

CULTURE & ARTS

by [Marvin Olasky](#)

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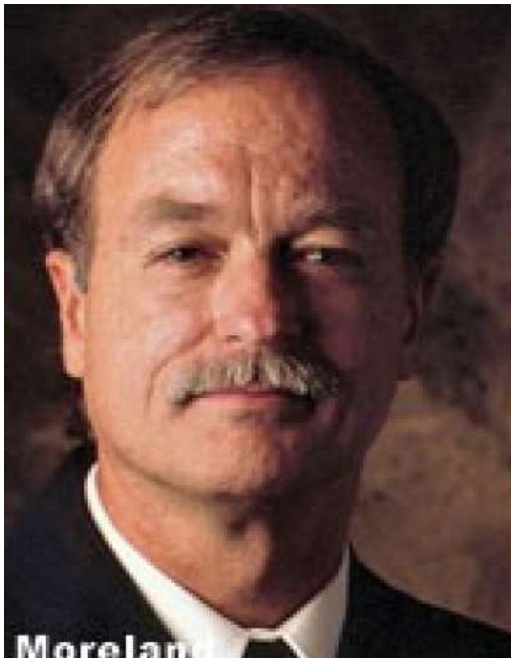
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Handouts

## Doubter's prison

### Faith is reasonable, say authors J.P.



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Jon Krakauer wrote in his best-selling *Under the Banner of Heaven*, "Faith is the very antithesis of reason." Biola University professors J.P. Moreland and Klaus Issler, authors of *In Search of a Confident Faith* (IVP Books, 2008) take issue with that kind of thinking. They challenge "seven of the main doubt-inducing background assumptions of our culture," showing as they go that faith is not "a blind, arbitrary leap in the dark that has no basis in reason."

Since many secular professors love to accuse Christians of leaping in the dark, and some Christians also don't accord reason its proper place in bulwarking minds as God changes hearts, college students will particularly find useful the book's deconstruction of conventional campus assumptions such as "It is smarter to doubt things than to believe them. Smart people are skeptical. People who find faith easy are simplistic, gullible and poorly educated."

Moreland's previous works include *The God Conversation* and *Love Your God with All Your Mind*; Issler wrote *Wasting Time with God*.

## Q: How do faith and reason go together?

Today faith and reason are viewed as polar opposites-as one gains knowledge about something, there is no need for faith. They say we don't need faith in the claim that water is H<sub>2</sub>O or gravity anchors us to the ground. But, the argument continues, one does need faith for religious or moral claims because there is no knowledge that these claims are true, no evidence either way for them.

Yet consider: To have faith in some alleged truth, say, that cigarettes cause cancer, is to count on this claim, to retain a readiness to act as if the claim were true. Faith is essentially *trust or confidence or reliance*, and that its proper exercise crucially requires reasons, evidence, and knowledge. Faith is trusting what we have reason to believe is true. Christianity has always been a friend of reason and knowledge.

## Q: So even though doubt is in these days, you declare that "the right approach to life is one that hungers to know as many truths as one can and to avoid as many falsehoods as possible."

Doubt is not unbelief. We think it's helpful to make a distinction between unbelief, doubt, and lack of belief. "Unbelief" is a willful and sinful setting of oneself against a biblical teaching. But "doubt" is an intellectual, emotional, or psychological hindrance to a more secure confidence. (As in, "I believe something but just have some doubts.") "Lack of belief" indicates "I don't believe something but know I should and want to-I need help."

Having doubts or lack of belief is not wrong, but it is hardly a place one wants to stay if that is not necessary. Sadly, skeptics are so afraid they will believe something false that they fail to believe many true things that would be of great help to them if they were more balanced in their approach to life. In our book we make clear that our goal is not to be skeptical or gullible. We are to be wise: believing as many truths and avoiding as many falsehoods as possible.

Q: You say "it raises the bar way too high to require that one can only claim to know important things relevant to Christianity when one is completely certain." You also acknowledge the reality of doubt. How does that go along with the hymn line, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine"?

Biblical confidence is not always an all-or-nothing affair. Consider that there are three ways of relating to a truth claim. You can disbelieve it, you can believe it, or you can be counterbalanced, literally 50/50 with no leaning either way. So if you do believe something, you are from 51 percent to 100 percent sure its true. If you do not have full confidence in something, you may lack trust to varying degrees. Therefore we think it's important to create safe, honest, non-defensive fellowships in which people are given permission to be on a faith-journey, with all the warts, messiness, and setbacks that are part of such a journey. Otherwise, people will hide what they actually believe from others, and even from themselves, all the while continuing to use faith-talk that avoids being socially ostracized in one's local fellowship.

## **Q: You write that the contemporary plausibility structure of Western culture creates a set of doubts about Christianity.**

Every culture has a set of background assumptions-a plausibility structure-that sets a tone or a framework for what people think, how they feel, and how they act. It directs what they will entertain as plausible, what they will habitually notice or disregard without thinking about what they are doing, how they form and retain their beliefs. This plausibility structure is so widespread and subtle that people usually don't even know it is there even though it hugely impacts their perspective on the world. Our current Western cultural plausibility structure elevates science and scorns and mocks religion, especially Christian teaching. This scientism or naturalism, roughly, is the idea that the only truths about reality that can be known are those that can be tested with the senses and certified by the hard sciences.

## **Q: What's the logical problem with scientism?**

It is self--refuting-one cannot prove the statement itself scientifically. That is, there is no way to use our senses to test whether or not the claim that the senses are our only sources of knowledge is true. Second, there are a number of things we know that are not known through scientific means: the laws of math and logic, our own consciousness and thoughts, the reality of certain moral claims, and, of course, that God is real. Some of these are actually pre-suppositions of science and, as such, science could not even begin without knowledge of them.

## **Q: The conventional wisdom is that more education leads to less evangelical faith.**

This does not bear out statistically. A few years ago, the statistics in sociologist Christian Smith's book *American Evangelicalism* showed that "evangelicals have more years of education than fundamentalists, liberals, Roman Catholics, and those who are nonreligious. . . . Of all groups, evangelicals are the least likely to have only a high-school education or less; the nonreligious are the most likely. Furthermore, higher proportions of evangelicals have studied at the graduate-school level than have fundamentalists, liberals, or the nonreligious."

There is a high percentage of believers in God among highly educated people, including a good number of Christians. And to the degree that some people become skeptical with increasing e-ducation, this is due largely to socialization, and not to the fact that they discover something average folk don't know that renders belief in Christianity silly and unreasonable.

## **Q: You offer a four-step procedure that can reduce our doubting tendencies if we practice it often enough.**

(1) Identify the source of the doubt (e.g., evening news, movie, conversation at work).

(2) Identify the particular assumptions that stand under the source (example: if it can't be tested by the five senses, you can't believe in it).

(3) Raise doubts about the doubt. Challenge it (example: I can't see my own thoughts, but I know them, so why should I believe this principle?).

(4) Replace the assumption with a more biblical one (example: For thousands of years, the brightest people alive have known God was real from the creation even though they never saw Him, so we can, in fact, know things that go beyond our five senses).

**Q: You offer a good way to respond to mockers: "I am sure you have formulated your viewpoint against Christianity in a fair-minded and intellectually responsible way . . ." Please tell our readers how to go on from there.**

"So I am confident you have read some of the best defenses of the Christian view on this topic in reaching your critical position. Please tell me, what were the 3-4 best books you read that defended the Christian view and what were some of their arguments that you found most difficult to dismiss in reaching your skeptical position? Do you remember who wrote those books?" Usually, people will just stare at you.



**Marvin Olasky**

Marvin is the former editor in chief of WORLD, having retired in January 2022, and former dean of World Journalism Institute. He joined WORLD in 1992 and has been a university professor and provost. He has written more than 20 books, including *Reforming Journalism*.

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