

Book Review #2

SCALING THE SECULAR CITY: A DEFENSE OF CHRISTIANITYⁱ

By J.P. Moreland

J.P. Moreland is arguably one of the most influential American Evangelical apologists of the latter century and the first part of the twenty-first century. His adeptness is especially clear in the areas of philosophy of science and philosophy of mind. Through his debates, lectures, and writings, Moreland has served well the cause of Christ by equipping people for ministry both in the academy and in the local church. In *Scaling the Secular City*, Moreland displays his acumen in dealing with some of the toughest challenges posed to Christianity. He accomplishes this with rigorous argumentation and a winsome spirit, the likes of which is worthy to be emulated.

MORELAND'S CENTRAL POINTS, ARGUMENTS, AND CONCLUSIONS

In *Scaling the Secular City*, J.P. Moreland begins his work by accentuating a fourfold purpose of apologetics. First, the Christian community is commanded in Scripture to defend the faith; second, apologetics can remove obstacles that impede one from coming to faith; third, apologetics can also strengthen a believers confidence in the truthfulness and reasonableness of their faith (faith seeking understanding) while simultaneously encouraging spiritual growth. Lastly, apologetics can contribute to the health of a culture by giving it, for example, guidance in areas of bio-ethics.ⁱⁱ

BOOK OVERVIEW

Moreland's purpose for writing the book is to provide and defend the thesis that the Christian God exists. He does this by showing that it is both rationally *permissible* and that it is rationally *obligatory* to believe it.ⁱⁱⁱ In the first four chapters, J.P.'s apologetic method is natural theological in scope. He argues for the existence of a personal God by using the *kalam* cosmological argument (chapter 1), the argument from design (chapter 2), the argument from mind (chapter 3), and the argument for the meaning of life (chapter 4). This is followed by an evidentialist apologetic approach where he argues for the New Testament's historical reliability and Christ's deity and resurrection (chapters 5 & 6). Lastly, Moreland tackles several objections raised against Christian theism by the scientific, sociological, psychological, and anthropological communities (chapters 7 & 8).^{iv}

NATURAL THEOLOGY

In chapter one, Moreland sees the cosmological argument as one of the most important proofs for God's existence. This argument gets its name from the Greek *kosmos* meaning "world", or "universe." This argument has three versions to it, the first of which is the *Thomist Argument*.^v This version asserts the existence of finite, contingent beings. These beings could have not existed and as such are dependent for their being on something else. Finite beings owe their existence either to an infinite regress or to a necessary being.^{vi} But adding another dependent being to a chain of dependent beings does not ground the chains' existence. The current existence of all finite beings is then caused by the existence of a necessary Being, and that being is God.

The second version of the cosmological argument is the *Leibnizian Argument*.^{vii} It begins by asking, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Here, he uses the principle of sufficient reason^{viii} to argue for the existence of an intrinsically intelligible or self-explanatory being-God-whose existence is logically necessary (i.e., it's a logical contradiction to deny the proposition *God exists*).

The third version of the cosmological argument is the *Kalam Argument*.^{ix} The argument first states that the universe either had a beginning or it did not. Then if it had a beginning, it was either caused or uncaused. If then the beginning was caused, it was either personal or non-personal. Thus, the major premises of the argument are that the universe had a beginning, the beginning of the universe had a cause, and the cause for the beginning of the universe was personal.

Moreland buttresses the *kalam* cosmological argument by several proofs. First, the impossibility of traversing an actual infinite (i.e., an infinite series of events).^x Second, is Big Bang Cosmology (i.e., universe began from an explosion and is continuing to expand) which points to the cosmos coming to be a finite time ago. Third, there is the second law of thermodynamics, which essentially tells us that the universe is wearing down irreversibly. It is headed for a state of maximum disorder. This seems to imply that the universe had a beginning. After dealing with objections to his arguments, Moreland admits that this argument does not argue for the God of the Bible, but it gives good reasons to support belief in some kind of theism.

In the chapter two *The Design Argument*, Moreland points out that there are many kinds of design (i.e., design as: order, purpose, simplicity, beauty, sense and cognition, information, etc.); he offers different forms of the design argument (i.e., design from analogy, etc.), and then deals with objections to the arguments. For example, part of Hume's objection to design is the question of who made the designer, but Moreland demonstrates that this leads to an infinite regress. Like the cosmological argument, the design argument does not argue for

the God of the Bible, but it is further evidence that a person, brought the universe into existence.

Chapter seven *Science and Christianity*, Moreland does a masterful job of getting to the philosophical naturalistic commitments that dominates the scientific community today. He also points out where Science as a discipline is limited, refutes itself, and has certain presuppositions. He continues with showing how Christianity and Science can be integrated to help each other discover truth, and demonstrates that science is not the sole paradigm for truth and rationality. Especially insightful is Moreland's insight in the evolution/creation struggles. For him, the key issue is making the macro/micro evolutionary distinction concerning life's origin, not the flood or the age of the earth.

Moreover, Moreland points out that there is no evidence that we came from some pre-biotic soup, he admits that the Cambrian explosion reveals no transitional forms in the fossil record, and that microevolution is observable, but macroevolution is not.

ASSESSING MORELAND'S WORK

Moreland's book is definitely sophisticated philosophically especially in the areas of science. He understands the war in academia and the need to meet the enemies of the Gospel on their own turf. He takes on some of the toughest arguments raised against theism generally, and Christianity specifically, by demonstrating philosophically and scientifically some serious flaws in the naturalistic worldview. Yet, he simultaneously equips the Christian to war in the battle of ideas both for the public square, and in the church.

MORELAND'S APOLOGETIC METHOD

His method seems classical and evidential. He starts by giving proofs for God's existence through the kalam cosmological and design arguments. He uses natural theology extensively (e.g., seen in his philosophical sophisticated arguments), but also the exegetical method (historical/grammatical) in the area of Genesis and the age of the earth issue.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF MORELAND'S BOOK

The strengths of this book are multifaceted starting first in the area of philosophy of science where he shows how Christianity and science can interact. The book is also apologetically sophisticated as he captures the key contemporary issues that hinder the making of disciples, and provides models in how to give arguments and counter arguments meticulously. Moreover, Moreland reveals penetrating insights into the interaction between Christianity and science by considering the epistemic insights both obtain. Clearly, Moreland's philosophical ability applied apologetically is both adept and adroit.

The weaknesses of the book seem to be the flipside of the strengths. That is, sometimes the arguments are so involved and meticulous that the philosophically untrained will at times get confused, which makes following his thought very laborious. Having said that, unlike *The Case For Christ* by Lee Strobel, or *More Than a Carpenter* by Josh McDowell, which the non-specialist can readily understand, this book is easier understood if one has a philosophy background of sorts. Nevertheless, even if one does not have such a background, mining the gems can still be had.

Scaling the Secular City is no easy read, and though written in the late 1980's, its current value can't be overstated. J.P. Moreland has given us a treasure house of insight as to how to rigorously wage war with the high priests of Western culture, especially those in academia. He has added to the arsenal of thought weaponry needed to articulate the Christian worldview in this post-Christian era we live in.

ⁱ Moreland, J.P., *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity*, Baker Book House, © 1987 by Baker Books

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, P. 11-12.

ⁱⁱⁱ "A **permissible** belief: a belief *P* is permissible in case believing *P* is just as warranted as believing non-*P*, or suspending judgment regarding *P* in light of the evidence. An **obligatory** belief: a belief *P* is obligatory if believing *P* has greater warrant than believing non-*P* or suspending judgment regarding *P* in light of the evidence." Pg.13

^{iv} I have chosen to skip the chapters on the New Testaments' historicity and the deity and resurrection of Christ because apologetically, these are my greatest strengths. Instead, I thought it more profitable for me to focus on arguments that would make my apologetic arsenal more robust. Hence, my focus is on chapter's 1, 2, and 7.

^v This argument receives its name from St. Thomas Aquinas the theologian/philosopher (1225-1274) P. 16.

^{vi} A necessary being, is a being that could not cease to exist if it actually does exist.

^{vii} This receives its name from the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716).

^{viii} That is, for anything that exists, there must be some reason, purpose, or some rational context, why it exists rather than not exist. P. 17.

^{ix} The term *kalam* refers to Arabic philosophy or theology. Popular among Arabic philosophers in the middle Ages, this argument was widely rejected in its time by Christians, largely due to Aquinas who was Aristotelian in his philosophy. However, St. Bonaventure, a contemporary of Aquinas, saw and extensively argued for the arguments' soundness P. 18.

^x "The present moment has as its ultimate chain of causal antecedents the entire history of the cosmos. If any past event has not already been actualized, then the present could not have occurred. This means that the past is actual and contains a specifiable, determinate number of events. This chain of events must have had a first member. Without a first member, there would be no second, third, or *n*th member in the chain where the *n*th member is the present event. A causal sequence leading up to an event must have a first member and a determinate number of members in the sequence, since the entire sequence is already actual. So if the past is actually infinite, the present moment could not have been caused; that is, it could not have come to be" Pp.28-29.