

Mark Lanier

## **Christianity On Trial**

Biblijski Institut, Zagreb, 2016, 254 pgs

Published by the Biblijski Institut in Zagreb, a book called, *Christianity On Trial*, came to our market in 2016. The author of the book is one of the most famous and most influential American lawyers, who combined his two loves in this book: love for God and His Word, and love for being a lawyer.

In an approach that is somewhat unorthodox for our readers, the author copies everyday situations from American courts onto the case of Christianity and, as he himself explains, this book represents the “Daubert’s discussion about God.” In the American judicial system, the law requires that before the experts are allowed to witness before the jury, a judge must question those experts in order to ascertain their expertise. This is called the “Daubert debate.” The purpose of this procedure is to remove charlatans and unreliable experts from the court proceedings, consequently to keep such people away from the jury. Along the same lines, in the book the author takes key elements of the Christian faith and calls upon witnesses and experts who are to prove its reliability.

The book consists of twelve chapters, two of which are reserved for the foreword and the afterword, and as for the rest of the chapters, the author uses each one to deal with an individual topic. Before the chapters themselves, the author begins with a foreword and an introduction, while the book ends with a list of sources that were used. The author uses the foreword to describe how he got the idea to write this book, in the introduction he familiarizes us with the book’s topic and the methodology he intends to use in it. The introduction begins with a somewhat provocative question, “Is it reasonable to believe in God?” since for some people God and reason do not fit into the same sentence. Going further, the author gives a succinct overview of other topics which he’ll be dealing with. Furthermore, the author familiarizes us with the world of American court houses, and goes on to discuss the roles of the jury, lawyers, and the types of evidence used in court.

As the starting point of his research, in chapter one called, “The Introductory Statement,” the author uses the question, “Does God exist, and if he does, what kind of God is he?” The author also suggests that this and other topics that pertain to Christianity need to be considered in light of what the Bible teaches, as well as the world around us. On that note, he explains that there are two types of evidence in court trials: *direct* and *indirect* evidence. Direct evidence is something that we have knowledge of first hand, while indirect evidence comes from a secondary source. However, what is important is that indirect evidence can confirm or refute indirect witness testimonies. This is important, because the author

will be using indirect evidence in some chapters, since the question of “does God exist” requires us to rely on indirect evidence. Further on, the author gives us a brief outline and explains each chapter in the book, and he concludes by appealing to the readers to make their own verdict after they have read the book and all the provided evidence.

Chapter two is called, “God? Gods? Or Nothing?” deals with the question of the existence of God, and in answering this question the author’s going to use, “the jury argument.” In his explanation of how the current American judicial system came to be, we find out that in court, experts from certain areas use their testimonies to help discover what exactly happened, but those who determine the facts and decide what really happened are none other than the jurors. And the jurors come to their verdicts based on the belief in the “greater weight of reliable evidence.” In other words, the verdict is based on the question, “What’s more probable?” Since every category has its own recognized measuring units, the author holds that the adequate measure of truth and his proposal to consider the existence of God is precisely that “what is more probable.” On that note, the author debates with: a Golden Rule atheist, a non-vegan vegan, an objective subjectivist; he debates about creation, evolution, and Adam and Eve, and he finishes the chapter by considering the significance of the Biblical account of creation from Genesis.

In chapter three, “Who God Isn’t,” the author emphasizes that our view of God and of the Bible are not always formed with first-hand experiences. Since that is exactly the way most people form their views about God, the author believes that it is primarily necessary to discern what God is not. We can do that by removing the non-Biblical views of God which may have crept into our minds, disguised as true. For this purpose, the author uses the book of John. Bertram Phillips’ book, *Your God Is Too Small*, is where Phillips lays out some erroneous views of God. According to him, people see God as: a) *a moral policeman* and they identify him with their own conscience; b) *a gigantic earthly father* and they reflect the image of their own fathers on him; c) *an old man in the skies* who is like an old man who is sometimes active in the world; d) *a force* – sort of like “the Force” in *Star Wars*; e) *a God of numerous paths* where every religion has its own strengths and revelations, which helps us find the way towards the divine; f) *a God of stern perfection* who is just that - stern and perfect; g) *a God of escape* – where God is just an excuse to escape reality; h) *a God of happiness*, whose purpose is to secure a happy and to provide a good life for us (ie., the Prosperity Gospel); i) *a God of our group* - this god is present among groups who think they have a special understanding of God; j) *a distant supervisor* who has created the world, and then distanced himself from it; k) *a second-hand God* - which is the topic of this chapter; l) *a personal complaint*, ie., for some people God is their disappointment; m) *a boring party-poop*er who only makes up all kinds of restric-

tions instead of giving life and courage; n) *a fun-park mirror* where God becomes a projection of our ideas, values, and emotions in an enlarged form, which is basically worshipping oneself; o) *a God for the elites* because it is considered that God only likes some people; p) *an arranged partner*, where the relationship with God boils down to “I’ll do something for you, God, and then you’ll do something for me”; r) *an impersonal God*, where God becomes impersonal and is considered to be an aggregation of highest values.

Chapter four, “Who Is God? Part I,” explores the nature of God in the context of the cosmic expanses. When faced with the vastness of the cosmos, people tend to either deny God, to think that it is impossible to know him, or to think that God simply does not care about us little people. For this purpose, the author calls to the stand, Alan Baddeley, a Psalmist, the heavens, St. Paul, Albert Einstein, and Sir John Polkinghorne. Since our minds have an immense role in understanding God, the author discusses some insights from the area of neuroscience, which shows that people tend to interpret new things in line with the thinking that already is in their minds. However, as we grow in knowledge and in life experiences, we also form new pathways in our minds, as well as deepening the already existing ones. In this way, the author wants to point to the need that, as our world and knowledge continue to grow, our knowledge of God also needs to grow. The author goes on to cite Psalm 8 to the music composed by the singer Keith Green as an experience which expanded his neural pathways. The vastness of the heavens (and God) to which the Psalmist talks about, combined with today’s knowledge about the vastness of space, reveals the greatness and glory of God as the Creator of it all. The orderliness of the universe and the reliability of the laws of physics, as well as the creation which shows the consistency of mathematical precision, reveal that the entire universe has a seal of approval for the existence of humans on earth. Since that is the case, the author points out that science gives us the answer to the question “how” while theology deals with the question “why.” But in all this, the author reminds us that us humans cannot possibly fathom God, who creates and maintains this huge universe.

Chapter five, “Who Is God? Part II,” continues the theme from chapter four, but here the author continues to explore studying God by observing leptons, quarks, and a personal God. As witnesses here, the author calls upon Sir John Polkinghorne, Frank Close, Heraclitus, and St. John the Apostle. As he continues the debate about the relationship between faith and science, the author points to the discovery that the atom is not the smallest particle in nature. By pointing towards the impressive dimensions of the atom, which is invisible to the naked eye, as well as that of its core and the possibility to divide the core into quarks, which possibly consist of oscillating strings (the existence of which cannot be proven, because there is no instrument which would be able to measure them),

the author emphasizes the greatness of God, who created all that and who knows all about those particles. This brings us to the question, "How could anyone understand such a God?" As possible solutions, the author provides the following propositions: a) we can reject God because we cannot fit him into our minds; b) we can shrink God to a size which can fit into our minds so we can control him; c) we can turn God into a super-computer and make him into a cold machine. The error all these propositions share is their vantage point, *from below*, because we are attempting to place God within our own boundaries. However, as the last solution the author is leading us into considering whether God revealed himself and in certain ways, and for this purpose he brings us a short debate about the term, *logos*, and about Jesus and his miracles.

Chapter six, "Biolinguistics and Communicating God" deals with the topic of communication. The author points out that how people think in words (try thinking without using words), which begs the question of the reasonableness of believing whether the God of Biblical proportions would decide to reveal himself through the written medium of the Bible. To the list of witnesses, the author calls on Peter MacNeilage, Thomas Henry Huxley, Salvador Luir, B. F. Skinner, Noam Chomski, Cicero, and St. Matthew. Since speaking is a characteristic unique to mankind, and our thinking goes on in our minds through our words, the author emphasizes that all of this speaks to the desire of people to understand others, and to be understood by others. The popularity of social networks proves this. In communication, there is always a *sender*, a *message*, and a *recipient*, and the sender is the one who decides how to translate his message into words, which is usually called, the *coding* process. The encoded message is thus being sent to the recipient through a *medium*, and the recipient then decides what it means after it has been *decoded*. After this, the recipient then offers *feedback*, confirming the reception of the message in various ways. In line with this sort of setup, the author still contemplates the revelation of God through the Bible as the Word of God.

Chapter seven, "Reality and the God of Truth," deals with the people's need to know what is true and what is false. For this purpose, the author calls on witnesses Plato, Chuang Tzu, René Descartes, Nick Bostrom, St. Paul, St. John the Apostle, Anselm of Canterbury, and Augustine. Using the 1998 movie, *The Truman Show* as an example, the author leads us into the topic of what is truth and how to recognize it. Leading us through history, the author refers to Plato's understanding of reality, as well as that of the oriental thinker Chuang Tzu. Also, we get acquainted with Descartes and his skeptical approach in which the truth is known through thinking without using any of the five senses. Finally, we come to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and Nick Bostrom, whose idea that the humankind may be living in a computer simulation was seen in the movie, *The Matrix*. The author goes on to show examples of how it is possible to manipulate reality and make

people believe the news which is fake, and he emphasizes that, for many, reality becomes subjective because people themselves define reality and truth based on the meaning they have for them. Since human intellect is limited and its operation is not flawless, in the remainder of the chapter the author leads us towards what the Bible teaches about the mind, truth, and understanding.

Chapter eight, “The Right, the Wrong, and a Moral God,” deals with the issue of morality, i.e., the fact that many people have a sense for what is right or wrong, but when asked to deliberate on the basis of their beliefs, they are unable to provide any logical explanation. For this purpose, the author calls upon these witnesses: Otto Ohlendorf, Herman Gräbe, Matthew Whita, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Fredrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, Adolf Hitler, Euthyphro, and Charles Staples Lewis. Basically, the chapter deals with the idea of Nazism and Hitler’s Germany as they relate to evolution, where the author claims that this phenomenon was an example of what the theory of evolution looks like when implemented in society. Here, the author assigns himself the role of an attorney and shows us what kind of defense he would have used had he been called to do it. There are several factors going in Hitler’s favor. First, Spencer’s statement about the “survival of the fittest,” which was uttered in the context of biology, came out of biology’s boundaries and was soon used in the context of race: the better races would go forward, while those less apt will not. Along those lines, the idea emerged that the better people need to continue procreating, while those less apt should die out. Second, Nietzsche’s philosophy, according to which absolute good and evil don’t exist, brought him to the conclusion that good and evil are not determined through their origin, but through their results, i.e., consequences. Adding the idea of the “Superman” to this, Nietzsche believed that the future of mankind depends on the future superman, while the current mankind is just a phase between ape and the superhuman. And if the future good is achieved by doing evil, it is then the greater good for the course of mankind. This is a picture into which Hitler fits perfectly, with his attempts to achieve the greater good by exterminating inept races and all people with serious mental or physical handicaps. For the rest of the chapter, the author provides a brief overview and explains various moral camps, and eventually concludes the topic by discussing God’s morality, which emanates from his being. The very nature of God is the ultimate standard of good.

Chapter nine, “Free Will, Moral Responsibility, and the Eternal, Righteous God,” leads us into the topic of whether are people capable of making honest moral choices, or have our choices already been predetermined. The list of witnesses for this chapter includes B.F. Skinner, Noam Chomsky, St. John the Apostle, and St. Matthew. The author acquaints us with the influential work of B.F. Skinner, whose deterministic attitudes about how people’s moral choices have been predetermined with their genetics and the environment, and how people are machines

built from biological matter, have had a great impact on the masses. According to this attitude, human choice is an illusion, and people should not be ascribed with their good deeds. In the same way, nobody can be responsible for their actions, nor can they be righteously punished in the sense of actual responsibility. The author disagrees with such an attitude and instead proposes the principle of human free will, explaining all the things which are implied by human free will in real life. By introducing God into the debate, the author emphasizes that the Bible teaches that we live in a cause-and-effect world, but it's the people who make choices about their behavior and ideas, which in turn become one of the causes. People are autonomous, although limited, and they are responsible for their moral choices. In this context, the author meditates on the issue of existence of good and evil.

Chapter ten, "The Brazenness of Resurrection," answers the question, "How can a holy God have a relationship with the sinful mankind?" The witnesses in this chapter are St. Matthew, St. John the Apostle, St. Paul, St. Peter, St. Mark, St. Luke, Polycarp, Titus Flavius Vespasian, Publius Cornelius Tacitus, Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, Plinius the Younger, and Charles Colson. In this chapter, the author subjects the resurrection of Jesus to the standards of the American judicial system, in order to draw some reasonable conclusions based on evidence. By reminding us of the direct and indirect evidence, the author explains the role and the nature of witnesses in the courtroom proceedings. Specifically, the credibility of the witnesses is explained, as well as second-hand testimonies (retelling), experts, partiality, the jury's sympathy and prejudice, and the burden of proof. Speaking of the burden of proof, the author places special emphasis on the fact that determining the past is not a scientific nor a mathematical question. Historical facts are proven using the "burden of proof" which, in criminal proceedings, need to be "beyond reasonable doubt," and in civil lawsuits "as believable as possible." After this, the author brings forth the testimonies of witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus and, in accordance with the categories we have listed above (credibility, retelling, etc.), he analyzes and assesses the credibility of Jesus' resurrection.

Chapter eleven, "Death and Eternity," deals with the reasonableness of the existence of afterlife and eternity, and calls upon the witnesses, Jesus of Nazareth and St. Paul. The author emphasizes that he did not intend to start the book with this chapter, because before discussing eternity we need to establish the reasonableness of believing in a personal, moral, and limitless God, who has communicated with humans. Because of Jesus' resurrection, our future is not a lottery, but is a destiny in Christ. By explaining the various meanings of the term "heaven," the author expands on the implications of Jesus' resurrection based on 1 Corinthians and concludes the chapter with the hope that we will all find refuge in God.

The last, twelfth, chapter is the author's final statement. Using the example of

the liberating verdict to O.J. Simpson caused by the jury which ignored certain pieces of evidence which would have gotten him convicted, the author concludes that our thoughts about Christianity are sometimes faced with the previously created feelings and ideas. It is emphasized that we need to set all of that aside if we wish to honestly consider the evidence offered by this book. Once again, the author summarizes individual portions of the book and, by outlining his own attitude, he invites his readers to recognize for themselves the reasonableness of the evidence provided in this book.

The book, *Christianity On Trial*, is an innovative way of outlining apologetics of the Christian faith in our speaking area, since the author is doing this as per his profession as a lawyer. In line with this, the author does not hold his claims to be 100% certain (although they are 100% certain according to his personal conviction), but in line with judicial practice he puts them up for consideration, which requires the readers to assess for themselves the argumentation of the witnesses, and to come up with a verdict, just like a court-room jury. In this way, the author is not imposing his own attitudes onto others, but he does argument and advocates them clearly.

Written in a plain and easily readable language, *Christianity On Trial* gives readers a basic-level knowledge of an entire array of scientific, historical, and theological topics, which is especially helpful in the dialog between science and religion. It is for this reason that *Christianity On Trial* helps the reader understand certain happenings in today's world and enables them to cope with them. As a curiosity in this book, I would like to emphasize the chapter which talks about Nazism and evolution, because the readers might find themselves wondering that, if evolution is true, Hitler may have done the right thing in his intention to improve mankind. Also, the chapter which speaks about the work of the psychology professor B.F. Skinner, which helps us understand why people commit crimes, and then they are excluded from responsibility based on "childhood trauma" or "life circumstances," punishing the victim twice. However, maybe the most impressive part of the book is the part where the author speaks with a person who believes in evolution, and still has not eaten their grandma. But in order to find out what that is about, you will have to read the book.

The book is intended for a wider audience which is interested in critical thinking about the Christian faith, the topic of the relationship between science and religion, Christian apologetics, getting acquainted with the American judicial system, or a succinct course in the basics of Christian faith. It can be especially helpful as a part of the apologetics course, and maybe even an introduction into theology. Be as it may, as somebody has already said before me, everybody will find something for themselves in it.

Ervin Budiselić