

An Unavailing Deity?

The Experiential Arguments For and Against
Personal Interaction With the God of the Bible

A Review of Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*

Reaching for the Invisible God by Phillip Yancey contains, in the early chapters, a confession of personal, experiential reasons to doubt the involvement of a deity in our lives. These chapters are more scrupulous, well-informed and unevasive than any that I have ever read or heard from a religious communicant who remained one afterwards.

Unfortunately the book leads to no conclusions, but instead gives what amounts to the Zen Buddhist response, "Un-ask the question."

Why is it that our experiences are precisely the same as what we would expect if there were no God?

Other books have covered the problem of how pain could exist if there is a good and powerful god. This book addresses a different question that can easily be confused with the "problem of pain" if

care is not taken. Why is it that our experiences are precisely the same as what we would expect if there were no god? The author has often suspected that this is the case ²⁴² and references many renowned spiritual giants as having admitted what is tantamount ^{TO} the same thing. (31, 42, 87) 91

I give him credit that he does not take an attitude of hand-waving dismissal. But he does take the action of dismissal to conclude the problem. Having admitted his own lack of observations to support the belief in an involved god, ²¹⁹ he recommends taking one's mind off of it and onto God. (pages line ; 219 line 27) I wonder how he would react if someone began to wonder about Jesus and was told "Take your mind off it." It is the opposite of resolving a problem.

I understand that *Reaching for the Invisible God* is not a book of apologetics, but rather falls into the genre of inspirational writing. I am writing this essay not to blame Mr. Yancey for failing to prove the involvement of a god — a goal he never set out to achieve — rather, I add a book by one of the most forthright religious speakers to a pile of evidence that a deity, as described in Scripture, is not being experienced by its own followers. This is an exploration of the inner workings of the kind of persuasion so prevalent in sermons and inspirational books.

The Difference Between Rationalization and Logical Entailment

The rest of the book consists mostly of descriptions of a model of a god that requires less contortion to fit with what we experience in life. This merely allows, rather than requires, the belief in gods. It does not resolve the problem that will attract many readers. If we should expect no observations that require our conception of god for an explanation, what have we come up with an explanation for? In other words, is the god hypothesis an answer looking for a question?

Visualize any debate as a tennis game played with two balls at the same time. One ball is evidence in support of player one's conclusion. It's rare to find an explanation or description that has no contradictory evidence to account for, so the other ball is the evidence which supports the other player's conclusion.

The two-pronged approach to persuasive writing consists of returning both of these balls. Part one is presenting evidence which, if the author's conclusion is wrong, must be accounted for. This is the attempt to logically require belief. Part two is accounting for the evidence that runs counter to the author's conclusion. This is necessary, but without part one, part two is rationalization.

An example: the motion picture *The Truman Show* explores the paranoid hypothesis that a person's entire world might be an elaborate fake constructed to deceive that person. Truman never seemed to give this hypothesis a thought until a stage light fell out of the sky. Until such things start happening, I don't give it much thought either. In the real world, people who believe this merely reinterpret their experiences to allow it, since the evidence does not require it for an explanation. It is an answer looking for a question.

You can imagine endless ways to allow your experiences to accommodate outlandish possible explanations. Do other people really have minds like yours, or do they only seem to? Are you a brain in a vat being fed fake sensory experiences, as depicted in *The Matrix*? We can apply Occam's Razor to these. It states that, if two explanations are equally supported by the evidence, the simpler one is probably correct. In other words, prefer the one that has less to explain away.

Is the god hypothesis an answer looking for a question?

Now compare this to the practice of explaining why (past a superficial examination) the world looks as if it doesn't have deities, or why nothing happens that really needs gods and goddesses for an explanation.

That is the purpose which *Reaching for the Invisible God* works to serve: it is a work of imagination to craft an unnecessary explanation so impervious that no possible experience could controvert it, and none is needed to support it. The very premise of the

book is the absence of any logical entailment of a supreme being provided by our first-hand experiences. Without having been previously given the expectation of God, audiences would enjoy *Left Behind* in the same way as *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix* or *The X Files*: in which characters receive the very first experiential evidence of a background context which they never previously needed.

It is possible to persuade a true believer of the emptiness of faith entirely on its own terms, without geology, paleontology, Big-Bang cosmology, philosophical arguments for atheism, or textual criticism.

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Divine Hiddenness

The purpose of this essay is to show that it is possible to persuade a true believer of the emptiness of faith entirely on its own terms, without geology, paleontology, Big-Bang cosmology, philosophical arguments for atheism, or textual criticism. A believer's own criteria for determining the truth value of religious truth claims can be shown to create double standards which she or he would not accept, and which she or he applies with arbitrary selectivity. Religious truth claims which survive this trial can be shown to contain no informational content. This cognitive dissonance led to my own deconversion.

Again, this is not what philosophers refer to as "the problem of pain," but it is similar to what is called "the problem of divine hiddenness." The fact that *Reaching for the Invisible God* had to be written at all supports the hypothesis that, if any supreme being exists, it does not seem to have done anything but watch during the lifetime of anyone who can be questioned first-hand.

Clues that Something's Fishy

So what do apologists for literal biblical inerrancy ask us to explain in their "part one?" For this they usually present evidence for creation, biblical prophecy and the historical resurrection of Jesus. Even if we concede that the preponderance of evidence seems to point to these (which it does not), we are still being asked to reinterpret our first-hand experiences in light of evidence none of which is fresher than about two-thousand years old.

When sources of evidence contradict each other, we must decide which one to reinterpret in light of the other. Age does not immediately rule out evidence, but a basic principle by which we all live our lives is that first-hand experience tends to be more reliable than second-hand testimony. When we do consider testimony, we see whether the implications bear out in experience. If the testable claims of religion are entirely in the distant past and the indeterminate future, this makes it easy to believe even if it were not true. For generations to sincerely perpetuate an error, what more effective setup could there be? This is why it is important to ask of any worldview: "What am I supposed to expect to experience?"

Be wary of any belief arranged in such a way that, if it were not true, you would never know. How does this test apply to the belief in metaphysical naturalism? If I claim, "There is no such thing as the supernatural," how would I know if it were false? The bible is full of examples of a world in which, if the stories were true, there clearly was interaction from a supernatural realm. Levitation of entire seas! Resurrection from the dead! Prestidigitation of loaves, fishes and wine! Walking through walls! Fire descending from heaven in answer to prayer! Prescience, extra-sensory perception, and levitation! If the supernatural realm exists, the bible shows what a different world we should expect to experience as a result. I know the supernatural does

What am I supposed to expect to experience if my world view is correct?

not exist because these things seem to only happen under highly suspicious circumstances. Modern life does not contain such wonders.

Some employ double-speak to claim that their lives do contain such events, by redefining "miracles" as the same events which would happen in a naturalistic universe: childbirth, recovery from disease, falling in love, repentance from a wicked life, etc. Someone who witnessed miraculous events described in scripture, if such were literal and historical, would consider this weakened definition an insult to true miracles. It is interesting that the frequency and intensity of reports of truly counter-natural events in populations seem to be in direct proportion to the ignorance and unsophistication of those populations. We find ourselves pushing back God, as an explanatory hypothesis, to whatever we have still no knowledge about- yet.

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Another watered-down definition of "miracle" is "uncanny coincidence." The study of statistical probability shows that we should expect to encounter uncanny coincidences all the time. We should not be surprised, or read any deep significance into them, since they are so commonplace. In a recent world series game, a bird flew in the way of a pitch and was hit by the ball in mid-air. The odds against this were astronomical. Why didn't the believers in the stands leap to their feet crying, "This is a supernatural intervention"? We read a benevolent intention into coincidences because we tend to remember those that benefited us and forget the countless ones which did not. Occam's razor should be applied when we are tempted to create an extra unnecessary layer of causation.

Here is an excerpt from an e-mail correspondence I had with a friend who asked me, "What experience could you have that would convince you that it was personal interaction from God?"

Dear Tim,

Let's call the experience X. To examine any hypothesis, use the acronym **SEARCH**.

S: State the claim. I would need to first state the claim as specifically and unambiguously as possible:

1. A certain phenomena, X, which I am experiencing, is best explained by the existence and active involvement of a perfectly wise, powerful and loving person who is the first cause or unmoved mover of reality.

How's that for a hypothesis? Is it sufficiently specific and unambiguous?

E: Examine the Evidence for and against claim 1.

A: Find Alternative explanations and consider the evidence for and against them.

2. I was hallucinating/dreaming X.
3. X was something which I caused to happen myself.
4. X is a hoax.
5. I have exercised arbitrary selectiveness in my perception, attention, and memory to X which I would not apply everywhere else.
6. I misinterpreted X. I only thought X happened because of my own logical fallacy, Y. For instance, I misunderstood the nature of statistical probability.
7. X was sent from space aliens. ;^)

R: Rate, according to the

C: Criteria of adequacy, all of the

H: Hypotheses against each other.

There are five criteria of adequacy. The first one is testability: Are any of the explanations falsifiable at least in principle? If any were wrong, would we be able to tell? Whichever ones are unperceivable are not so much false as simply useless, and this counts against them. If we will never have an experience that will support or contradict them, they will never affect us, so who cares?

The second criteria is fruitfulness. Which hypotheses make other novel predictions that can be confirmed with investigation? This would increase their independent corroboration.

Third is scope. How much explanatory power does each possess for other things?

Fourth is parsimony, which is a fancy way of saying, Which claims require the assumption of the fewest unexplained, mysterious influences? Such influences include entities, processes, or energies that we have not perceived, and have no other support for.

Fifth is conservatism. Which claim contradicts less of my total body of reliably established experiences?

So to answer your question I had to think of an experience that would count as X. I now have decided what one is. Fermat's Last

Theorem hasn't been solved in 350 years. If God gives me a short mathematical proof of Fermat's Last Theorem, which states " x to the n th power + y to the n th power = z to the n th power," then clearly hypothesis 1 beats the others. (Except maybe 6, but space aliens wouldn't even know who Fermat is.) No human knows the solution, much less me. I don't even understand the equation, so it would have to be coming from God.

Unfortunately I just found out that Fermat's Last Theorem was solved in 1993. So let's use Goldbach's Conjecture instead, which states, "Every integer n greater than 5 is the sum of three primes."

Mr. Yancey is extremely knowledgeable and sophisticated, having been exposed to a diverse number of approaches to the frustration of attempting to interact with God. Aside from personal testimonies from friends, the author mentions Soren Kierkegaard's fideism,⁽⁵⁴⁾ *Contact* by Carl Sagan⁽²⁷⁾, the Turing Test of artificial intelligence pioneer Alan Turing⁽²⁹⁾, *The Road Less Traveled* by M. Scott Peck^(), and *The Variety of Religious Experiences* by William James. I identified countless of Mr. Yancey's statements reflecting what he seems, I think, to have learned from these sources. 93

As a result of setting out to craft a god-concept which fits into his experience, he approaches the functional equivalent of Deism. One of the few phenomena which Mr. Yancey has observed is mystical feelings in himself and others.^() This is precisely what almost all of the contradictory religions claim for support as well. For instance, Mormons accept the "burning in the bosom" as direct communication from God. If we are going to explain their sensations as brain activity without an outside source, that is a sword that cuts both ways.

1. If my subjective internal experiences are given to me by God, what are those of other religions? Just brain activity with no outside source? Why theirs and not mine? Or is the source satanic? Again, why theirs and not mine?
2. If it is virtuous to accept claims on trust, previous to being provided with independent corroboration, why is it wrong for those with faith claims other than my own?

Any god-concept which fits into experience approaches the functional equivalent of Deism.

3. Should my first-hand experiences be reinterpreted in light of second-or-third-hand testimony? For how long?
4. Should I direct my attention to any evidence in support of my faith claims? Why then, when I begin to doubt what I believe, should I take my attention off of it? For how long should I give my faith claims the benefit of the doubt?
5. If the answer is "forever," why am I not applying this to conspiracy theories, get-rich-quick schemes and anecdotal alternative medicine?
6. What makes motivational reasons a test of truth? When are motivations sufficient to replace substantiation in support of a belief?

Faith Abused as a Mental Block

The only negative aspect to the book is the endorsement of belief "in the teeth of evidence." () Regarding his support for "paranoia in reverse,"(66) the author gives this jaw-dropper:

A skeptic will respond that I have just presented a classic rationalization: beginning with a premise, I proceed to manipulate all evidence in support of that premise. The skeptic is right. I begin with the premise of a good and loving God as the first principle of the universe; anything contradicting that experience must have another explanation.

Again:(263)

Once again, a skeptic might accuse me of flagrant rationalization, arguing backwards to make evidence fit a prior conclusion. Yes, exactly.

The skeptic objects to antagonism toward evidence because it is an outrage.

The skeptic objects to antagonism toward evidence because it is an outrage. There are three important reasons that Phillip Yancey may not exempt himself from following evidence wherever it leads. First is that beliefs motivate our actions, which have moral consequences. This will be elaborated in the next section.

Another reason is that rational discourse is the only moral means of settling disputes. If A claims "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," and B claims "Allah said something that contradicts A, I believe it, and that settles it," then nothing is settled. Rational argumentation is

precious because it's the only real force of social cohesion. Even though our rational conclusions differ, the only successful alternative methods are deception, coercion and emotional distraction.

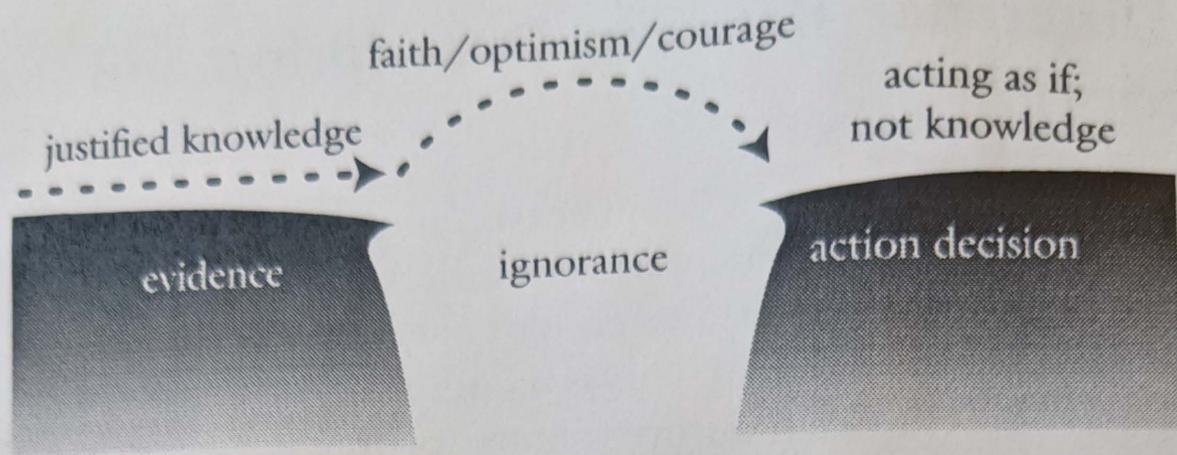
Further, how does playing intentional mind games on oneself advance the holy cause? Unrepentantly admitting and endorsing manipulation of evidence implies "no-contest" not only to followers of contradictory religions, but to every shade of paranormal crackpot. Without that "no contest," it is a double standard rendering evangelism hypocritical: I'm not accountable to evidence but you are. Critical thinking is the only preventative of real paranoia and victimization of the gullible. Surely most believers in God would cringe to hear faith defined as a mental disorder: "paranoia in reverse." (66)

This does not automatically entail naturalism. There are many religious apologists who claim to be evidentialists. They do not have to take their doctrines as presuppositions, but believe that the evidence leads to their conclusions.²

"Faith" as a Stop-Gap Measure

So what is the proper place of an act of the will in our minds? It ought not to be an act of the will to submit to an a priori conclusion. It ought to be an act of the will to submit to the process of following the evidence wherever it leads, and an act of the will to accept what has been found, including change, no matter how disappointing.

Of course we can't avoid a certain weakened form of "faith." We must constantly make choices, even when we don't possess the information we need, and some information has resisted the discovery efforts of the greatest minds. Even taking no action is a choice, so it is inevitable that we will, at first, have to do the best we can without being able to justify it. This is a form of faith. Whatever degree of capacity we have, is the degree to which we are responsible to hold our beliefs accountable to question. Children begin with no knowledge, and they must cope with this through faith in their parents. As adults, we are no longer so dependent, but the limits of our knowledge require that we use experts and specialists who we accept based on evidence of their credibility. The longer we live, the more we should learn, which gradually reduces this dependence as well.



When we have to act as if we know, it is easy to confuse it with actual knowledge.

This variation of "faith" is called trust. It is an expedient coping tool, which is only appropriate when the limits of knowledge leave no alternative. It should be joyfully discarded whenever it becomes possible to reduce the ignorance that made it necessary. The distinction is the attitudinal position: whether faith is something to be celebrated, or a regrettable stop-gap measure.

In contrast, the information provided by faith, as traditionally defined by supernaturalist teaching, is not tentative or open to revision. It is wrong to mistake either of these kinds of faith for knowledge. A claim held without being able to justify it acts as a shield against claims that can be defended.

First, this is willful resistance to learning, and personal growth. It is painful to unlearn beliefs which we cherish, either because they serve our selfishness and pride, or our emotional needs and innocent longings. Second, it is avoidance of personal responsibility. Being able to point the finger and say "he told me so" exempts a dependent person from responsibility for wrong beliefs. Third, when an efficiency tool is misused it becomes an illegitimate shortcut. The difficult effort of holding our position to revision is a moral obligation. Electing an outside source to serve these functions, even after knowledge has become available, is abdication.³

The Difference Between Description and Prescription

The author admits that the main reason he stays in the fold "is the lack of good alternatives, many of which I have tried." (38) He states that the only alternative to transcendent centrality of human beings in the universe is nihilism. (257) This is a common unsupported assumption claimed⁴ by Christian authors. Some people have concluded that life has no meaning because there is no god. They believe so because they have not yet recognized this as an assumption and challenged it.

Positive ways of living have often been attached to cosmological truth claims, but they are not a necessary basis for each other. I can begin to demonstrate this by rewriting, for instance, *Reaching for the Invisible God* to not attach cosmological truth claims at all. All that it loses is comfort, which is not a test of truth value. The following are my own statements to which Mr. Yancey would probably offer support, with qualifications. They are followed by page numbers from his book.

Choosing a brave emotional attitude toward disappointment is a demonstrably desirable way to live life.()

It is socially productive to give trust to those who have earned it, and the benefit of the doubt to the rest.()

Loving actions do not need loving feelings to be justified. (88)

Acceptance of calculated risk is healthy. When faced with two equally supported alternative actions, it is wise to risk the optimistic one.

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Growth comes through adversity.() 252-253, 281

Many more could follow. Although these sentences are prescriptive truth claims of useful emotional attitudes and paths of action, each can be rationally defended without asserting descriptive truth claims of eternal life, cosmic justice or a perfectly wise, powerful and loving parent. Nor do they result in descriptive claims of any kind, except to those who mistake attitudes for descriptive beliefs because they can result in the same action.⁵

So cosmological beliefs do not even carry irreplaceable usefulness for behavior. Contradictory prescriptive truth claims can be compared and rated against each other rationally. Use the acronym SEARCH. State the claim. Examine the Evidence for and against it. Repeat with Alternative claims. Then Rate, according to the Criteria of adequacy,

each Hypothesis. There are five criteria of adequacy. Testability: "Are they falsifiable even in principle?" Fruitfulness: "Which one makes the most unexpected predictions?" Scope: "Which one explains more?" Simplicity: "Which one requires the fewest assumptions of unknown mysteries?" Conservatism: "Which one contravenes less of our established knowledge?"

God Suffers the "Death of a Thousand Provisos"

Motivation to believe is not sufficient to replace substantiation for a belief. Fortunately, it is selectively applied by sane believers only to claims which are harmless and palatable. This is inconsistent, but preferable to embracing madness. This is why Mr. Yancey's body of works taken as a whole is a refreshing antidote to the application of religious teaching in making predictive claims. Respected authorities reduce God's involvement to a mere intangible "comforting presence;" without this model, more people will continue to withhold medical treatment from their children, handle poisonous snakes, and ruin their lives with impulsive decisions made under the unexamined "urging of God."

People usually become apologists from an admirable desire to maintain integrity. Unlike many pulpiteers, their conscience would trouble them if they declare their doctrines unaccountable to the same standards of credibility that are applied to stage psychics. As a result, they have to write books narrowing our expectations to nothing. Without meaning to, they train us to expect as a result of the existence of the spiritual plane, precisely nothing distinguishable from random chance—not only previous to faith, but *previous to death*.

Reaching for the Invisible God is good research for those involved with rational outreach to the faith subculture. It reveals the unavailing view of their deity's communication and nurture into which rational Christians are cornered. God is most effectively cancelled unintentionally at the hands of his own followers.

Here are some of the promises to the believer in the Christian bible. Consider what it is that would count as a violation of these promises to you.

Isaiah 41:10: "I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

Psalm 91: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.' For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand; but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your habitation, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot. Because he cleaves to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him, and show him my salvation."

Luke 6:38: "...give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Malachi 3:10: "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, sayeth the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."

2 Corinthians 9:6 and 8: "The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." "And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work."

Psalm 33:18-19: "Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine."

Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

Psalm 31:19-20: "O how abundant is your goodness that you have laid up for those who fear you, and accomplished for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of everyone! In the shelter of your presence you will hide them from human plots; you hold them safe under your shelter from contentious tongues."

James 5:14-16: "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord *will raise them up*; [italics mine] and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

Mark 16:17-18: "And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons, they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." [Notice six uses of the unequivocal word "will," not "might."]

Have you ever had experiences which you thought might be breaking these promises? If you asked a pastor, perhaps you were given an excuse, or told that it didn't apply. What should we expect to experience, or never experience, if these promises were true? Or if they were false?

Footnotes

- 1 I have phrased it here more explicitly than he did.
- 2 William Lane Craig is reputed to be one of these. Strangely, in his book *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (1994), he writes "Should a conflict arise between the witness of the Holy Spirit to the fundamental truth of the Christian faith and beliefs based on argument and evidence, then it is the former which must take precedence over the latter, not vice versa." No matter what this may reveal of his internal state, he publicly exerts on the religious community a positive influence for honest and sincere objectivity.
- 3 For more development on this, see the essay *The Ethics of Belief* by William K. Clifford, and two books, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* and *The Ordeal of Change* by Eric Hoffer.
- 4 Ravi Zacharias based an entire book on this assumption, titled "Can Man Live Without God?" In it, he ignored atheists or humanists who believe that life has meaning, and who don't foolishly worship mankind.
- 5 See "Faith as a Stop-Gap Measure" below.

Methodology of Mental Diligence

- 1 Specifically and clearly define terms in a claim or question.
- 2 Cultivate self-awareness. Habitually attempt to become aware of preconceptions and biasing factors.
- 3 Set the standard of satisfactory proof proportional to the controversy of the claim, its relevance to decision-making, and the importance of the decisions affected. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.
- 4 Assign comparative weight to standards of credibility. Accumulate observations of their reliability by holding them accountable to as many other standards as possible.
- 5 Seek out the strongest contradictory hypotheses and alternative explanations, and attempt to understand their perspectives.
- 6 All other things being equal, prefer explanations which require the fewest assumptions of unexplained or hypothetical factors.
- 7 Motivation to believe is not sufficient to replace substantiation for a belief.
- 8 The burden of proof is on they who assert. Suspended judgement must be the default position.
- 9 Clearly specify the conditions under which an explanation or description could be falsified.
- 10 Add qualifiers to conclusions to proportion the strength of convictions to the strength of the evidence.
- 11 Clearly identify speculation and acknowledge unresolved questions.