Jun 28, 2018 published
Jun 28, 2018 online
Apr 25, 2022 modified
Dec 3, 2025 accessed

The Axiom of Belief

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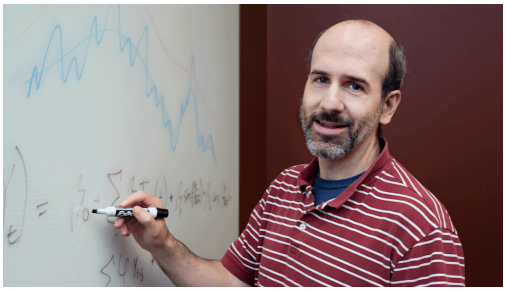
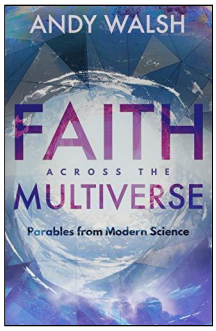
in **Faith Across the Multiverse**

https://doi.org/10.54739/tqvj



The Axiom of Belief

If math can function without being able to prove everything, perhaps other domains can as well. For example, what if we take belief in the God of the Bible to be axiomatic? Trying to deduce his existence from first principles has always felt a little backwards to me, since by nature he is first principles, the cornerstone anchoring everything else (Ephesians 2:20). Even the name he gives himself, usually translated in English as "I am that I am" (Exodus 3:14), strongly suggests a self-evident quality one looks for in an axiom.



This perspective provides us with an operational definition of faith. Instead of defining it in terms of dogma or rejection of evidence, let's say that faith is choosing a set of assumptions, or axioms, for understanding the world. And if you prefer, we can further refine this definition to state that faith is specifically choosing assumptions that either explicitly include a God or gods, or at least do not explicitly disallow the existence of such a being or beings. Many atheists and other areligious folks bristle at the idea of calling their choice of assumptions faith, and that's understandable given the general usage of the words. I don't see any need to insist on that broader definition of "faith," so long as we all understand that at some point we are all making a choice of assumptions, and that no particular set of assumptions is privileged

Assuming God rather than proving him might seem like dodging any requirement to provide evidence. Axioms can certainly be informed by evidence, and my belief in God is definitely informed by historical corroboration of the Bible. But axioms cannot themselves be deductively proven; as with pudding, the proof is in the tasting. I am primarily interested with what conclusions follow from my belief in God and how useful they are in my real life. This is comparable to the situation in geometry, where multiple geometries are logically and mathematically valid but the ones where parallel lines intersect are useful for describing a wider range of real world experiences.

This idea that God is not a provable conclusion but an axiomatic assertion, and just one possible axiom among several alternatives, may be uncomfortable for some believers, but I think this idea is consistent with the Bible. Take the refrain of Ecclesiastes: "Futile! Futile! ... Absolutely futile! Everything is futile!" The teacher who wrote the book is looking at the world around him and finding no

Dr. Andy Walsh is publishing his first book, Faith Across the Multiverse: Parables from Modern Science.

Dr. Walsh is computational biologist, just like me. Early in our training, computational biologists become intellectual omnivores and polyglots. To be successful, we must weave between several fields. This comes through in his book, which is divided into four languages, that of (1) math, (2) physics, (3) biology, and (4) computer science. There are two other languages that seamlessly weave through the rest, the language of (5) theology and of (6) comic books. The appendix includes suggested readings in all these areas. Tellingly, the longest suggested reading list of all is of comic books.

This book is playful, smart, grounded, mathematical, and a must read for those of who care about the public square. Dr. Walsh presents a public theology of science. This is not a defense of the faith, but something far more coherent. Unlike nearly all books in the theology-science dialogue, Andy can't help but mention Jesus almost everywhere. Walking a challenging theological line, he correctly uses parables to explain and expound in the language of science what is know already about Jesus, rather than using science to define Jesus. The parables of the scientific world expose a deeper reality we find in Him.

In this excerpt, Dr. Walsh asks whether God is the axiom or a contingent fact. In my view, this explains what it means to make Jesus the cornerstone, the axiom of belief. I hope there will be more to come.

meaning or value intrinsic in anything he finds there. Rather than descend into nihilism, he ultimately chooses to build a framework for understanding the world and living in it based on a belief in God. He does so, not out of the logical undeniability of the premise, but because he found a life so constructed to be fruitful. Usefulness is also the criterion Paul applies to the Bible, describing scripture as "useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

When Jesus talks about his parables, he observes of some people, "Although they see they do not see, and although they hear they do not hear nor do they understand" (Matthew 13:13). Jesus does not expect everyone to accept his teachings; to some they will be nonsensical. Perhaps different outcomes arise because some have chosen a way of interpreting the world that renders such teachings as nonsensical. In order for his audience to come to a particular conclusion based on a deductive argument, they would have to start from the same axioms. Jesus is acknowledging that they don't and so does not rely on deduction. Instead, Jesus describes the kingdom of God that follows from his view of the world, and invites us to be a part of that kingdom. This is an appeal to the usefulness of his assumptions, not their completeness.

We've already seen one example where mismatched assumptions produce nonsense. In most cases, we assume words like who, what, or no one have a single meaning. When we encounter someone assuming instead that any word can be used as a name, their statements seem nonsensical. "No he didn't, no one did" is not a sensible response to the question "Who wrote this book?" when we adopt the usual axioms of English. But to someone crazy enough to choose the alternate foundation, well, that answer is perfectly cromulent. Fortunately, no one is that obnoxious.

Mismatched assumptions play into the plot of Raiders of the Lost Ark as well. In order to find the ark, one needs to place a bejeweled staff in a particular place on a map at a particular time, and refracted sunlight will mark the spot. Instructions for the height of the staff are written on the ornamental headpiece containing the jewel. The Germans assume their one-sided copy of the headpiece is complete, but Marion and Indy have the original with details from both sides. The Germans construct a perfectly functional staff and are able to get a location from the process, but because their assumptions don't match reality they wind up digging in the wrong place.

Henry McCoy has a similar problem with mismatched assumptions. He assumes that natural causes which can be described with science are the opposite of anything religious or theological and that God or gods only manifest via the supernatural. Therefore, he feels compelled to reject religious concepts in spite of his own personal experience with various deities. But the dichotomy he believes in is not required by the Bible, which is comfortable associating natural causes with God. We read that "the heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1). And elsewhere, we find the claim that "since the creation of the world [God's] invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through what has been made" (Romans 1:20). Drawing a sharp line between what God does and what we can understand through science isn't strictly necessary.

At the same time, I don't think these verses require us to conclude that creation itself indisputably proves God's existence. If the world was such that a belief in God was the only logical conclusion, or the only logically consistent way of understanding the world, then God's work is done from the beginning and he has no need to communicate any further. But this is not the story that the Bible tells. Instead, it indicates that God repeatedly reveals himself personally, culminating in his incarnation in Jesus. Yes, there are other purposes of the incarnation, but one of them is to enable knowledge of God. As Jesus himself says, "If you have known me, you will know my Father too. And from now on you do know him and have seen him" (John 14:7).

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