

# Secularism

## A Religion Profile from International Students, Inc.

### Secularism: An Overview

#### Number of Adherents

Demographer Davit Barrett estimates that there are 150 million atheists and 768 million nonreligious people in the world. The combined total comes to more than 918 million people (Barrett).

#### Secularism Among the Nations

In more than 40 countries, atheists or nonreligious make up more than 10 percent of the population (World Christian Database). The following are just a few of those countries: Australia, Britain, Canada, China, Cuba, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, North Korea, Mongolia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Russia, Sweden, Uruguay and Vietnam.

#### Defining the Terms

An “atheist” is one who says there is sufficient evidence to show that God does not exist. An “agnostic” is one who says there is insufficient evidence to know whether or not God exists. The “functional atheist” is one who is apathetic concerning God’s existence. For the purposes of this profile, the term “secularist” will be used to indicate all three.

#### The Rise of Secularism

##### The Renaissance (Ca. A.D. 1400-1600)

In the early 1400s, Gutenberg invented the printing press with movable type. As a result, the writings of the past became much more accessible to the public, and this increased accessibility sparked two responses. One was a greater awareness of and obedience to God’s Word, which led to the Reformation. The other was a pursuit of humanistic themes, which drew upon the writings of Greek and Roman thinkers and served as the foundation for the Renaissance. The word “renaissance” means “rebirth,” and that which was reborn was man’s sense of independence and individualism.

Toward the end of the Renaissance, the modern method of empirical science began to develop. The key players were Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543), Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). Although it may seem ironic now, each of these men believed in the Christian God. They viewed science as studying the handiwork of an almighty Creator and discerning His natural laws. Galileo considered God to have written two “books”: the Bible and nature (Hummel, p. 106).

Contrary to popular belief, the cause for the diversion between Christianity and science originated not with the Church but with the university professors who were threatened by Galileo’s revolutionary ideas. These professors were steeped in the Greek scientific method, which included observation to a small extent, but mostly explained the workings of nature through rational deduction from first principles, or assumptions, an entire view of the universe had been built up. Consequently, the professors embraced such misconceptions as the sun having no imperfections, the moon being a perfectly smooth sphere that shone with its own light, and the earth alone having a moon since the earth was at the center of the universe. Galileo’s recently invented telescope quickly demonstrated the incorrectness of such assumptions (Hummel, pp. 91-94).

Not willing to be thwarted by Galileo, the professors decided to make the controversy religious rather than academic (Hummel, p. 92). They argued that the heliocentric (sun-centered) view contradicted scripture (e.g., Psalm 104:22 says, “The sun rises.” Therefore, the sun must revolve around stationary earth). In the face of what at that time appeared to be a genuine contradiction between scripture and the heliocentric theory, the theologians of the Roman Catholic Church had no choice but to condemn Galileo’s views, because the conflict had challenged the authority of the Church.

As a result of that controversy, the schism between reason and faith had begun. There were now two apparently irreconcilable sources of truth: the church and science.

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In the way that philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650) responded to a movement called Pyrrhonism (named after the Greek skeptic Pyrrho, 365-275 B.C.), he contributed to the trend of moving the source of truth away from the Church. Pyrrhonism was a form of utter skepticism whereby everything was doubted. As a result, nothing could be known for certain. The significance of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am") is that he had used Pyrrhonists' own method of questioning everything in order to establish one fact: The doubter could be certain of his own existence (Brown, p. 184). Descartes had no intention of being a religious reformer; nevertheless, his new method of approaching truth shook Christianity to its core. It was used to shift the basis for certainty from God to man.

### **The Enlightenment (ca. A.D. 1600-1800)**

The success of science ushered in the Age of Enlightenment. During the Enlightenment, people began to elevate science to being the ultimate test for truth.

The discoveries of the laws of science by men like Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Robert Boyle (1627-1692), and Isaac Newton (1642-1727) gave support to the analogy that the universe was like a machine. Such an analogy, when misapplied, tended to dismiss the need to believe in a God who sustained the universe.

Other challenges to the Christian worldview came through philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), David Hume (1711-1776), and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Hobbes drew out the implications of a materialistic philosophy in which matter was the ultimate stuff of the universe. Hume, in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, presented arguments against the veracity of the miracle accounts in the Bible. And Kant encouraged people to assert the power of their own intellect and to throw off the shackles of ecclesiastical authority (Brown, pp. 286-287).

Still, even with the onslaught of the Enlightenment, most people in the nineteenth century, including scientists, believed in the existence of a rational and personal Creator. The reason was that there was no alternative theory to that of creation that adequately explained the existence of an orderly universe. That changed with Charles Darwin.

### **The Modern Age (ca. 1800 to present)**

In 1859, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. In it, Darwin theorized that life forms had resulted from natural, random processes and not from the pre-design of an intelligent Creator. The gap that had previously been filled with a religious faith in a Creator could now, through the theory of evolution, be filled with a purely scientific and

naturalistic explanation. Many scientists became enthralled with the theory of evolution, and began to apply it to every field of study, including history (Marx) and psychology (Freud).

The result of Darwinism was that, for many, the belief in God became an unnecessary hypothesis. If mankind was to find solutions for its problems and hope for its future, people must look inward, not toward God.

## **The Beliefs of Secularism**

### **The Denial of God**

The most fundamental tenet of secularism is the denial of the existence of the supernatural. According to secularism, belief in God is nothing more than a projection of man's own thoughts and desires. God did not make man in His image; instead, man made God in his image.

### **The Denial of Miracles**

After having denied God's existence, it's logical then to conclude that miracles—the result of God's intervention—are not possible. The miracles recorded in the Bible, secularists surmise, must have been the embellishments of the authors who were promoting their particular religious agenda (Geisler and Brooks, ch. 5; Geisler, 1992).

### **The Fact of Evolution**

Secularists assert that the existence and complexity of the universe can be sufficiently explained through naturalistic principles as set forth in the theory of evolution. Personality and mind also have resulted from the evolutionary process and are sufficiently explained through the interaction of chemical and biological elements. Thus, there is no "ghost in the machine."

### **The Potential of Man**

Secularists see religion as being restrictive and escapist. Religion does nothing more than to assuage the fears of an ignorant people. If humanity is to survive, secularists say, mankind must face problems squarely and find the answers within itself, reason, and science. Secularism begins and ends with man.

Man will be able to face the issues squarely only when freed from the shackles of religion.

### **The Centrality of Science**

Secularists are confident that the scientific method of inquiry is the only reliable avenue by which to discover truth and knowledge. According to the secularistic point of view, there

## Secularism and Christianity Contrasted

Secularism	Christianity
<b>God</b>	
Matter, in one form or another, is all that has existed from eternity.	God alone is infinite and eternal. The material universe is finite and has not always existed. God created it out of nothing.
<b>Humanity</b>	
Humanity is by nature monistic in that man consists of only one substance: matter. Humanity represents the highest point of the gradual and random processes of evolution.	Humanity is by nature dualistic in that man consists of two substances: body and spirit. Humanity, being made in the image of God, represents the highest point of God's creation.
<b>Humanity's Problem</b>	
The problem is that humanity depends on the escapist promises of religion, rather than facing problems squarely and believing that humankind has the potential to create a world in which peace and justice will prevail.	The problem is that man has rebelled against a personal and holy God. As a result, man lives for himself and places hope in false gods, such as success, money, nature, science, education, etc.
<b>The Solution</b>	
The solution is in extending the scientific method of rational inquiry into all aspects of life, while at the same time maintaining a sense of compassion for the individual.	The solution is in man being restored to a right relationship with a holy God through faith in Jesus Christ. While Christianity encourages the rational inquiry of science, it opposes scientism, which goes beyond the limits of science in that it claims that the scientific method is a sufficient avenue to all truth.
<b>Jesus Christ</b>	
At most, Jesus was a good moral teacher. Because the biblical authors embellished the details of Jesus' life, though, we can be certain of very little concerning what is historically accurate.	Jesus was the very embodiment of God on earth. The Bible meets the qualifications for being authentic history. It records that Jesus lived, died for our sins, and rose from the dead.
<b>After Death</b>	
There is no personal survival after death.	There is personal survival after death, either to eternal life with God or eternal separation from Him.

is an irreconcilable antagonism between reason and faith, science and religion, empirical observation and revealed authority.

### The Stress on Relativity

Secularists deny that there is an absolute moral reference point beyond man (i.e., a holy God). They contend that humankind does not need an absolute moral standard beyond itself in order to have a sufficient foundation and motivation for moral behavior. Humanity is by nature good, and all that is needed to realize that innate goodness is education, not religious transformation.

### The Finality of Death

At death, the individual ceases to exist in any cohesive or conscious form. As the signers of The Humanist Manifesto II wrote, "There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body" (Lamont, p. 293).

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## Approaching Secularists

### Suggestions for Evangelism

#### What Kind of God Did the Student Reject?

Don't assume that all secularist international students have rejected the personal God of the Bible. Since they came from cultures influenced by various non-Christian religions, they might not have considered the possibility that a personal God who loves them exists. Ask questions to discern their concept of God.

#### Offer Evidence for God's Existence

In the following section, some evidences for God's existence is listed. Notice how each new bit of evidence tells us a little more about the nature of God—from Cause, to Intelligent Cause, to Moral Being, to Fulfiller of our Longings.

- **The Origin of the Universe and of Life**

The second law of thermodynamics says that while the total amount of energy remains constant (the first law), the availability of usable energy is constantly decreasing. Energy, then, inevitably moves toward a state where it is increasingly unusable and inaccessible. The inevitable cooling of a cup of hot tea typifies the constraints impressed by the second law.

What are the implications of the second law with respect to the origin of the universe? It means that the universe had a beginning. Why? Because if the universe has always existed, then an infinite amount of time would have already passed until this present moment. But this cannot be true because, according to the second law, the universe would then be in a state of equilibrium—a cold and lifeless state of absolute rest.

The question that obviously follows is: If the universe has not always existed, then who or what caused it to come into existence? We can appeal to science for the answer. Scientists understand that the universe was tuned in at its inception to a precision of greater than sixty decimal places, which is a precision equal to the number ten multiplied by itself more than sixty times. Unless the universe had been finely tuned, it would not have "worked." But all known natural processes are not tuned that finely, only to several decimal places. Only a First Cause with supreme intelligence could have produced such phenomenal accuracy.

Further questions include: What is life, and how did it originate? Could life have arisen from the gradual changes that resulted from the interaction between natural forces over billions of years?

To help answer such questions, try doing a simple experiment. Pour salt and pepper into a clear container that can be covered, and keep the salt and pepper separate. Then shake it. What happens? The salt and pepper become mixed. Now continue shaking the container to try to separate the two. Do they become unmixed? What would be the best way to separate the salt from the pepper?

What does this experiment illustrate? First, that the random processes of nature destroy, not create, patterns. Second, that it would take an intellect (by physically separating the salt from the pepper) to restore the pattern (see Gange, ch. 7).

Living cells are like the pattern of the salt and pepper being separated, except that the patterns in such cells are much more complex. They are not only complex but also viable, in that not just any pattern will do; living cells must maintain a particular pattern that will produce and sustain life. Such a pattern, moreover, contains a vast amount of information, such as is found in DNA. Life is not the mere repetitive pattern that is contained in crystals, which the random processes of nature can produce, but it is like the pattern contained in a blueprint, which can be produced only by an intelligent being.

The question of origins, then, concerns the issue of what is a sufficient source for the information—the coherent and viable patterns—contained within living cells? To say that the information contained in a complex living cell came from the random and gradual evolutionary processes of nature is to believe that one can separate the salt from the pepper by shaking the container—an outcome that, being unobserved, is a matter of faith and one that goes against the observed second law. The best explanation for the source of information in living cells is not blind nature, but a Supreme Intellect. After all, it is an everyday empirical fact that people, not random forces, are the source of meaningful and coherent patterns (e.g., words, cars, buildings, etc.). Also, it is not mere coincidence that the theme of separation—the instilling of information—is found in the creation account of Genesis 1, where God separated light from darkness; the waters above from the waters below; sea from land; time into days and years; sea, air, and land life, each after its own kind; man from dust; and woman from man.

- **The Presence of Design**

The argument from design is built on the premise that design indicates the work of an intelligent designer (see Ps. 19:1, Rom. 1:20). The classic example is that of a watch. Obviously, the intricate inner workings of a watch could not have come about as the result of random chance, but

## Contradictions and Problems within the Secularistic Worldview

Secular Assertion	Contradiction or Problem
“There is no absolute truth.”	Such a statement itself claims to be an absolute truth.
“Life is meaningless.”	The person who says this claims to make a meaningful statement (Zacharias, p. 73).
“Science is the only avenue to truth.”	Such a statement cannot itself be proven to be true by the scientific method.
“All morality is relative.”	How can we tell if a person who makes such a statement is telling the truth, since he or she might consider it convenient to lie? Plus, such a person often does not hesitate to make moral judgments concerning social issues, or concerning his or her view of God (e.g., Why did God permit evil?)
“Each individual determines his or her own purpose in life. There is no ultimate purpose.”	If there’s no ultimacy to any purpose, then even the individual purposes are meaningless. How does anyone know there is no ultimate meaning unless he or she has an ultimate perspective?
The theory of evolution, which is lauded as a natural law, contends that complexity (life) arises out of simplicity (non-life) without the aid of intelligence.	Contradiction or Problem: But the law of entropy, which is an indisputable law of nature, says that complex things disintegrate to a state of simplicity (see Noebel, pp. 330-333).
“Humanity is, by nature, good.”	Such a statement lacks meaning since there is no moral reference point in secularism by which to gauge goodness.
“What is needed today is rational and logical thinking.”	How can our thoughts be trusted to reflect reality if they are the product of nothing more than chemical and biological elements?

only by the thoughtful planning of an intelligent designer (see Olsen, pp. 26-27, and Denton, ch.14). The same is true of the relationship between the creation and the Creator (e.g., the intricacies of the human eye).

- **The Stirring of the Conscience**

Our consciences and feelings of guilt give evidence to our moral nature. Such moral feelings are like currency—they are worthless unless backed up by something of value outside themselves. They also indicate that the best explanation for why we have moral sensibilities is that our Source must be both moral and personal, for impersonal natural forces do not have moral sensibilities. In other words, since there is a moral law binding on all of that insists we do what is just and good, there must be a Moral Law Giver (see Geisler and Brooks, ch.13).

- **The Longing for Something Beyond**

While secularists might say publicly that they accept death as being the final end, there is nevertheless that private

doubt that lingers. For example, Corliss Lamont, who was voted Humanist of the Year in 1977, wrote, “Even I, disbeliever that I am, would frankly be more than glad to awake some day to a worthwhile eternal life” (Lamont, p. 98). Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell, too, expressed some hesitation concerning the idea that this life is all there is: “It is odd, isn’t it? I care passionately for this world and many things and people in it, and yet...what is it all? There must be something more important, one feels, though I don’t believe there is” (Heck, p. 224). What would be the source of our yearning for an existence beyond? Perhaps the universe has played a cosmic joke on us. Or, our yearning is a mistake of evolution. What, though, if it’s not a joke or a mistake, but a pointer to that which is real?

### **The Deeper Issues**

People make decisions based not only on their intellect, but also on their emotions. So, one should also try to pluck those deeper chords.

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## Show That You Care

Floyd McClung of Youth with a Mission articulated this principle in a catchy way: “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” (Aldrich, p. 35). Obviously, part of what it means to care is being concerned about people’s needs.

Caring also means building a friendship that is unconditional. While we should not be shy in sharing our faith with an international student, neither should our friendship be conditioned on how a student responds to the message of Christ.

Another way of showing that you (and God) care is by praying for your international friend. Ask how you may pray specifically for him or her. For many international students, it will be news that God cares about their individual needs.

## Responding to Hindrances and Objections

### The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is that if there is an all-powerful and all-good God, then He wouldn’t allow evil. But evil does happen, so God is either not all powerful or not all good.

One may respond to this objection by pointing out, first, that the problem of evil actually assumes the existence of an absolute standard of goodness. That standard can be found only in a holy God, the very thing that the argument is trying to deny (see Geisler and Brooks, ch. 4; Zacharias, pp. 174-178).

Second, identify the source of evil (see Kreeft, pp. 49-56). We are talking about moral evil, not natural disasters or physical diseases. With respect to moral evil, we are persons, and persons have the ability to choose between good and evil. Evil is the result of persons having chosen wrongly. God cannot be held responsible for the way His creatures have chosen to go against Him, since their ability to choose is real.

Could God have made a world where the people were programmed to choose to do only that which is good? Yes, but such creatures would have been automatons, not persons, and they would not have had the ability to make real choices.

Third, when a person cites the problem of evil as an objection, he or she is assuming that God has not dealt with evil. The Bible declares, however, that God has dealt with evil through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. The real issue, then, is that He has not dealt with it in a way they expected or as soon as they desired. But if God is all good and all powerful, then we know that if evil is not defeated, it eventually will be, because Jesus Christ’s resurrection demonstrated that victory.

### “How Can a Just God Judge Those Who Have Never Heard of Jesus?”

This objection raises the issue of justice. So, before

responding to their objection directly, ask them to consider something: What is the source of their sense of justice?

Some might answer that each individual is his or her own source. Others might say that the moral foundation for our sense of justice is to be found in social consensus.

The problem with such answers is that they derive the sense of “ought” from that which “is.” But that which “is” is an insufficient basis for our sense of “ought.” Just because most people have told a lie does not negate our sense that lying is morally wrong. If we base our sense of justice on nothing higher than ourselves or social consensus, then we will be mired in moral relativity. But is not “relative justice” a contradiction in terms?

In order for one’s sense of justice to have meaning, it must be based on a firm moral standard. What we observe is that moral sensibilities are properties of personal beings, not natural forces. But what kind of being would be 1) personal, 2) beyond humanity, and 3) have moral sensibilities? The answer: God! Therefore, the sense of justice raised in the objection actually affirms the existence of the very thing that is being questioned, for only a personal, holy God is a sufficient moral basis for our sense of justice. In brief, then, things can’t be ultimately unjust unless there is an ultimate justice (God).

But will God indeed judge those who have never heard of Jesus? No and yes. No, in the sense that He will not judge us on the basis of revelation that we have not received. Yes, He will judge us, though, on the basis of how we respond to the knowledge that we have received (Rom. 2:12). God has given everyone an awareness of who He is. By what means? Through what is called “general revelation,” which includes the disclosure of God through creation and conscience (Lewis and Demarest, ch. 2; Rom 1:19-20; 2:14-15; cf. Ps. 8:1, 3; 19:1-4; Isa. 40:12-14, 26; Acts 14:15-17; 17:24-25).

### “The Bible Is Not Worth Serious Consideration”

Secularists dismiss the Bible, contending that it is filled with myths, contradictions, and scientific inaccuracies. Because of space limitation, only a few responses to this objection will be summarized (see Boice, ch. 5; Geisler and Howe, ch.1).

First, ask if they have read the Bible, and if they have not done so, challenge them to read it. It’s very possible that their attitude toward the Bible was received through someone else.

Second, every educated person should be familiar with the Bible. Why? Because, according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, the Bible is the number one bestseller of all time (MacFarlan, p. 383). Also, the Bible has had a significant influence on Western literature. One book on literature says, “Great authors commonly show a familiarity with the Bible, and few great English and American writers of the

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seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries can be read with satisfaction by one ignorant of Biblical literature” (Holman, pp. 61-61).

Third, the Bible should be given serious consideration because it is historically accurate (see Bruce; Geisler and Brooks, ch. 9; Kitchen; Wilson; and Yamauchi).

Fourth, the secularist should give the Bible serious consideration because it is unique among religious scriptures in that it speaks of a God who is absolute in His holiness and who judges sinners. In light of that fact, would bad men write such fierce judgments against their own sin? Or, on the other hand, would good men put “Thus saith the Lord” on something that they had devised themselves? Isn’t it more likely that it came from God (Boice, pp. 57-58)?

Other approaches to this objection include: 1) the Bible’s amazing unity, considering it consists of 66 books that were written over a fifteen-year period (see McDowell, p.18); 2) the biblical authors being led to avoid scientific misconceptions about the body, the heavens, and the earth that were popular in the cultures and religions of its time (see Barfield; Montgomery, part 3); and 3) the fulfillment of prophecy (see McDowell, ch. 9; Montgomery, part 4, chs. 3-4).

### “Evolution Sufficiently Explains the Origin of the Universe and the Diversity of the Species”

Most of us don’t have the expertise to present the evidence against evolution with any sense of scientific sophistication. How, then, should we respond to the objections raised by those who believe in evolution?

#### 1. Keep it Simple

Keep the meaning of creation basic. Your definition of creation should include nothing more than the belief that an intelligent Creator is necessary to explain the origin of the universe. Anything more will divert the discussion away from the core issue.

#### 2. Evolution Is Also Based on Inference

Evolution is based on faith just as much as creationism. Be aware that evolutionists move from the observable to the theoretical in a way that is not warranted by the evidence. They observe that minor changes occur within species (microevolution), but they then extrapolate from those observations the theory that such changes eventually add up to the formation of entirely new species (macroevolution). While microevolution is empirically verifiable, the extrapolation to macroevolution is only a theory that has never been observed and that is a matter of faith (Johnson, p. 115).

#### 3. Belief in Creation Is a Reasonable Inference

Creationism is a reasonable alternative to evolution. After all, one of the principles of science is that every effect has a sufficient cause. Creationism posits a sufficient cause for our

existence as persons: a personal God who is morally holy, intelligent, and self-existent. Evolution, on the other hand, posits what appears to be an insufficient cause in that the complex (human life) comes out of the simple (nonlife), or that the universe arose from nothing without a cause.

Creationism is reasonable, moreover, because it is able to make a distinction between operation science, which has to do with the principles that govern the continued operation of the universe, and origin science, which has to do with the principles that caused the universe to begin. By saying that science can make statements about the origin of the universe, evolutionists are assuming that the very same laws involved in the operation of the universe are adequate to explain the origin of the universe. Such an assumption is similar to saying that the very same laws that explain how a car functions are sufficient to explain how the car was designed and built. They aren’t, because the origin of the car needed the guidance of intelligent beings (Geisler, 1983, pp. 137-138).

If you want to garner evidence against evolution that is of a more scientific nature, the following are fruitful lines or argumentation (see Noebel, ch. 14).

- the fossil record: the sudden appearance of complex life forms and lack of transitional forms,
- the problem of life coming from nonlife (see Gange, ch. 9; Thaxton),
- the problem of complexity arising out of simplicity without the aid of intelligent intervention,
- the immense amount of information encoded into the DNA, which would indicate an intelligent source rather than that of a random chance (see Grange),
- the lack of beneficial mutations,
- the limits to the amount of change possible within a species.

For books that address the theory of evolution from a scientific perspective, the following three are recommended: *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* by Michael Denton, *Darwin on Trial* by Philip Johnson, and *Of Pandas and People* by Percival Davis and Dean Kenyon.

### Recommended Resources

For books that address most of the common objections raised by secularists, see Copan, Geisler and Brooks, Gish, Kreeft, Moreland (1987), and Strobel (2000 and 2004).

For books that give scientific evidence for the existence of an Intelligent Designer, see Broom, Dembski and Kushiner, and Moreland (1994).

For books that could be given to secularists for them to consider arguments for the existence of God, see Boa, Geisler and Turek, and Strobel (2000 and 2004). For DVDs that could be shown to a secularist, see ColdWater Media and Illustra Media (2002 and 2004).

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## Christian Apologetic Websites

**Apologetics Research Network** [www.arn.org](http://www.arn.org)

**All About God** [www.allaboutgod.com](http://www.allaboutgod.com)

**Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture**

[www.discovery.org/csc](http://www.discovery.org/csc)

**Genesis Foundation** [www.genesisfoundation.org](http://www.genesisfoundation.org)

**Josh McDowell** [www.josh.org](http://www.josh.org)

**Reasons to Believe** [www.reasons.org](http://www.reasons.org)



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