

ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE

A Personalized Approach to Apologetics

AGENDA / OVERVIEW

- **What are the trends in religious belief in the U.S.?**
 - Not favorable
- **What are the likely reasons behind these trends?**
 - Research shows that in most cases, people just stopped believing
- **How can we respond?**
 - Offer apologetics tailored to people's specific questions and concerns
- **What are possible next steps?**
 - Create a community (online/offline) for apologists
 - Personalized counseling ministries

DEMOGRAPHICS OF U.S. CHRISTIANITY

Here's an overview of religious affiliation for U.S. adults.

	2007	2014	Change
Evangelical Protestant	26.3%	25.4%	-0.9%
Roman Catholic	23.9%	20.8%	-3.1%
Mainline Protestant	18.1%	14.7%	-3.4%
Other Christian Groups	10.1%	9.7%	-0.4%
Non-Christian Faiths	4.7%	5.9%	+1.2%
No Faith Affiliation	16.1%	22.8%	+6.7%

WHO ARE THE NONES?

- Those with no faith affiliation – the “nones” – are more prevalent among younger generations. So in the U.S., the trend is looking likely to continue.

	% Unaffiliated (2014)
Silent Generation (b. 1928-45)	11%
Baby Boomers (b. 1946-64)	17%
Generation X (b. 1965-80)	23%
Older Millennials (b. 1981-89)	34%
Younger Millennials (b. 1990-96)	36%

WHO ARE THE NONES?

- “Nones” are also somewhat more likely to be
 - Male
 - Well-educated
 - High income earners
 - Politically leaning Democratic
 - Living in or near big coastal cities like NY or LA
- Where I live (northern NJ), there are many who fit all of these categories, and (anecdotally) they tend to be very unlikely to have a religious affiliation

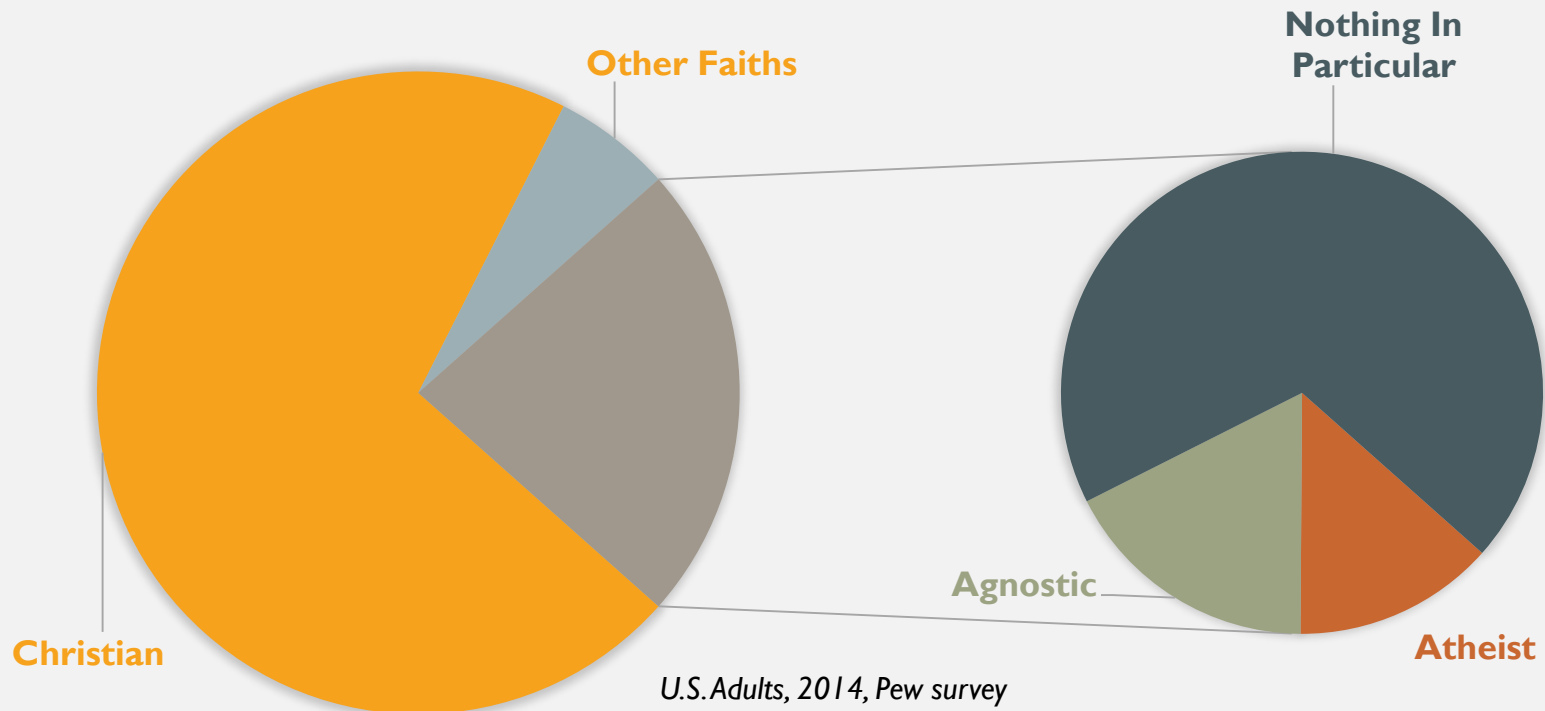
IS THERE ANY GOOD NEWS?

- On a global scale, Christianity is holding its own
 - Growth in the developing world is offsetting losses in Europe and North America.
 - The nonreligious have a low birth rate and are expected to shrink, while Islam is projected to grow.
 - But forecasts like these are uncertain, anything can happen!

Christians as % of world population	
1910	34.8%
2010	31.7%
2015	31.2%
2060 (proj.)	31.8%

IS THERE ANY GOOD NEWS?

- Also, there are few full-fledged atheists. Given three labels to choose from, most U.S. “nones” prefer “nothing in particular”.



ON THE OTHER HAND...

- Atheists, according to Pew, nearly doubled as a share of the U.S. adult population from 2007 to 2014 (from 1.6% to 3.1%).
- The trends might be even worse than we think ... interpreting the evidence is confusing considering differently worded questions and differences between online and telephone surveys (sample selection, possible honesty of responses).
- For example, the question “do you believe in God?”, results in
 - 90% yes, 9% no, 1% no opinion – Gallup telephone survey 2013
 - 74% yes, 12% no, 14% not sure – Harris online survey 2013

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>

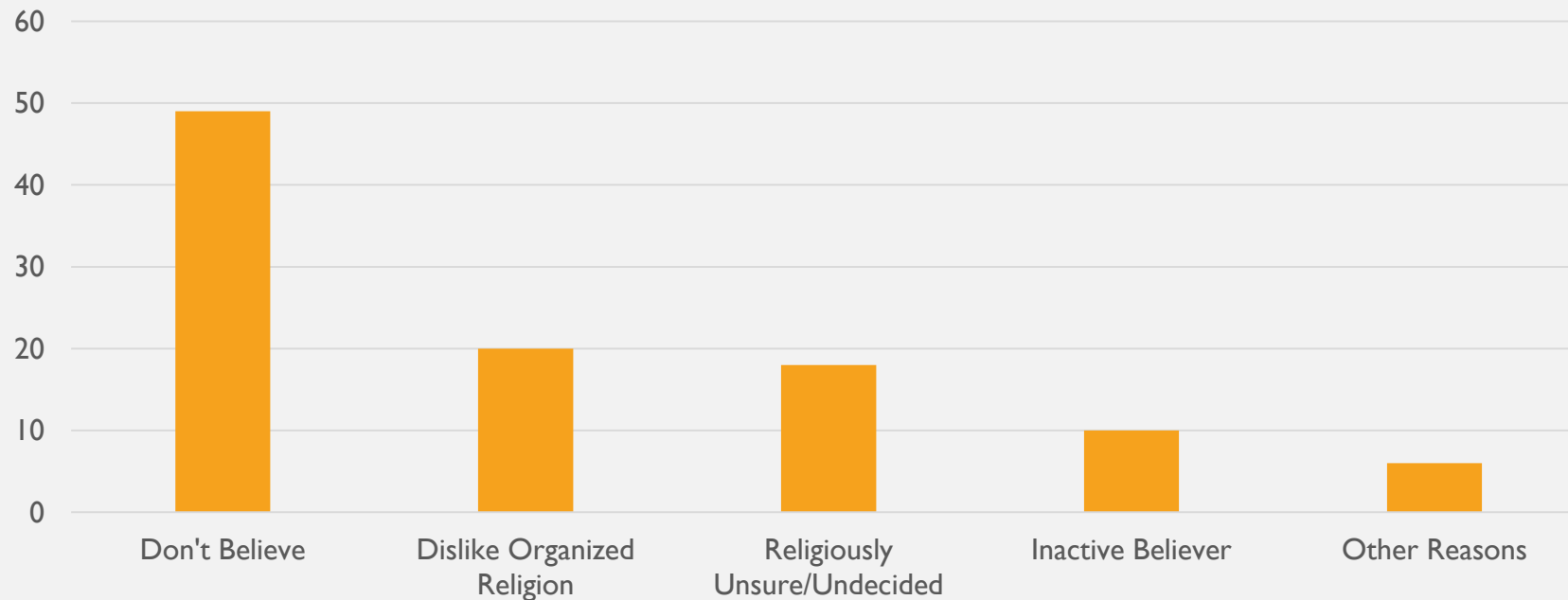
http://www.theharrispoll.com/health-and-life/Americans__Belief_in_God__Miracles_and_Heaven_Declines.html

ON THE OTHER HAND...

- Further muddying the waters, identification as a member of a religious group isn't a foolproof indicator of beliefs
- In the U.K., where religion has been in decline for a long time
 - 49% of the population identifies itself as Christian
 - 32% of the population believes in God
 - 55% of self-identified Christians believe in God (23% believe in a “higher power”, 9% don't believe in either, 12% don't know what they believe) <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/03/26/o-we-of-little-faith/>
- In the U.S., more people believe in God than consider themselves part of any religion, but there are other quirks (e.g. only 80% of Christians believe in an afterlife). <https://www.atheoryofus.net/christianity-statistics/>

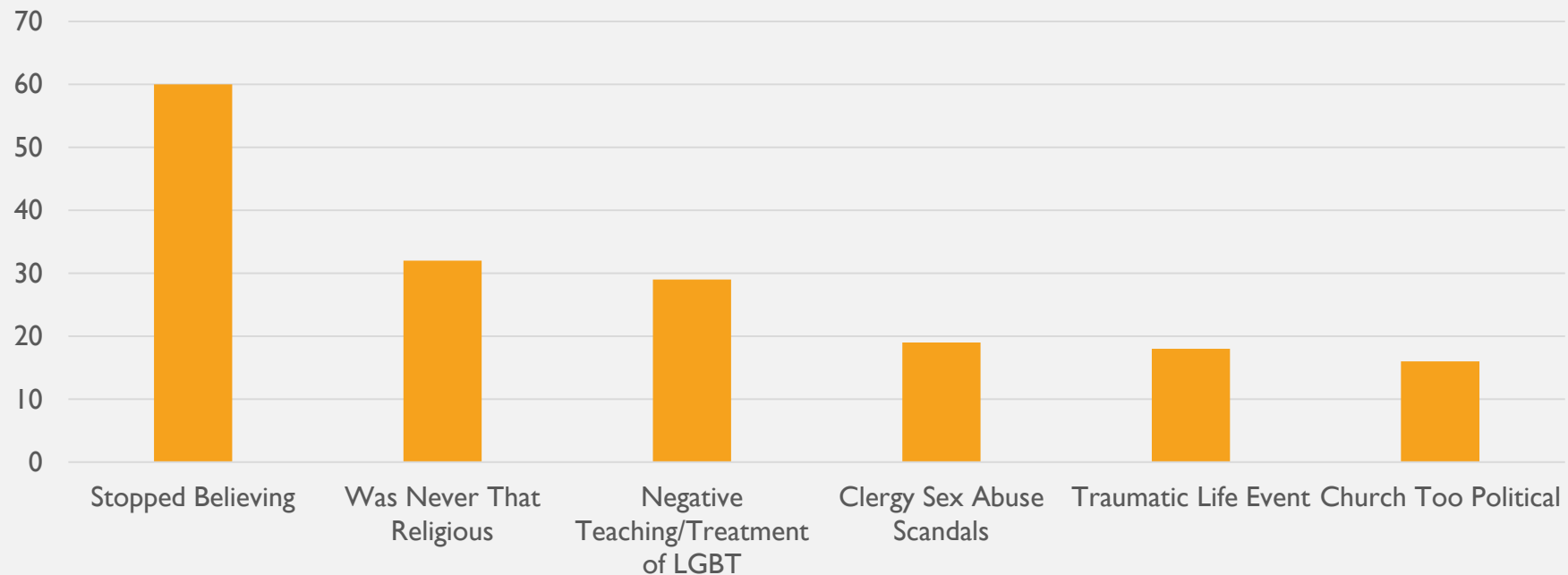
WHY ARE PEOPLE LEAVING?

This is being asked a lot in recent surveys. The answers depend in part how questions are asked or answers are classified. Here's the Pew survey (2015):



WHY ARE PEOPLE LEAVING?

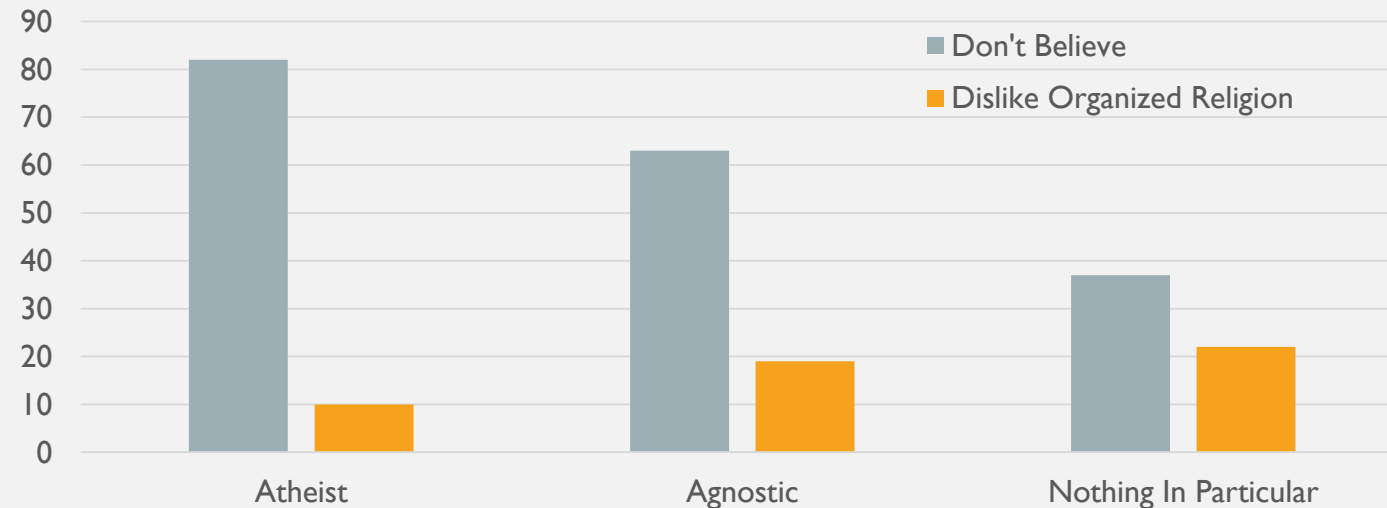
The PRRI survey (Aug. 2016) offered several prompts when asking what factors people considered important in the decision to leave their childhood religion:



WHY ARE PEOPLE LEAVING?

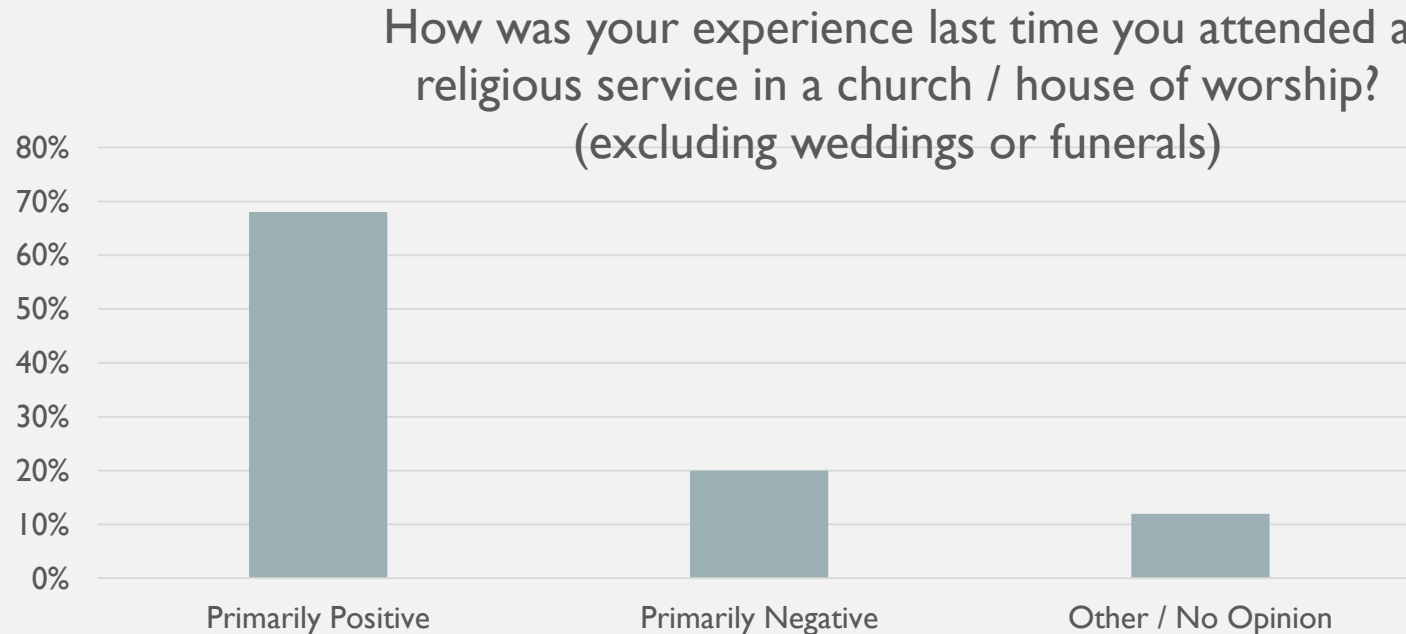
In the Pew survey, all subsets of the “nones” mentioned beliefs over dislike for organized religion.

Reasons Given For Leaving Religion Behind



WHY ARE PEOPLE LEAVING?

In the PRRI survey, most of those who left their childhood religion do not point to a bad experience. Unaffiliated Americans were asked...



IMPLICATIONS

- So to recap...
 - Christianity is shrinking in the United States
 - It's hard to measure because of the varying survey methods, but seems to be a net outflow of about 1% of the population per year.
 - **Lack of belief** is mentioned more often than any other factor
- Conclusion?
 - If we want to reverse the trend, focusing on programs, buildings, cultural relevancy, non-traditional worship styles, etc., while helpful on the margin, misses the main point
 - People need to be made aware of good reasons to believe!

SOME CAVEATS

- I do think statistics are useful for understanding trends and measuring progress. The numbers are telling a tale of a real change in society, and Christian ministries should react accordingly.
- However, we can't directly measure the contents of people's hearts, or the quality of their relationships with God.
- Each of the "nones" is an individual, not a statistic. How would I feel if someone's interest in my beliefs was goal-oriented as opposed to genuine curiosity?
- I need to remind myself often of these things.

A CALL FOR APOLOGETICS

- Apologetics is the practice of
 - Giving people positive reasons to believe in God and follow Jesus, and
 - Defending Christianity against challenges and objections
- So if “no longer believing” is the main reason why people are leaving Christianity, it seems like apologetics ought to be a critical part of the solution.

PERSONAL STORY

- My own interest in apologetics is very personal.
- I grew up Catholic, drifted away from church in my early 20's. I never stopped believing in God, but for a while I just didn't give Him much of my time.
- When I had children, in my late 20's, it kindled a fresh interest in faith and I felt motivated to examine my beliefs more closely and be able to articulate why I believed what I believed. I started to read widely on religious questions that had long failed to interest me much.

PERSONAL STORY

- My initial explorations were unsettling
 - Reading the Bible cover-to-cover actually weakened my faith, raising more questions than it answered.
 - Most of the present-day apologetics I encountered early on were unconvincing, while many of the attacks on Christianity seemed thoughtful and well-reasoned.
 - And among the loudest voices arguing things out, neither side seemed especially generous in spirit.

PERSONAL STORY

- It felt bad to feel my faith getting weaker.
 - I saw that the other side had nothing positive to offer.
 - And I became convinced I had a “God-shaped” hole in my heart and needed hope for eternity to live a full, joyful, and fruitful life.
 - But for faith to produce hope, I need to believe it to be really true, and I can’t just make myself do that. Sound reasons (or direct divine intervention) are necessary to produce confidence.
 - I have prayed often for the latter, but doubts remain as a thorn in my side.
 - So I keep coming back to being prepared “to give a reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet 3:15).

PERSONAL STORY

- I started to pay more attention to sermons than before, but for the most part
 - I was struck by how little attention churches paid to really establishing the foundations of Christianity and sincerely engaging the critics' points.
 - I was also surprised at how few people in my own life had really given it much thought and heard out both sides of the arguments.
 - Mostly I was disappointed in myself for having been indifferent for so long.

PERSONAL STORY

- Encountering C.S. Lewis - and through him, Chesterton and MacDonald - helped me immensely.
- As someone with a background in probability theory, Pascal also made a big impression.
- I can still remember vividly where I was when I was reading these formative books.
- Over the years, I've supplemented those initial apologetics with a few additional gems picked up from a variety of sources, and with some homemade insights of my own (which may or may not be original)

PERSONAL STORY

- My faith emerged from this period of questioning as
 - Weakened in terms of certainty – I still wrestle with doubts to this day
 - But strengthened in terms of commitment
 - Lewis helped me see that Christianity cannot be just “moderately important”
 - Pascal helped me see the importance of choosing a side and taking steps of faith, and acts as a strong bulwark any time I find myself slipping
 - Various writers – as well as individual Christians I met as I re-engaged with church – have helped me see a vivacious side of faith that I never knew
 - I began to pray regularly and organize my life’s priorities around Christ
- I look back on this period as a kind of “born again” experience

PERSONAL STORY

- Ever since then
 - I've wanted to "pay forward" the gifts I received from those who helped me
 - I've sometimes felt as if I had an uncommon perspective that could help people who are not responsive to conventional presentations of the Gospel
 - Plus, my own faith is often in need of refreshment. When it comes to my interest in apologetics, I'm reminded of this guy:

"I'm not only the hair club president, I'm also a client."



PERSONAL STORY

- Disclaimers
 - In sharing my faith with individuals in my own life, I have very little to report in terms of concrete success
 - *Maybe I planted some seeds and God will give the growth later on?*
 - In sharing my faith with the wider world via Q&A websites and a blog (www.christianityqanda.net), I have met with mostly silent non-engagement
 - *Maybe it's just because my writing style is too wordy and dry?*
 - *Maybe essays for a general audience are the wrong approach?*
 - So anything I have to say in these slides about recommended techniques for influencing others and reviving the faith should be taken with a large grain of salt!

HISTORY OF APOLOGETICS

Apologetics has a long history. The Apostle Paul, both through his Epistles and his conversations in the public square (Acts 17), was among the first of many.



Justin Martyr
2nd Century



Thomas Aquinas
13th Century



Blaise Pascal
17th Century



C.S. Lewis
20th Century

APOLOGETICS TODAY

- Most apologetics ministries today hail from very conservative evangelical (and to a lesser extent Catholic) quarters. Their passion for the subject matter is apparent, and they bring to bear a variety of arguments, but their conclusions often seem to me to be overreaching and unconvincing.
- Progressive / mainline writers, on the other hand, often offer feel-good inspiration and practical application, but very little in the way of direct apologetic arguments.
- Neither approach really worked for me, I had to seek out and puzzle over my own answers to many questions over many years.
- But most people probably don't have the time or the inclination to do this.

WHY TRY TO “REACH” PEOPLE?

- Jesus commissioned His disciples to “make disciples of all nations”, and many of us want to take part in that project personally.
- To a non-believer, though, our own Bible-based motivations are irrelevant.
- Before we get into why we think our beliefs are true, we need to give our audience reasons to be personally interested.
- A common approach (for example, the guy handing out tracts in the subway) is the scare tactic – “God loves you, but you’re going to hell unless you convert”. Everyone’s heard it a million times, and those for whom it worked are already in church.
- What else could we lead with?



PASCAL'S WAGER

- Pascal's Wager is unusual among apologetics arguments, in that it admits that God's existence cannot be proven. Pascal argues that a life lived in pursuit of God is nonetheless the correct choice, mathematically speaking, given that it offers great possible rewards and no downside.
- The lack of certainty makes it seem weak and is one reason it's not a very popular approach among apologists. Why appeal to a listener's doubt if you have lots of other compelling proofs?
 - Aquinas had 5 "proofs" of God's existence. So why is anyone still arguing about it?
 - Some apologists claim the Resurrection is a proven historical fact that only a stubborn/rebellious heart would doubt <https://answersingenesis.org/jesus-christ/resurrection/infallible-proofs/>
- Pascal's approach is useful primarily to anyone who finds the standard arguments, while helpful, to fall well short of being proofs.

PASCAL'S WAGER

- Pascal's Wager is also unpopular among skeptics. In its conventional presentation, it is seen as making too many unwarranted assumptions:
 - That the version of God we believe in is the correct one
 - That Heaven/Hell is all about having the correct beliefs
 - That believing in God is has no costs or benefits in this life
 - That God would reward someone who comes to Him in the spirit of a self-interested "wager"

	God Does Exist	God Doesn't Exist
I Do Believe	I Go To Heaven	Nothing Happens
I Don't Believe	I Go To Hell	Nothing Happens

Pascal's Wager

PASCAL'S WAGER

- I think all of this is extremely unfair to Pascal
 - First of all, we are going off of his unpublished notes (Pensées), not a finished product.
 - Useful concepts in probability theory are often introduced to a new student in a simplified form (like a 2×2 case), with lots of unwarranted assumptions, as a way of communicating the main insights. It's expected that a practitioner will adjust accordingly for the complications of the "real world", and naïve to think that Pascal's thinking was as simple as it's often presented.
 - The original text does not frame the "wager" in terms of a specific description of God or a particular theology of heaven & hell, nor does it claim there are no impacts in this life:

"Now, what harm will befall you in taking this side? You will be faithful, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful. Certainly you will not have those poisonous pleasures, glory and luxury; but will you not have others? I will tell you that you will thereby gain in this life, and that, at each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness in what you risk..."

<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees.iv.html>

PASCAL'S WAGER

- For myself, Pascal was helpful in shutting down the temptation arising from a so-called “rationalism” that claims the burden of proof is on faith and that atheism ought to be the default posture of a person acting in rational self-interest.
- Of course, seeing faith as a “wager” is not an operating principle for a fruitful relationship with God, and it occupied only a small portion of Pascal’s own life of faith. But in my case, it stops doubts from gaining any real momentum, because it reminds me how little that path offers.
- The same basic principle is found in John 6:68. When some disciples wandered off after some difficult teaching, and Jesus asked the twelve whether they were leaving too, Peter replied “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*”

CAN WE REACH EVERYONE?

- The most dedicated atheists are passionate about their non-belief and convinced the church is a harmful force in the world. They have always been among us, but prior to about 1990, social pressure kept them from being very vocal here in the U.S.
- I suspect the end of the Cold War and the rise of the Internet gave them a new platform and boldness. The Church is facing a much more powerful opponent than it did in past generations.
- These days it seems that everyone is running into the atheistic message on a daily basis. Sometimes, it is just playful and the implications are subtle – “religion is something to laugh at”.



CAN WE REACH EVERYONE?

- Furthermore, atheists are quite good at planting questions in the minds of their target audience. The tone is usually mocking or mean-spirited, but the questions raised are serious ones that apologists need to be prepared to answer.



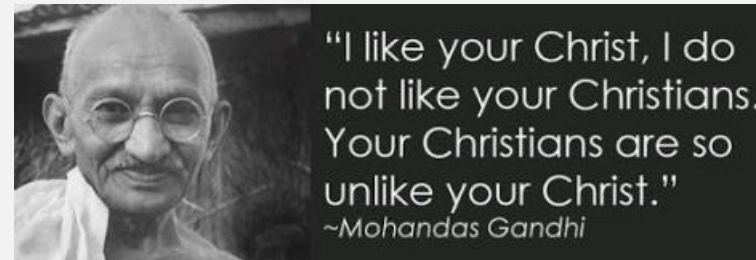
- I don't think we should focus energy on "reaching" atheists per se. Perhaps all we can really do in response is to love them, show them our authentic selves, and make them a little less convinced that Christianity is net harmful.

TARGET AUDIENCE

I'm interested in the nearer fishing grounds – let's say, agnostics who on a good day are halfway to a generic sort of deism. Or the “spiritual but not religious” folks. In these groups, some common concerns are

- What do I need church for? I'm fine enough as it is, I'm basically a nice person.
- Besides, you can't prove anything in the Bible is true. How can you be so certain?
- Every time I look Christians are picking on gays, denying science, meddling in politics. And there are so many scandals!

Note: fortunately, Jesus personally still enjoys a good reputation.



WHAT CAN WE SAY?

- I'm interested in an apologetic that speaks to people where they're at, and feeds their minds with good reasons to believe and an authentic, personalized approach. Pair this with a ministry that's ready to touch their hearts as well.

*(random stock photo,
this is just a draft!)*



WHAT MIGHT WE SAY?

Here are a few ideas I've come up with and have partially tried out when the opportunity arose. Not sure whether or not they are on the right track.

- **What do I need church for? I'm fine enough as it is, I'm basically a nice person.**

Hard to see forgiveness of sins as "good news" if you're not a sinner. Maybe start with something more personal and timely. For example, look at economic inequality, a hot topic on which most of us should have "cause to be uneasy".

- **I like your Christ, but not your Christians. Hypocrites!**

"I hear you. We're trying to do things right at XYZ Ministry. It's not the kind of thing that makes the news. Come check us out, I think you would feel welcome and comfortable. Jesus didn't like hypocrites either, by the way."

- **Besides, you can't prove anything in the Bible is true. How can you be so certain?**

"Guess what, some of us are not certain either. Jesus was gentle with those of little faith, He seems more interested in commitment, which we can choose, vs. certainty, which isn't really up to us. There's more evidence than most people think, but less than some people claim. It's more like finding probable cause than proof beyond reasonable doubt. Here are a few things I find pretty helpful. Happy to help with any questions."

POSSIBLE PITFALLS

- Ministering effectively to the doubtful requires familiarity with their worldview, and engagement with the ideas being thrown their way from the other side.
 - This can be dangerous work, doubts are contagious!
- There are reasons why it's seen as dangerous to discuss politics or religion.
 - If we insist on our own specific version of truth, we end up with 2 billion churches of one.
 - There is a wide spectrum of Christian belief, from the most liberal Episcopalian all the way to the most doctrinaire young-earth creationist.
 - I suspect we've all felt the temptation to look one step to our right and think "fanatic!" or one step to our left and think "watered down!".
 - If I find ever myself resembling a Pharisee, time to pause and take a deep breath.

SUGGESTED PRINCIPLES

- Get to know each person's present beliefs and life situation. Look how you can offer something helpful that moves them closer to God, rather than insisting they adopt all of our own beliefs.
- It seems to me perhaps the Apostle Paul adjusted his style in this direction over his own ministry.
 - In Galatians, often placed early in his career, we find a very combative Paul, complaining about certain “men from James” and Peter (2:11-13) and how they were not correctly demonstrating a theology of freedom from the Mosaic law. Speaking about the pro-circumcision camp, he complained “As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” (5:12)
 - In 1 Corinthians, however, we see a sensitivity towards different audiences and a willingness to adjust himself to situations. “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law ... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” – 1 Cor 9:20-22
 - Finally, in Romans 14 we find a deep concern with sensitivity towards the individual conscience, and a desire never to be a “stumbling block”, echoing what Jesus said in Matt 18:1-7. On topics of disagreement among believers, he advises “whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God” (14:22).

SUGGESTED PRINCIPLES

- To me, this means if someone can accept a more extensive set of beliefs than I can, or stricter ethics, or additional traditions, I am not to speak out against it
 - This is probably why some kinds of apologetics questions are not being addressed from the pulpit. You can't answer someone's doubts effectively without vocalizing and acknowledging them. But why introduce doubts to people who don't have them? Pastors are in a tough spot!
- On the other hand, teachings that are unnecessarily extensive or strict or traditional should not stand in the way of reaching new people for Christ in the modern world. We should pray for good judgment (Acts 15).
 - Make first steps towards faith accessible to people, as His yoke is easy (Matt 11:30).
 - This includes not just easy first steps of action (sinner's prayer), but also easy first steps on the intellectual journey (believing in God first before adding a bunch of doctrines).

SUGGESTED PRINCIPLES

- Certain hot-button issues (most prominently in the past decade - gay marriage) are turning people away from Christianity in large numbers, and tearing denominations apart at a pace reminiscent of the Civil War era.
- Unanimity among Christians on these issues is not looking likely anytime soon, so how can we minimize the damage?
 - Keeping Romans 14 in mind and trying to avoid judging one another is good advice. A few voices are offering a “Third Way” approach of trying to keep congregations together despite deeply felt differences. <http://www.a2blue.org/third-way/>
 - Training oneself to be able to fairly argue both sides of any given dispute is also helpful. Until we can really see both sides of any issue on which intelligent people disagree, we should assume we’re missing something important.

SUGGESTED PRINCIPLES

- Liberals would be advised to remember Chesterton's fence.
 - *“There exists in such a case a certain institution or law; let us say, for the sake of simplicity, a fence or gate erected across a road. The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, ‘I don't see the use of this; let us clear it away.’ To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: ‘If you don't see the use of it, I certainly won't let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it.’”* <http://www.chesterton.org/taking-a-fence-down/>
 - Being able to clearly argue the conservative case in these cases not only sharpen's one's own thinking, but also allows one to defend (without necessarily agreeing with) conservative brothers and sisters who are often naively portrayed as “hateful” or “stupid”. “Defend” doesn't mean saying you believe what you don't, but “playing devil's advocate” as a means of showing the listener that these issues are not as simple as they might seem.

SUGGESTED PRINCIPLES

- Conservatives would be well advised to recognize that there is a thoughtful case to be made by the other side (e.g., <http://www.wouldjesusdiscriminate.org/>) and that large sections of the church have been wrong before and changed with the times on both scientific and social issues.
- If an inquirer is hung up on one controversial issue, he/she should be made aware that the church itself is divided – which is sometimes news to them – and advised not to distance themselves from Jesus just because they disagree with some Christians on one issue.
- Both groups should also take note that the “nones” are almost always sympathetic to liberal theological positions.
 - For conservatives, this means being sensitive to the members of their own congregations whose faith might be most vulnerable and being sensitive on things that might trigger alienation.
 - For liberals, it means recognizing their position on the “front lines” of the faith, stepping up their game, and getting better at apologetics.
- No one should ever be encouraged to go against his/her conscience!

NEXT STEPS?

- Community
 - Apologetics is challenging work, and anyone involved in it could benefit from fresh approaches, encouragement, and support.
 - I would love to see a parachurch ministry or private online community for apologists to support one another.
- Counseling ministries
 - As noted, some of these topics that come up in apologetics are too sensitive to handle well by sermons or written materials directed at a general audience.
 - Perhaps every church should make sure that person-to-person pastoral counseling around the “big questions” is available, and have volunteers from various backgrounds who can be matched up with individuals whom they can help.
 - This is especially needed for young adults (the PRRI survey indicated that 62% of the nones who left their childhood faith did so before the age of 18).

CALL FOR FEEDBACK/PROPOSALS

- I'm interested in what's been done successfully out there – especially wondering whether any churches have reversed membership declines through personalized apologetics.
- I tried a small group in my local church, advertised on meetup.com, and only committed Christians showed up. What kind of outreach would work?
- Our church is also doing an “Alpha course”, but again the audience has been almost entirely believers. And in my opinion the course spends far too little time on the issues and doubts that trouble most of the nones. What kind of curriculum would be useful for more skeptical audiences?
- I would be an interested donor/volunteer towards any new ministries that have a compelling plan to succeed along these lines and reach new people, especially if it's local to me. At present, I don't feel ready to launch anything by myself.