

## In Defense of Hitchens's Razor

John W. Loftus

In this chapter, I'm going to defend what has come to be known as *Hitchens's Razor*, which he stated as follows: "What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence."<sup>1</sup> The point Christopher Hitchens was making is that miracle claims asserted without any evidence can be dismissed. Period!

William of Ockham (1285–1349) had previously articulated what is known as *Ockham's Razor*, whereby "entities should not be multiplied without necessity" when it came to supernaturally caused miracles. According to Ockham, the best explanations are those that make the fewest assumptions, so simpler explanations are to be preferred over complex ones. This paved a pathway for modern scientific inquiry since the addition of supernatural entities adds unnecessary complexity into our scientific explanations.

One can see this in the work of Pierre-Simon de Laplace (1749–1827), a French mathematician, astronomer, and physicist, who wrote a five-volume work titled *Celestial Mechanics* (1799–1825). In it, he offered a complete mechanical interpretation of the solar system without reference to a god. Upon hearing of Laplace's work, legend has it that Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte said to him, "They tell me you have written this large book on the system of the universe, and have never even mentioned its creator." To which Laplace responded, "I had no need of that hypothesis."

Both *razors* are epistemological in nature, and both are important. *Ockham's Razor* has to do with *the burden of proof*. It's placed squarely on the person making miraculous claims, since they require additional entities. *Hitchens's Razor* has to do with *the need for objective evidence*. Lacking it, miracle claims can be dismissed out of hand without a second's thought. I think all reasonable people should agree with Ockham's Razor, which explains why scientists should not invoke a god to explain the complexity of the universe, the evolution of life, or the beginnings of life. I also think all reasonable people should agree with Hitchens's Razor. Without any objective evidence, miracle claims shouldn't be entertained, considered, believed, or even debunked. They should be dismissed out of hand.

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<sup>1</sup> Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 150.

To be clear, when we dismiss a miracle claim, we still have a responsibility to share the reasons why we dismiss it, depending on the numbers of believers in a society who hold them and how much these beliefs are causing harm. We should do what judges do in a court case. They explain why the case is being dismissed so people can understand. Most of the time they simply say the objective evidence is not there. Judges almost never state the conditions under which they could be convinced, nor specify the amount of evidence needed. They only need to say that the case doesn't meet the evidential standards required. All we have to show is why the needed objective evidence doesn't exist, and that should be the end of it. There wouldn't be a reason to respond in much depth at all. Plus, depending on the circumstances ridicule is even appropriate.<sup>2</sup>

There are basically two types of evidence. *One type is objective evidence*, the kind that both a prosecutor and defense attorney can agree on in a criminal murder court case, such as cell phone texts, audio messages, location records, 911 recordings, surveillance videos, an autopsy report, fingerprints, blood on the murder weapon, DNA evidence, and so on. What doesn't count as objective evidence are subjective feelings, inner voices, dreams, visions, or third person reports of them. Without any evidence, the court case is dismissed by the judge, just as surely as former twice impeached President Donald Trump's many attempts in court to overthrow a fair democratic election were dismissed in 2021.

*The other type is the evidence of testimony* (or testimonial evidence), the kind that comes from confirmed eyewitnesses who actually saw or heard something relevant to the case, who also honestly tells what was seen or heard. Some people argue that by itself, testimony isn't evidence of anything until the evidence shows that an alleged witness is in fact an honest eyewitness. I'm not so sure about that. Nonetheless, I am sure that establishing honest eyewitness testimony comes from sufficient corroborating objective evidence, and/or the lack of corroborating evidence that shows otherwise. Negligible evidence like circumstantial evidence, and in some exceptional cases, hearsay testimony, are not completely irrelevant.

On top of both the objective and the evidence of testimony are the cases to be made by the prosecutor and the defense attorney. They are both tasked with making sense of all the evidence. The prosecutor's task is to show that the total evidence is best explained by the guilt of the accused, while the defense attorney's task is to show that the total evidence is best explained by the innocence of the accused. They each seek to show that their account of the evidence makes more sense.

In this chapter I'll defend two main points, both of which are important for an over-all case against Christianity: 1) The Christian faith has no objective evidence on its behalf, and 2) The Christian faith makes no sense at all, even if there is some second-hand hearsay testimonial evidence, and/or circumstantial evidence for it.

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<sup>2</sup> See Loftus, *Unapologetic*, 211–35.

When referring to the Christian faith, I mean a diversity of faiths that identify as being Christian. These are sects run by fundamentalists, evangelicals, progressives, and liberals. What I will argue applies more to fundamentalists and evangelicals, but it should apply to some degree to them all, including other theistic faiths to some degree.

### **Main Point One:**

#### **The Christian Faith Doesn't Have Objective Evidence on Its Behalf**

The Christian faith is established and reinforced by miracles, as reported in the Bible and believed by church people. I cannot deal with every miracle claim here. Others have done an excellent job of researching many of them, especially The Amazing James Randi,<sup>3</sup> Joe Nickell, the only full-time paranormal investigator,<sup>4</sup> and Skeptics Society's Michael Shermer.<sup>5</sup> So I refer to them, and to others.

What I have investigated in great depth shows that the miracle claims in ancient "sacred" books like the Bible do not have any objective evidence for them, much less sufficient objective evidence. But because Christians believe in ancient miracle claims in the Bible without any objective evidence, they will also believe modern day miracle claims without any objective evidence. At that point, believing in miracles comes easy for gullible people.

Theistic believers do at least agree that all of the miracle claims establishing religions *that contradict their own* should be dismissed due to the lack of objective evidence. As those other miracles go, so also goes one's own miracles.

I've championed an outsider test for faith to get believers to be honest about their own religion. To be honest means treating one's own miracles the same way all others are treated, with no special pleadings or double-standards. As a non-Mormon, try to believe Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon from non-existent Golden Plates; as a non-Catholic, try believing the Marian apparitions at Lourdes, France, in 1858; as a non-Muslim, try believing Mohammed flew to the heavens on a winged horse; as a non-Buddhist, try believing Buddha emitted flames from his upper body while gushing forth water from his lower body; as a non-Hindu, try believing Lord Shiva drank poison to save the universe. We all dismiss miracles out of hand because they lack objective evidence, and rightly so. Now go do likewise to your own miracles.

#### **A) Does God Do Miracles?**

From the outset, I'm forced to admit we cannot, technically speaking, completely rule out the remote possibility of a god who exists and performs

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<sup>3</sup> Randi, *Encyclopedia of Claims*.

<sup>4</sup> Nickell, *The Science of Miracles*.

<sup>5</sup> Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things*.

miracles. God may do them secretly, privately, subjectively, despite the fact that no reasonable person should believe anyone else's testimony that one occurred.

This technicality won't grant believers any hope to pry open the floodgates to their sect-specific miracle assertions though, for at least two good reasons.

1) If a god does miracles, believers must show why organ failures, viruses, and the things we eat are always the best explanations for why we get sick, rather than divine curses. Conversely, believers must also show why the best explanation for their healings comes from a doctor-prescribed medicine or a vaccine, rather than prayers, which don't work any better than chance. The extremely strong trend is that science is working, whereas god is not. As science advances, god retreats. Ockham's Razor calls for simpler explanations. It cuts off these god explanations as adding unnecessary complexity by adding additional entities. God explanations are simply substituting one mystery (a god) for another one (why an unexplained event took place). Miracle explanations have increasingly become unnecessary in the modern world of medicine because they never worked in the first place.

2) If a perfectly good, all-powerful god exists who performs miracles, it's reasonable to conclude there would be no horrendous suffering of any kind in the world. All it takes to get this point is to consider the underwater earthquake that caused the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, killing a quarter of a million adults and children (along with animals). If any event deserved god's intervention, that one did. If god stopped the underwater earthquake *before it happened*, and subsequently performed a perpetual miracle to keep it from ever happening again, none of us would ever know he intervened. So, the very fact that it took place means god doesn't do miracles. For if god doesn't stop the most egregious horrific cases of suffering, there's no reason to think he stops any lesser kinds of suffering either. If god doesn't do anything about horrendous suffering, then s/he doesn't do any miracles to stop horrendous suffering at all. This is an undeniable fact that honest reasonable believers must acknowledge.

## **B) Testimonial Evidence to Miracles is Not Objective Evidence.**

In my anthology, *The Case against Miracles*, I wrote the chapter "Extraordinary Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence." Following David Hume, I described three types of claims about the objective world and the evidence needed to accept them.

*1) Ordinary claims require only a small amount of fair evidence.*

These are claims about events that take place regularly every day and, as such, require only the testimonial evidence of someone who is trustworthy under normal circumstances. If a trustworthy person tells us there was a car accident on Main Street, we would accept it. There's no reason not to.

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