

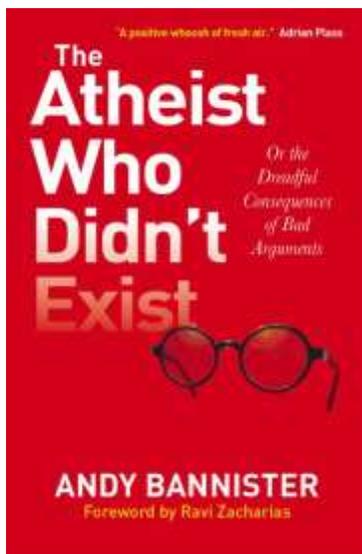


KAREN CAMPBELL
M E D I A

With Atheism on the rise, Christian academic Andy Bannister writes a book that “Clears Away the Weeds of Bad Arguments” and “Tugs on the Loose Threads on the Cardigan of Skepticism”

From the Director of Ravi Zacharias Ministries Canada, The Atheist Who Didn't Exist is a clever, Jon Stewart-esque look at one of the big debates of our time

The Pew Research Center announced earlier this year that atheists in America have nearly doubled in just seven years, but Andy Bannister has been on the receiving end of anti-faith arguments for longer than that. Now the Director and Lead Apologist for Ravi Zacharias



Ministries in Toronto, Bannister grew up in England and draws on his experiences there – from the advertising campaign that saw the slogan, “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life” plastered across London double-decker buses, to the meteoric rise of a little-known scientist named Richard Dawkins.

Having spent most of his life in post-Christian Britain with what would eventually become a vocal strain of non-belief called “New Atheism,” Bannister – who also has a PhD in Islamic Studies from the London School of Theology – has a unique background from which to grapple (often with tongue firmly planted in cheek, though always with serious aims) with the likes of Dawkins and others.

In *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* (Monarch Books, September 12, 2015), Bannister takes a late-night satirical approach to his topic, bringing some light-hearted yet often hard-hitting satire together with weighty, academic insights. The result is as silly as it is serious, as irreverent as it is respectful. Blending comedy, satire and popular philosophy, the book has been described as “*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* meets C. S. Lewis.”

Each chapter begins with a fabricated or embellished story meant to illustrate some larger point (for instance, in chapter two, “The Scandinavian Skeptic,” a friend of Bannister’s refuses to believe in the existence of Sweden, which ultimately leads Bannister to argue that Scandinavian skepticism, is, like atheism, a belief system and not just an absence of one).

Elsewhere, Bannister pokes holes in common arguments used against people of faith – from the “one god less argument” (Christians don’t believe in “Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal,



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Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further,” Richard Dawkins has said) to the idea faith is psychological wish-fulfillment or the result of existential dread.

More philosophical topics are also broached, from the idea that science has buried God under a pile of rubble, to the belief that we don’t need God to be good. But perhaps none is more poignant than when Bannister argues that a universe without God brings with it a number of consequences. “Many things stand upon belief in God, such as the idea that human beings have intrinsic value,” he writes. “Ethics, law, and human rights theory are based on the belief that you are not just a random collection of atoms, but a person with dignity and worth. From where did this idea originate? It came from the Bible’s teaching that human beings are made ‘in the image of God.’ Reject God by all means, but then, as Friedrich Nietzsche noted, you must start again with new foundations.”

Bannister ends *The Atheist Who Didn’t Exist* with an passionate appeal for the historicity and plausibility of the Jesus story, and for Christianity as a faith that – despite its adherents’ frequent shortcomings – answers questions of meaning, dignity and purpose more satisfactorily than atheism. The book also closes with an emphasis that everybody has faith of some kind: atheists as much as Christians. “‘Faith is the opposite of reason!’ may make a great bumper sticker or tweetable moment [but] it fails spectacularly,” Bannister writes. “Try if you wish to live a totally faith-free existence, but that will require doing nothing, going nowhere, and trusting no one. Faith is part of the bedrock of human experience.”



Andy Bannister holds a PhD in Islamic Studies from the London School of Theology. He has spoken and taught at universities across the U.S., Canada and the U.K. on both Islam and philosophy, and is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Other Faiths at the Melbourne School of Theology in Australia. He is the author of *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur’an* and currently serves as the Director for Ravi Zacharias International Ministries in Canada. Originally from the U.K., he lives in Toronto with his family.

<http://bit.ly/andybannister>

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Suggested Interview Questions for Andy Bannister

- 1) How did growing up in England, which is more secular than the U.S., prepare you for the work you now do, arguing for the reasonableness of faith in God?
- 2) Why did you use comedy as a key part of the book? What role does humor and satire play in conversations about faith and doubt, Christianity and atheism?
- 3) What are some of the most common arguments you hear used against religious believers, and how should Christians respond?
- 4) Why do we need *another* book on atheism? Hasn't everything that can be said been written?
- 5) When it comes to responding to atheists' arguments, there's always the danger that people of faith will get drawn into unhelpful and unwinnable arguments with opponents, or worse, cement someone more firmly in their atheism. What should Christians do to create a positive dialogue with atheists?
- 6) What's your personal experience been both on social media and in person in terms of debating with atheists or engaging them in conversation?
- 7) What two or three things do you wish every Christian knew about atheism?
- 8) A recent Pew Research Center survey shows that the percentage of people who identify as "atheists" in America has nearly doubled in just seven years, while the overall religious landscape in the U.S. shows more people now identifying as religiously unaffiliated, making the U.S. look more like the UK and Western Europe. What do you make of this secular trend? What are the causes?
- 9) Does increasing secularization demand more intellectual engagement on the part of Christians? If so, how do you see this book contributing to that?
- 10) In your conversations with atheists, what are the biggest and most common misconceptions they have of Christians, and do these misconceptions vary between the UK, Canada and the U.S., or are they relatively consistent?
- 11) You have a background in Islamic Studies, which begs the question, to what extent – if any – does inter-faith work play in responding to atheism?
- 12) Due to the fact that England has long been a more secular country than the U.S. in terms of church attendance and the percentage of people who identify as Christians, what advice would you give Christians in the U.S. for sharing their faith with neighbors as those neighbors become increasingly secular and perhaps disinterested – or even disdainful – of Christian faith?

To schedule an interview with Andy Bannister, contact Karen Campbell at
karen@karencampbellmedia.com or 616-309-4390



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Suggested Tweets for *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* by Andy Bannister

Jon Stewart meets C.S. Lewis meets Richard Dawkins in #TheAtheistWhoDidntExist
[\(click to tweet\)](#)

Humor meets philosophy meets satire meets theology in #TheAtheistWhoDidntExist
[\(click to tweet\)](#)

Does Sweden exist? Is atheism really a religion? Humor meets big questions in
#TheAtheistWhoDidntExist [\(click to tweet\)](#)

The Loch Ness Monster helps answer Richard Dawkins in #TheAtheistWhoDidntExist
[\(click to tweet\)](#)

By all means be an atheist: but if so, be a *thought through* atheist #TheAtheistWhoDidntExist
[\(click to tweet\)](#)

Tugging on the loose threads of the cardigan of atheism: #TheAtheistWhoDidntExist
[\(click to tweet\)](#)

Good minus God? Meaning without Religion? Science sans superstition? #TheAtheistWhoDidntExist
[\(click to tweet\)](#)

Humor is a powerful tool to gently unpick bad arguments: #TheAtheistWhoDidntExist
[\(click to tweet\)](#)

Finding the "God vs Atheism" debate boring and stale? Check out #TheAtheistWhoDidntExist
[\(click to tweet\)](#)

Everybody has faith: atheists as well as Christians. Find out why in #TheAtheistWhoDidntExist
[\(click to tweet\)](#)



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Excerpts from *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* by Andy Bannister

"The aim of this book is simple: to clear away some of the weeds of bad arguments so that a more sensible dialogue can be had. Because here's the thing: the "God Question" is arguably the most important question that anybody can think about. Whether or not God exists is not a mere intellectual curiosity, up there with "What's the ten trillionth digit of Pi?" or "Did Newton invent the cat flap?", but a question that has implications for every area of our lives, not least because it is directly tied to the question of meaning: is there something that we are meant to *be*, or is a life spent playing computer games and eating pizza as valid as one spent fighting poverty or serving the cause of justice?" (27-28)

"One of the most famous atheists...Friedrich Nietzsche...wrote, 'When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident...Christianity is a system, a whole view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands.' Nietzsche is pointing out that just as if you dynamite the foundations of your home...the roof will collapse...so too with God. Many things stand upon belief in God, such as the idea that human beings have intrinsic value. Ethics, law, and human rights theory are based on the belief that you are not just a random collection of atoms, but a person with dignity and worth. From where did this idea originate? It came from the Bible's teaching that human beings are made 'in the image of God.' Reject God by all means, says Nietzsche, but then you must start again with new foundations..." (38-39)

"*Everybody* has beliefs that are central for them, beliefs that cause actions, beliefs that define them, beliefs that have implications. And for those kinds of beliefs we can be asked to give reasons. If you are an atheist who wishes to duck that responsibility, then I can do no more than to commend you to one of your own, Christopher Hitchens, who said: "That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence." Quite right too." (46)

"If the universe really is meaningless and pointless, then you and I are here not because of any higher purpose but simply because a long chain of our ancestors managed to reproduce successfully for generation upon generation, stretching unbroken all the way back across four billion years to things that first wriggled in the primordial soup. Yet if this is true, we're faced with an exceedingly puzzling mystery: namely, why it is that we yearn for more? What is it about human beings that makes us the only the creatures who ask "Why"? Give a cow a field of grass and an occasional bull, and she's happy for life. Human beings, on the other hand, seem disconcertingly dissatisfied with just material things. So then, what was it that possessed evolution, normally so thrifty with its juggling of genes, to equip us and us alone among the animal kingdom with desires not just for cake and copulation, but for value, meaning, purpose, and significance?" (184-185)

"...if the Gospels are true....they proclaim that all is not acidic skepticism, or unyielding despair, or hopeless lostness, or the utter blackness of the void, but that everything that is broken, including us, *can* be mended. They boldly declare that, if these stories are true, if Jesus is who he claimed to be then because of his history and in spite of ours we *can* have a future." (232-233)