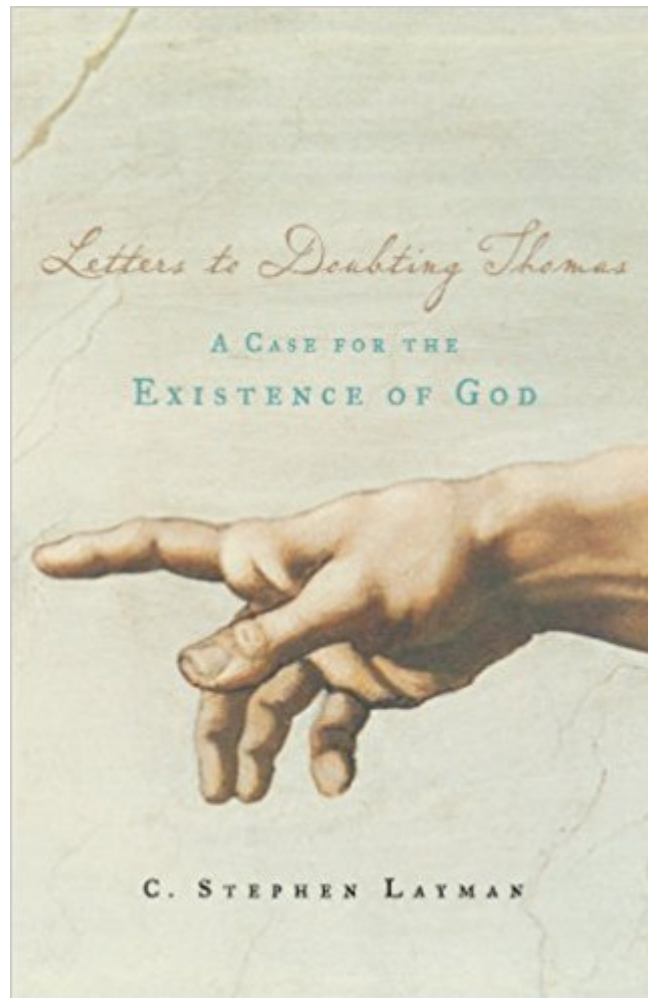




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Letters To Doubting Thomas: A Case For The Existence Of God



Synopsis

Arguments for or against God's existence can be intense, complex, and disconcerting; in fact, they often raise more questions than they answer. In *Letters to Doubting Thomas: A Case for the Existence of God*, C. Stephen Layman offers an innovative approach to the debate--a way to organize a seeming multitude of related claims and ideas--bringing clarity to a discussion that is often mired in confusion. *Letters to Doubting Thomas* explores the evidence for the existence of God through an exchange of fictionalized letters between two characters--Zachary, a philosopher (and believer), and Thomas, a layperson (and doubter) who appeals to Zachary for help in sorting out his own thoughts about God. Point by point, Zachary leads Thomas through a highly readable comparison of Naturalism (the belief that there is no God and that ultimate reality is physical reality) and Theism (the idea that there is an almighty, perfectly good God). Incorporating recent developments in philosophy, each exchange of letters addresses one complex philosophical issue, breaking it down into manageable units. Topics covered include free will, religious experience, the cosmological argument, the fine-tuning design argument, the problem of evil, divine foreknowledge and human freedom, the ontological argument, the divine command theory of ethics, and a moral argument for God's existence. As the dialogue proceeds, Zachary develops a cogent, cumulative case for Theism over Naturalism, while Thomas raises critical questions all along the way. Featuring a unique format and lucid writing style, *Letters to Doubting Thomas* is ideal for courses in the philosophy of religion and accessible to students with little or no background in philosophy. It is also engaging reading for professors, theologians, and anyone interested in the question of the existence of God.

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Customer Reviews

"This is the best book of its kind that I have ever seen--a significant accomplishment and a major contribution. There is a substantial need for works on this subject that are accessible and engaging for everyday readers and undergraduates, but without compromising the integrity of the philosophical arguments. Letters to Doubting Thomas does both."--Noel Hendrickson, James Madison University

"The book is exceptionally clearly written. It presents difficult arguments and concepts without undue technicality, but without sacrificing accuracy. It is a fresh, lively, up-to-date defense of theism."--Wesley Morriston, University of Colorado, Boulder

C Stephen Layman is Professor of philosophy at Seattle Pacific University.

"Letters to Doubting Thomas" offers a concise, careful argument for God's existence. The broad structure of the argument is hardly original: basically, the book contends that certain features of the world -- the existence of contingent beings, free will, the so-called fine-tuning of the universe, moral rules, and so forth -- are better explained by theism than by naturalism. However, many of the twists and turns are new and thought-provoking. In particular, the book makes a smart move at the very beginning by invoking religious experience as evidence that theism is not an ad hoc hypothesis at odds with our "background information" about the world. Having demonstrated that theism has SOME prior probability, the book considers whether theism does a better job than naturalism in explaining free will, fine-tuning, etc. The author doesn't pretend to give a knock-down proof of God's existence. However, he does make a strong case that theism has more explanatory power than naturalism, its main intellectual rival. The book is clearly written and logically organized. That said, it is not unsophisticated and it is NOT for beginners in philosophy. The argument has many steps and I suspect the book needs to be read twice before it can be fully appreciated. I plan to read it again.

Even being a vigorous atheist, I myself have to say that Layman's book is a very good introductory book on arguments in favor of theism, and one I would recommend to atheists and theists alike. Layman defends the broad theistic conception of God that isn't bogged down by doctrinal messages as many other books on God's existence tend to be. Layman's discussion of basic principles of logic and the inference to the best explanation were pretty good as well. Additionally, Layman's writing

style is clear and engaging. One downside, for me, was the book's layout. The structure is essentially, as the title suggests, a letter between two friends. While this style was charming at first, it quickly got annoying as the conversational banter occasionally distracted me from Layman's presentation of the arguments.

This is the first book I've ever read that has really convinced me to reevaluate many of my beliefs. Layman presents some really good arguments I had never heard before. I really enjoyed the humility in his approach. He doesn't pretend to offer an irrefutable case for Theism and acknowledges that no such case exists. He merely presents some arguments that support his belief that Theism does a reasonably better job of explaining our world than Naturalism. I have very little experience with philosophy but none of his arguments seemed too difficult to grasp although they certainly require some reflection to fully absorb.

Stephen Layman of Seattle Pacific University has penned a spirited series of letters, between fictional correspondents Thomas and Zach, touching on various aspects of the philosophy of religion. As motivation for the exchange, Layman's Zach sets himself the task of convincing Thomas that "theism" - which he defines as belief in the necessary existence of a unique, perfectly good and omnipotent being - is a more convincing hypothesis than "naturalism" - the belief that there exists nothing beyond the physical world. Together the pair explore a number of the factors that have traditionally been held to support or undermine the two positions, including mystical experience, the problem of necessary existence, cosmological fine-tuning, the question of free will, the problem of natural and moral evil, the appearance of design in nature, and the Euthyphro dilemma. Zach's initial statement of the issues surrounding each topic is in most cases clear and even-handed, and for this reason alone the book offers a useful introduction to the philosophy of religion for the freshman student and casual reader alike. Layman's dialog format also helps bring to life material that would otherwise often be technical and dull. However, as each chapter develops Zach's balance quickly falls away to be replaced by a one-sided defense of theism, and Thomas rarely points out the many weaknesses and inconsistencies in his arguments (the only major exception has Thomas shooting down Zach's first attempt at framing an ontological argument for the existence of God in Chapter 9). Many of the rhetorical maneuvers Zach uses - such as appealing to the extreme claim that only a perfectly good creator can guarantee human cognitive reliability to stave off suggestions that God is morally indifferent, or insisting that naturalism cannot explain evil because it cannot explain life at all - smack more of apologetics than mainstream philosophy. And Zach's solution of

the problem of evil commits him to the odd belief that (some) animals will experience life after death "if God's purposes [for them] are not fulfilled prior to death" [p. 202], a proposition that few theologians would likely embrace. Moreover, Layman's Zach seems to be unaware that naturalists play this particular philosophical game with quite different ground rules. At one point in Chapter 8, Zach concludes a passage critical of naturalism's failure so far to explain the origin of life with the hedging remark "Let me hasten to add that if life did arise from natural causes, there is no reason for Theists to deny this" [pp. 211-212]. Far from being a point in favor of theism, most naturalists would regard this as a black mark against it. As the mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace famously retorted more than 200 years ago, "the precise difficulty with the hypothesis [of a creator]" is that "it explains everything, but predicts nothing".

In a day and age where sound bytes and cliches dominate it's nice to see a book that really makes you think. If you don't have much of a background in philosophy the book can seem daunting at times but as with all things worthwhile in the end hard work is rewarded. The author focuses his book on the issue of whether Naturalism or Theism is a better explanation of reality. In my opinion each hypothesis has its good and bad points. I don't think in the end there is a clear winner but at least I have a much better understanding of how to evaluate these two positions.

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