Darrell Bock

Very good. Let's pursue this a little bit because I think the issue of evil and the existence of evil is a difficult one. We discussed this in a cultural engagement chapel much like the one you'll participate in tomorrow, discussing genocide and the Old Testament. And there is this sense in this complaint of how dare you. How dare you fill my life with pain and suffering? It's a fist in the face of God in some ways. When sometimes what pain does for us is remind us we are not God. And that doesn't take away the pain or the suffering that people go through or that exists in the world but it is a reminder that sometimes in our reaction to what is taking place, it's either meaningless. So none of it makes any sense at all, that's a real word of comfort or there is something to face up to. It's almost God's answer to Job, "Where were you when the creation happened." There's an element of that answer where you go, that really doesn't answer Job's pain but it does answer the issue of this design, this claim for design and this claim for sovereignty and this reminder that we as the creatures don't get to make the rules and create the expectations.

John Dickson

Yeah. But I also want to affirm the way that it is in the western tradition that you have this fist shaking at God. How is that in the western tradition? It's because the Bible has allowed it. I would say there are a bunch of things in our western culture that you and I normally interpret as secular criticisms they're actually just Christian ideas, slight Christian heresies. So the secular insistence that churches are hypocrites, well that's Jesus, that was Jesus's line. And more broadly the Bible is relentless in claiming that some of its key heroes were rat bags.

Darrell Bock

That's an Australian term in case you didn't recognize it.

John Dickson

Okay. Sorry. Awful. And this freedom of Steven Fry, that fist shaking at God is actually a Christian heresy. And I do like to point that out to people. I'm of the view that the only theodicy is eschatology. It's only in the end that God can answer this question. It's only if he can prove that the path he has chosen, this path of fall and evil and redemption, achieves a greater good then if he hadn't gone down that path that this question can be resolved. But the thing is if God can pull that off it's a resolution. So I am of the view that the only theodicy is eschatology.

Darrell Bock

Quickly tell because we've got other people that want to ask questions is the story about the Imam and the debate that you had with the Imam. That deals with this question, the idea that -
John Dickson: The god loving enemies?

Darrell Bock: Yeah God loving enemies.

John Dickson: Well we had a lovely discussion, a public discussion with a Muslim advocate who's prominent in Sydney. And it was great. We each shared a little bit and then we cross-examined each other and then threw it open to the floor. And one of my questions to him was, "Look I've read the Quran, I've read a whole bunch of Hadiths; I can't find, could you tell me or help me because I really want to know, is there a passage that tells us that Allah loves those who are opposed to him? Loves his enemies?" And Dea Muhamad said, "Of course not. And once more are you saying there's a passage like that in the Bible?" It was awesome. It was like it just bowled me a beautiful ball and I was able to knock it out of the park.

Darrell Bock: He said, bowl by the way. That was a cricket metaphor.

John Dickson: Yes. Yep.

Darrell Bock: Pitched.

John Dickson: Yeah. Like pitched. Yeah but like an underarm pitch.

Darrell Bock: That's softball but we'll discuss sports later.

John Dickson: And obviously I was able to say, "Well actually Dea this is the heart of Christianity, that God loves those who are opposed to him and entered into the world and gave himself for us." And it was a very striking moment. And you could tell the audience was engaged with it, there were a lot of Muslims there. And after the discussion a lot of Muslims took issue with that because I was sort of that dishonors God that he would love enemies because Islam is very much tied to the honor-shame paradigm of Arabic and lots of Middle Eastern culture. And so it defames God's honor. I had another public thing with a Muslim leader at the University of Western Sydney. He was very polite but he almost shouted me down in the question time saying, "Are you saying that God went to the toilet?" Because it was about reincarnation right.

Darrell Bock: I've actually gotten an email like that from someone who's Muslim.
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John Dickson  "That God was hungry? That he had to eat? That the creator of all things needed substance from his own creation?" And on and on he went and I said, "Yeah. That’s what I'm saying."

Now the interesting thing is the Muslims say, "How dare you. That guy so outdid Dickson because he showed he how foolish my view of God is." And all the secularist Sydney students are going, "What a beautiful picture of God that he would do that for us.

Audience Member  Hi, I read your book Hearing Her Voice a Biblical Invitation for Women to Preach.

John Dickson  Do I run now?

Audience Member  Well I've thought about running away from this microphone several times but here I am. And I just wanted to say thank you and this helped me see myself differently in the church so thank you.

John Dickson  Huh. Okay. So I don't have to retract it.

Audience Member  And then I also have a question for you. We're talking about having conversations in a way that looks like Christ and I know that when I talk about this issue which is really emotionally loaded on both sides of the issue about whether women can preach or not it always seems to turn into a purely logos conversation where scripture and rationalism and you talked tonight about appealing through pathos and ethos so I wondered do you have suggestions on some ways we could appeal to that regarding specifically women preaching. And yes I do know where you are and I do know where I’m a student and all that and how there's many different backgrounds here but I would like to know.

John Dickson  Sure. Firstly thank you for saying those warm things about that book. I mean I come from probably the most conservative context imaginable where women in many of my churches in Sydney in my tradition wouldn't ever MC a church service, lead a church service, or run a Bible study for mixed audiences, maybe that's common here as well. So what I've tried to do in that book without rehearsing the argument and going into the argument is to lay out why I think it is Biblical for women to give what we call sermons. Which I don't thing corresponds to the thing Paul forebode in 1 Timothy 2:12 but to do it in a way that is full of warmth and gentle.
I hope that you recognize that because I felt it as I wrote it. I don't feel any angst or animosity towards my colleagues who are very strict complementarians I see myself as a soft complementarian. I think I say in the book or a generous complementarian. I don't know but still a complementarian but I tried to take the heat out of it by being far more gentle and limited in what I say. In terms of strategy, look I don't know because I feel a little bit put on the spot not knowing official policies and all that sort of thing.

*Darrell Bock*  
I'll let you know.

*John Dickson*  
Yeah. So I've got no idea.

*Darrell Bock*  
Let me comment if you will - actually you have no choice I'm going to do it. And that is I think there's a way to have this conversation and the way to have this conversation is the way John writes about it. And so he lays out the Biblical evidence as he sees it, takes you through it, and the response to that ought to be to engage in kind with the same tone, with the same substance, to respond however you think you should respond to it. And the unfortunate thing about some of these areas, that are Christian fights, if I can, I'll use that language. John got some heat for what he wrote. The response is, that sometimes the heat is all out of proportion to the discussion that the topic deserves.

We get upset about where the bottom line is in terms of what someone's conclusion is without thinking through, how do we discuss this and what is a disagreement, as Christians, Christianly. I wish I saw more of that in this conversation. And unfortunately many times we don't. So John, let me say that you handled this I think in the book very, very well. There would be things that we might discuss in private but that's fine, that's part of the point of the exercise and I think that the way in which it was done is exemplary as anything and it is a lesson the church, particularly the conservative church desperately needs as it engages in these conversations where we know that we have brothers and sisters with Christ who are as deeply committed to Jesus Christ as we are but who think differently on this matter. So thank you. Over here.

*Audience Member*  
I have a question about evil.

*John Dickson*  
I thought we dealt entirely with that.
I hope. It is well said how God intervened and how he suffered for us and with us and know it but my question is, he made the things happen, that's number one. Number two, the Lord says, "I am willingly to get into it." That's his will to do it to suffer but as human beings we have never been asked ahead of time to enter into suffering, to enter this evil world. We all know the conversation in the book of Job between God and Satan but Job had no clue. And how can we understand God's respect loving, while all those things happening.

I try to make clear that although I think there are others who make pretty good accounts of the problem of evil. I'm in the camp that the only theodicy is eschatology. Which boils down to God will make it up in his Kingdom and the good that is achieved via this path will be greater than the good imaginable through any other path. And the thing that gives me certainty that these are good and kind intentions is the cross. So I don't have an explanation in time, other than the obvious, humanities full, sinful, the creation itself is cursed. I mean these are things the scriptures say but I think your question is more particular about someone growing up having unspeakable evil happen to them out of all proportion to their relative contribution to the evil of the world. So that's where the problem becomes tricky. I can only say that in the Kingdom God will show us how he's made it up to us. In time all we have as a down payment that his ultimate intentions will be beautiful and merciful and loving is the cross where God has shown us the lengths to which he will go for our good. I can take him on trust is what I'm saying and that isn't simply to say, "I just trust him wherever he takes me." It means that I genuinely believe the good that he will show in the final eschaton will prove this path of creation full of redemption is the ultimate good to his glory and to our joy.

Last question over here.

So we're talking about how do we live as a minority in today's culture as a Christian minority. And working with youth I've come across this question. So in our effort to engage with popular culture, meaning what we listen to, what we watch and where we go. Where do we draw the line with engaging in popular culture but also not endorsing the culture that we are engaging with? Where do we draw the line?

Wow.
In 30 words or less.

I think it's worth doing this in conversation with the youth that you're leading because what will shock you might not shock them. The connotations that you pick up they might not. They may say, "Oh no that's not what that means." So it could be a little bit of cultural ignorance on your part as a leader equally in conversation they may see cultural ignorance on their part. You might be able to show them how they've just accepted things that aren't Biblical. But in terms of listening to popular culture, viewing it and so on, I personally have a very broad and generous approach to these things, all things permissible - no I didn't say that. It's just as well this is not recorded.

Actually it is.

Yeah. I know. So I'm from the pretty far end of we ought to be culturally engaged, but I think there are lines and I think you can only work them out in conversation is my point.

And I'm going to speak now as a parent. I don't think you can protect your children from the world that is around them completely unless you put them in hermetically sealed box and are much better at this than most. And the result that you see on the other end, if you don't talk it through with them as they grow up and actually engage in some level of engagement will be that when they get out and have to make choices that you risk them making very bad choices. And so my parents who weren't Christian took very much the attitude of I'd rather know what you're doing, let you talk with me about it and engage on why that's wise or stupid. Then for me to so restrict you that your one desire in life is to make sure I don't know what you're doing. I just think that there's just a wisdom in the environment that you create about engagement, not necessarily just in what you engage with but about engagement that says that I'm here to engage with you in the messiness that is the world that we live in.
And to make that clear from the very beginning. And the Bible itself is actually a pretty messy book. As you said there are rat bags in it. There are all kind of other creatures and critters too. And a lot of the sections of the Bible that we want to engage with do things that if they're weren't written in the Bible we might restrict people from being exposed to. There's something wrong about that. And so my preference would be to work on creating the right kind of engagement environment. That's when you say you're generous with regard to engagement that's what I think I'm describing, which says, "Bring to me your questions, bring to me what your exposing. Let's think about what this is and does and how it works or how it doesn't work. All those kinds of things to create a discerning person as they grow up so that when they do grow up they can discern.

John Dickson

Yeah. I think I want to just add. To help your teens be more critical consumers of media is really critical. So that they can themselves, they have the tools to decode what they're being told. So there originally an example that there's a song I can't remember, it's like - I don't know if it's number one around the world but that really cool tune with a screaming voice about the church cutting me. It's about him being gay and the church - Take me to Church. You know my kids were listening to it and it's a great tune but we had a big conversation, by the end they were going, "Dad." But we were just trying to work out how the messaging of the song worked and by the end they could see that this was a powerful, emotional but completely untrue perspective on a universal scale. Obviously he has experienced that kind of judgment in church but I said to my kids, "Do you know anyone at St. Andrews Roseville," their church, "who is like the Christians this young man met." And they said, "No." And so they were able to discern what is a personal story must not be universalized and yet that's how often these sorts of songs impact.