

Denice K. Leslie  
Christmas Eve  
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**A Question of Faith: <sup>1</sup>‘What Do You Say to Someone Who says ‘There is no God.’?’**

The carol says it so well, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” Such is the certitude of our faith as we celebrate the birth of Christ this hushed Christmas Eve. The beauty of the season, the glorious music, the candlelight and communion with the lovely ending of Silent Night, — every face aglow with the light of small tapers—How I look forward to this holy night.

There is simply nothing else like it for us as believers, enveloped as we are in a peace in our knowing, a trust that surpasses the confusion and conflict of the surrounding world akin to what we experience in the presence of a sleeping infant. A sense of amazed grace and certainty about the love of God at work in our world. Awe and wonder, inner joy and contentment. We are on this night, as on no other, trusting children in the presence of God.

And yet there are so many who say, “There is no God.” And this is where the gap that opens between believer and non-believer feels like an unbridgeable gulf. What does one say after that??

A pastor we knew in our young adult years, Dick Wing had one of the best responses I’ve ever heard. When someone would say, “There is no God,” or ‘I don’t believe in God,” Dick would say, “Tell me about this God you don’t believe in.” He would listen and he said, nine times out of ten he would tell them, “You know, I don’t believe in THAT God either.”

Some don’t believe because they have misconceptions of a judgmental God, making a list and checking it twice to find out whose been naughty and nice—that kind of thing. Or they believe God is actually a big Santa Claus in the sky who hasn’t answered their prayers.

Other people say there is no God feel completely self sufficient and assume those who believe in a deity are in some way less secure. In need of a crutch to make it through life. Or are just naïve at best.

Or for the truly compassionate, it may be just the plain old sin of human nature—expressed just as ardently among true believers as among the so called heathen-- has made them not just skeptics but

disgusted cynics who dismiss religion as a bane to world harmony—a danger more than a benefit. Daily headlines about clerics on trial for years and years of unchecked molestation of children surely reinforces their convictions.

So what do you say to someone who says, “There is no God.”

For me belief in God—adult belief in God—well, when I grew to the age where I had to examine what I’d been taught as a child and decide for myself could best be summed up in one salutary conviction:

That there is someone in the universe who is not stupid. That doesn’t exactly sound like faith in human kind or compassion for my neighbors does it?

But it is, and far more than that it is a confession on my part that I don’t have all the answers to what ails the world. No human creature does. The truth is; it is supremely arrogant of any of us to assert there is no God. It implies we have the knowledge it takes to do life not only for ourselves but for others.

But I can’t think of a single human way of knowing sufficient enough or even when taken altogether that add up to the Source of knowledge.

Psychology can give us information about how and why we fear, feel happy, love or hate—and psycho therapy can help us unravel the unconscious ways in which our interactions and developmental stages of life impact our present behavior --and arrive at new skills, but, unfortunately, it can’t be passed on from one generation to another.

Education doesn’t have the power to make people moral. It doesn’t give them common sense or even a sense of self. Technology and science haven’t saved us—if anything these are neutral bodies of knowledge at the mercy of our desire and ability to do good or evil. Medicine may lengthen our lives—contribute to the quality of life, indeed create new life. But it doesn’t give us a soul. Or character. Or ethics. If it did, access to health care would be universal. History is a neglected body of knowledge that surely would discourage anyone from believing in progress within the human heart or mind when it comes to compassion and the common good. And religion has contributed greatly to that dim conclusion. While the proverb that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it is another way of commenting on the fallen state of human kind in general.

As a believer, I do not have hope in the human creature apart from the intervention of the

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<sup>1</sup> A question of faith submitted by Molly Lovgren, 2006.

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Source of life. That Intelligence that is multiple intelligences.

I often wonder if people who say there is no God have a better idea. If belief in God is naïve—belief in humankind is a far, far greater naiveté. Frankly, I can believe in people BECAUSE of God. The grace of God.

People used to say that not to believe in God means, we are alone in the universe—I’ve never bought that idea, having been raised on Star Trek—my goodness I’m sure there are lots of other creatures out there probably in multiple universes—no, its not about loneliness. Although I would be terribly lonely in my spirit, in terms of the meaning of life if there were no God.

I find the idea of a world without God to be a world completely without real power—and power fuels hope. The only power I know of that is powerful enough to change the human heart is not the power we have as human beings to split the atom—it is the power of redemption that is available through the door of forgiveness. Forgiveness first and foremost of oneself—which bottom line is all about self-acceptance and having grace for one’s limitations. If you are like me, this usually requires bumping up against something larger than me and my self-conceit. Acknowledgement of our limits comes when we are faced with the larger reality of that which is without limits—like a bright light revealing the fact we’ve been stumbling around in a dark room fully convinced that we’ve been navigating beautifully until the light goes on and we see the bruises for ourselves.

What Jesus models for us, what Jesus lived, what God imparts in Christ is not a magic bullet that immediately solves all the world’s ills—not an intellect that supplies all the answers—but a truth, a reality that we can not deny: *the world needs saving*. Lives need changing. My life needs changing. Governments need changing. Systems need changing. So much needs changing its overwhelming. Except to God.

What I say to people who say there is no God is this: I chose to be apart of the power that can change what can’t be changed. I chose to be apart of the only power I know that gives me hope in myself, in you, in our collective efforts and in the future beyond my lifetime. It’s the power to love. Not just the power OF love. The power TO love. The WILL to love. That is what God has that I don’t have all by

myself. And we don’t have together. To love in spite of. To love even when. To love bigger than...to love to the end...right into a new beginning, beyond death. To love with creativity and ingenuity and joyfully through tears of sorrow.

Nothing says that to the world quite like a new, helpless, vulnerable infant. That is the message of the manger: the preciousness and vulnerability and fragility of life accompanied by the amazing fact of its beauty and its persistence—Not ITS persistence—GOD’S PERSISTENCE.

I chose to persist with God. The choice to persist withOUT God is empty, hollow, hopeless and more of the same old same old. Suicide would be preferable and for many is! Or drugs or alcohol or violence or ruthless power ....need I say more?

I chose to love with God. I chose to put myself into the hands of God, to be used by God as part of God’s power at work in the world. I chose to enter into God because to do so is to enter into life—I chose to do what God did. God came to us. We see and know him in Jesus who invites us into Life. Who invites us to come to the world.

What do I say to people who say there is not God? What a pity?! No, I don’t say anything in the beginning. I just smile and go on with God and love them. Because it’s not about struggle or defense or devaluing those who question or deny—and it’s not about devaluing myself for not always knowing WHAT exactly to SAY.

In point of fact, it’s never been just about SAYING something. It’s always been about loving others as this story shows us: A believer reminisces:

“Alan and I met 20 years ago. We were both students at Cal Poly. I was a freshman and he was a junior. As a physics major, Alan was both intelligent and articulate. How Alan got on with his studies, however, is still a mystery to me; Alan was virtually blind. He could see well enough to get from one place to another all right, but when it came to reading it was a different story.

I can still see Alan, his face two inches away from some text, arduously pecking away at each of his assignments. Alan not only got straight A’s, but he later returned to Cal Poly as a physics instructor. Although Jewish in background, Alan was extremely skeptical of anything religious, especially Christian.

He was well read and well versed, and he argued his doubt like a scientist. Alan believed that

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Christianity was unable to pass the methodological requirements of science. He therefore pled agnostic; there simply wasn't enough evidence to warrant belief in God.

As a fledgling freshman, I, along with several others, tried to show him how, in fact, there was ample evidence for (God). Testament documents, but also the testimony of creation. But none of our arguments or thesis or examples were sufficient for Alan.

However, Alan was usually happy to discuss religious subjects, which always gave us believers some hope. But even more intriguing was how he liked to hang out with us. Alan didn't have many friends. He was rather unattractive, much too serious, and totally dependent on others for any kind of transportation.

But we tried to reach out to him as best we could. Alan knew he could come with us to the beach or on our recurrent midnight runs to Taco Bell. We tried to include Alan in anything we were doing. □□

One evening something happened. Though I wasn't there at the time, a bunch of friends had gotten together for a night on the beach. Alan came along to enjoy the sunset and roaring bonfire.

By the time the evening was over, Alan had made a commitment to follow Jesus. No one had spoken to him, nor did anyone even know. The next day he came to me to tell me what had happened. "But, Alan," I said, "what made you decide?"

"You see, Chuck," he told me, "it came to me last night, while everyone was singing around the fire, that whenever I am around you Christians I am happy. Even when we disagree with each other, I find myself liking to be with Christians." □

□ "But, Alan, I thought you were never going to become a believer unless there was first enough evidence. "Yes, Chuck," he replied, "and I still require it. But that's precisely why I now believe. It's how you all love each other that strikes me most. I never considered that evidence before.

A good scientist, you know, considers all the facts. I simply haven't found the love you Christians have for each other anywhere else. That's evidence

enough for me that Jesus is (the Christ of God)."<sup>2</sup> □□□-

In ancient times, a Roman remarked about the Christian sect: "See how they love each other." It was remarkable then. May it be remarkable now.

What makes that love possible? The love of God as expressed in Jesus whom we affirm to be God with us. O holy night! The stars are brightly shining, this is the night of the dear Savior's birth."

May we enter in to the new year persisting in the love of God, embracing the loveable and the unloveable, the believer and the non-believer, our friends and our enemies, the poor and them that mourn, as God has embraced us, with Good News of great joy for all the world. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Moore, "The Powerful Witness □ of Community," Beyond Argument, □ [www.gospelcom.net](http://www.gospelcom.net)