

A PUBLICATION OF



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# VANGUARD

OVERCOMING THE DARKNESS

## No Reason to Fear: The Logic of a "New Atheist"

Rick Wade

Sometimes we Christians shy away from books which attack our beliefs because we're afraid we can't answer the objections. That's understandable. Often the authors of such books carry impressive credentials. It's easy to feel intimidated.

However, the challenges of critics throughout the ages have not been able to prove Christianity false, and those of modern day critics won't either. Most of their arguments have already been answered. When we brace ourselves and start reading a critic's book, we often find that the arguments don't pack that great a punch after all, much like the neigh-

borhood bully who the other boys are afraid of but really have no reason to be.

### Fallacious Arguments

In this article I'm going to use Sam Harris's book *Letter to a Christian Nation* to illustrate some of the faulty reasoning found in books of this kind.<sup>1</sup> Harris's book is plagued with fallacious arguments, a surprising turn since he presents his side as being that of reason.

Harris's favorite target in his attack on religion is its supposed immorality. He tells

*No Reason to Fear...* continued on pg 6

## Ministry Snapshots

**Prestonwood series**—Probe speakers just wrapped up an apologetics series at Prestonwood Baptist Church. Maybe your church would like to hold a similar series on Sunday or Wednesdays nights. For more information, call Renea McKenzie at 972-480-0240, ext. 110.

**New staff!**—Probe has two new support-raising staff. Paul Rutherford got his philosophy degree at Rice and then spent a year overseas. Dave Sterrett is a Liberty (biblical studies) and Southern Evangelical (apologetics) grad, and is working on an MA in philosophy at the Univ. of Dallas.

**New staff cont.**—In November, Heather handed off her Program Coordinator duties to Renea McKenzie, Probe's newest staff member. Renea has an undergrad degree in kinesiology and a master's in English. She spent a year at L'Abri in Switzerland. Need a speaker for your church or small group? Give her a call (see above).

**Michael in Hungary**—Michael recently taught apologetics at the Word of Life Bible Institute in Tóalmás, Hungary. This was his third time teaching apologetics there. He's taught systematic theology twice as well.

**Byron in Asia**—Recently, Byron spent a week in Asia, speaking to groups of pastors and students. He taught apologetics twice to pastors and twice to a combination of pastors, laypeople and students. It wasn't all formal training, however. He also got to talk to college students in a local coffee shop.

**Hawaii Apologetics Conference**—Pat reports a big success following his third apologetics conference in Hawaii. This year he was joined by Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes. Over 280 people attended from over 20 churches. The three men spoke at three churches in the area and at a pastors breakfast.

# The Emerging Church

Don Closson

## Introduction

The church, both local and universal, is always influenced by the culture in which it resides. As a result, churches in America have gone through changes that correspond to changes in the American culture. Some of the changes are innocuous and are seen as suitable by almost everyone; air conditioning and indoor plumbing come to mind. Other changes can be more controversial such as musical genre, the use of multimedia, and especially preaching styles and content. The challenge for churches is to determine what changes are acceptable and what changes compromise the message of the gospel.

A growing list of influential thinkers and pastors argue that the postmodern era in which we live mandates a significant change in how believers do church. This movement has come to be known as the *emerging church* and has acquired a considerable following as evidenced both by the number of conferences held on the subject and by the numerous Web sites devoted to the issue.

To weigh the arguments of the emerging church one must first define the changes that have occurred in our postmodern culture. Postmodernity is horribly difficult to define. It is primarily an argument or protest against modernist attitudes and truth claims. The emerging church has picked up this protest by rejecting traditional ideas of authority, certainty, and rationality. Instead its emphasis is on what it calls *authenticity*. Feelings and affections matter more than logic and reason, one's experience more than propositional truth claims, and inclusion more than exclusion.

In this article we will consider what is good, what is not so good, and what is dangerous to the gospel of Christ in this church reform movement known as the emerging church.

## What's Good About the Emerging Church?

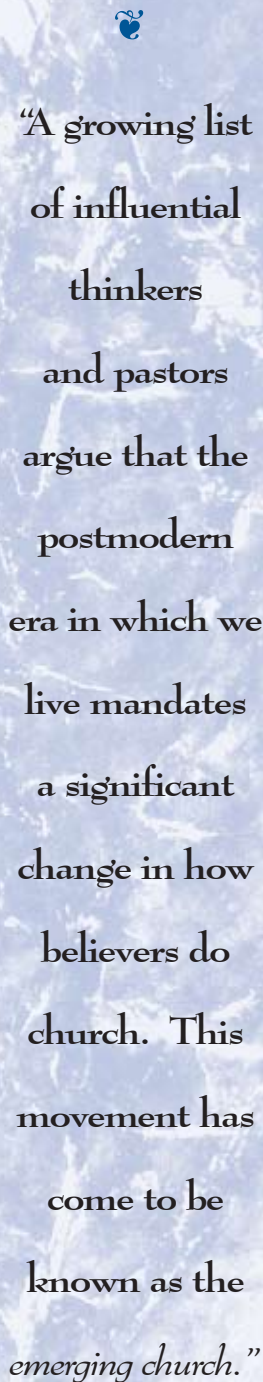
Let's start by looking at some good things about the emerging church.

Its leaders are thoughtfully engaged in responding to what they believe are dramatic changes in our society, including the rapid increase in ethnic and religious diversity and the arrival of instant local and global communication. The leadership of the emerging church rejects the attempt to respond to changes such as this by clinging to a narrowly defined church tradition. They believe that idealizing a past era and allowing nostalgia to replace the hard work of contextualizing Christianity for today's realities would be a mistake. Instead, we should discover how best to communicate the gospel to our increasingly postmodern world.

As I noted earlier, a key emphasis of the emerging church is authenticity. It argues that modernity has brought the church an unnecessary and unhealthy desire for absolute theological certainty which has led to an unbalanced focus on the theological propositions held by believers rather than on living an authentic Christian life.

It has also rightly stressed the importance of community. Modernity offered a picture of human nature that highlighted the heroic individual. However, the Bible begins with a relational Trinity—God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and sets the New Testament believer within the community of the church, including all the “one another” admonitions given by its inspired authors.

The world is watching to see this community in action. As Stanley Grenz writes, “Members of the next generation are often unimpressed by our verbal presentations of the gospel. What they want to see is a people who live out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships.”<sup>1</sup>



“A growing list of influential thinkers and pastors argue that the postmodern era in which we live mandates a significant change in how believers do church. This movement has come to be known as the *emerging church*.”

## Concerns About the Emerging Church

One criticism of the emerging church is its one-dimensional portrayal of the modern era. Some argue that the emerging church uses an incomplete description of the modern era and its impact on the church to build its case. For example, emerging church leaders paint a picture of the church in the modern era as having given in to the rationalistic excesses of the times. By doing so, they argue, it is guilty of committing the sin of absolutism, leading to an arrogance that resulted in a cold, emotionless orthodoxy. Confessional Christianity is claimed to be too abstract and rationalistic. Carefully constructed theologies, and those who build them, are set against a faith comprised of stories, proverbs, and mystery. Often it is presented as one or the other, no compromise being possible. But is this necessarily the case?

Without going into too many of the names and ideas involved, it must be noted that the modern period has not been a monolith of science and reason. From Rousseau to Nietzsche, many have challenged the mechanistic model presented by Enlightenment thinkers and offered a different view of reality and human nature. C. S. Lewis is one example of a Christian who defended the faith in formal, rational debates, and yet understood the power of story and the imagination.

A second criticism of the emerging church has to do with the question of knowledge. Do we have revealed propositional truth in Scripture, truth that can be understood and communicated, even cross-culturally, or are we limited to the emotions and relationships that only result from a personal encounter with God?

First, they set the standard for knowing something to be true unreasonably high. They claim that either we know something exhaustively, even omnisciently as God knows it, or else our partial knowledge can only be personal knowledge, more like an opinion rather than something that can be binding on others as well. Even worse, they

argue that we have no means of testing to see how close what we think is true actually corresponds with reality itself.

What this viewpoint does is make it impossible for anyone to claim that he or she knows something objectively, and that this objective knowledge is true or valid for everyone everywhere. If knowledge can only be personal knowledge, then the phrase “it might be true for you, but not for me” becomes reality for everyone and for every topic.

### Summary

The focus on relationships and authenticity isn't necessarily antithetical to propositional truth. Other church reform movements in America have worked to renew the church's emphasis on building community and authentic worship without sacrificing truth along the way.

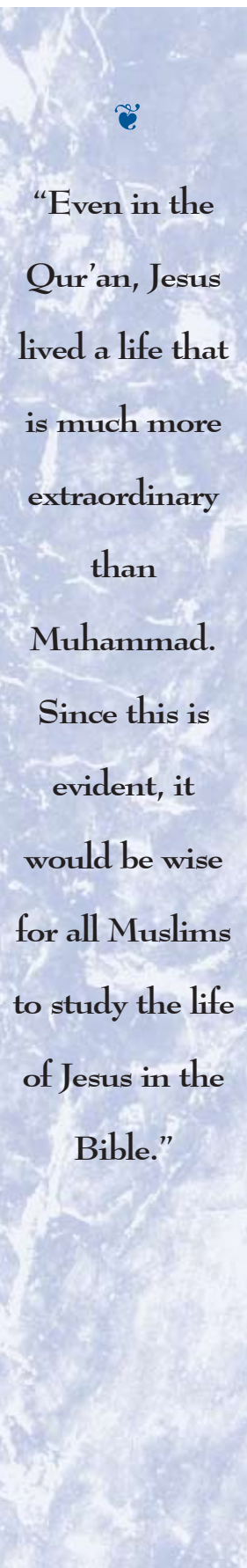
One significant church movement, also driven by the need for authenticity and community, is the Fellowship Bible Church movement of the '80s and '90s. Gene Getz's 1975 book, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, gave an argument for grounding the activities of local congregations on the functions of the early church rather than on their forms. Getz's attempt to discover the purpose of the church through what he calls the three-fold lens of Scripture, history, and culture resulted in a movement that has spanned the globe and helped to shift the focus of local worship towards intimacy within small groups and authentic worship.

Hopefully, the emerging church will find a place next to these past reform movements as it gathers attention and matures. However, if it continues to de-emphasize sound doctrine, it will find itself to be irrelevant and ineffective.

### Note

- 1 Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 169.

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# Live Above Event

Ray Bohlin

On February 9, I was an invited speaker for a most unique event. It was called Live Above, and it was broadcast live across the internet to over twenty-five remote locations (churches and Christian schools) with several thousand in attendance.

This event was a six hour live seminar geared to assist graduating high school seniors make the transition well to the next stage of life, whether it be college, the military, or the work force. Pulled together by Youth Transition Network, over fifty youth and college ministries participated in some way. Probe Ministries was invited to specifically address the intellectual challenge that different worldviews present in the university environment.

The technology of the event was spectacular with the camera switching constantly between the live speaker, audience, slides, videos, and online questions. Their system allowed for immediate audience feedback from around the country. For instance, I asked the audience what type of person they

were most concerned about encountering in college: an atheist, a Buddhist, a Mormon, a homosexual, or an evolutionary biologist. Within seconds tabulated bar graphs of participants' texted replies were showing up on the screen to my left. Forty percent listed a homosexual and thirty-one percent listed an evolutionary biologist as the ones they were most concerned about meeting.

There were segments about handling change, dealing with temptation, connecting with a Christian campus ministry, surviving the additional work and academic burden. There was a great session on dealing with failure in this new venture. Everyone was extremely pleased with the final result.

The early feedback was great. The youth pastor of one of the largest churches in the nation said he wished he'd had all his students attend. A mother and daughter decided not to leave after lunch for a cheerleading event as planned. Now the mother wants to reach out to the churches and schools in her community.

The whole day was recorded and will be available to all the participating ministries within a few weeks. Be watching our Web site for further details. This will make a great gift to your graduating senior and youth pastor. Watch it together!

# DTS Apologetics Course

Renea McKenzie

In January, Probe offered an apologetics course for Dallas Theological Seminary for the third year. And for the third year the class was a major success. Our objective for this course was to equip these seminary students with worldview training that would lead to worldview-based ministry from the pulpit and beyond. These young leaders can now equip others to renew their minds, defend their faith, and engage people, movies, and ideas with knowledge, gentleness, and humility.

The course was offered by the seminary as a one-week, two-hour course in which class is in session every day from



nine to five. It's an intense course with papers and assignments due each day, but one which the students found to be invaluable. I actually had the chance to sit in on the class myself, and not only enjoyed it, but

was proud to be a part of a ministry that offers so much of what the body of Christ needs. All week long my fellow students commented on how they wished our course were a

regular fifteen-week course, required for all DTS students. Two students emailed me with these testimonials:

*"The Apologetics class was incredible. It gave me vast insight into not only a defense of our faith, but who we are defending it against and the impact a strong Christian World View has. I'm an author and get a chance to speak around the country on the very issues that this class taught and I now have a wealth of resources at my disposal. This class is a must for any serious Th. M. student."*  
—Chris Plekenpol



*"I loved the class because it was unique exposure to materials and knowledge that are absolutely critical for ministry. The class gave us apologetic responses for a world full of tough and intimidating questions - easily one of the best courses I've taken while at seminary."* —Doug Congdon

*Thank you* for standing with Probe financially. Our generous donors are God's means of making our ministry possible. If you'd like to send an extra gift toward ministry needs in the coming year, including the move to the Hope Center, **give us a click!**

**Donate here!**

## Probe Speaking Schedule Spring 2009

Date	Name	Event	Location
Feb. 24-Mar. 24	Steve Cable	BIS teaching ministry	Bangladesh
Mar. 4	Heather Zeiger	Prestonwood Baptist Church, Personhood and Stem Cells	Plano, TX
Mar. 6-8	Sue Bohlin	Women's Retreat, Magnolia Bible Church	Magnolia, TX
Mar. 10	Sue Bohlin	Christian Women's Club	Crockett, TX
Mar. 11	Heather Zeiger	Prestonwood Baptist Church, Genetic Engineering	Plano, TX
Mar. 12-30	Pat Zukeran	Word of Life Bible College	Laguna, Philippines
Mar. 18	Byron Barlowe	Prestonwood Bible Church	Plano, TX
Mar. 20-21	Sue Bohlin	Women's Retreat, Open Door Bible Church	(LA)
Mar. 20-22	Kerby Anderson	Christian Book Expo	Dallas, TX
Apr. 1	Pat Zukeran	Calvary Chapel South Maui	Kihei, Maui, HI
Apr. 2	Pat Zukeran	Calvary Chapel Bible College	Kihei, Maui, HI
Apr. 5	Pat Zukeran	Honolulu Christian Church	Honolulu, HI
Apr. 7	Pat Zukeran	Grace Bible Church	Waipahu, HI
Apr. 13	Sue Bohlin	Christian Women's Club	Amarillo, TX
Apr. 14	Sue Bohlin	Christian Women's Club	Lubbock, TX
Apr. 23	Sue Bohlin	Christian Women's Club	Canton, TX
Apr. 24-25	Pat Zukeran, Don Closson	<i>Mind Games</i> Conference, Lake Pointe Baptist Church	Rockwall, TX
Apr. 28	Michael Gleghorn	Apologetics Class, Dallas Bible Church	Dallas, TX
May 3	Kerby Anderson	Bayside Community Church	Tampa, FL
May 6, 13	Sue Bohlin	MOPS, Crossroads Bible Church	TX
May 24	Kerby Anderson	Bethesda Christian School	Dallas, TX
June 21-27	Pat Zukeran	JEMS Mt. Hermon Conference	Mt. Hermon, CA
June 23-26	Probe staff	Super Summer Arkansas	Arkadelphia, AR
Aug. 9-14	Probe staff	Student <i>Mind Games</i> Conference, Sacandaga Bible Conf./Retreat Ctr.	Broadalbin, NY

## Feedback

Brandy wrote to tell Michael what his article on Wicca meant for her and her daughter:

I was so glad to read your article on Wicca. I just recently heard of this so called religion. My teen daughter was given a book to read by a friend at school. It is a series called sweep. Just from looking at the cover something struck me as off. I read some of the book and quickly realized what it was. A book about teens and Wicca religion. I started to look up articles on a Christian perspective of Wicca. I found your article very informative on the subject. I now feel that I can talk with my daughter and explain why she won't be reading the series and what a Christian view of it is.

“The arguments don’t pack that great a punch after all, much like the neighborhood bully who the other boys are afraid of but really have no reason to be.”

*No Reason to Fear...* continued from pg 1

us that “Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible.”<sup>2</sup> Such things are sanctioned by God, Harris believes, because He does them Himself. Harris accuses Christians of picking and choosing sections of Scripture that present a more loving God while ignoring the truly telling ones which reveal a God who condones slavery and the beating and killing of rebellious children.

But Harris is guilty of picking and choosing himself. He commits the fallacy called the *neglect of relevant evidence*. He accuses Christians of presenting a lopsided view of God, but he does the same thing. He prefers proof-texting to sound theological understanding.

To be fair, in his discussion of the evils committed by Christians, he does note that “it is undeniable that many people of faith make heroic sacrifices to relieve the suffering of other human beings.”<sup>3</sup> But he doesn’t bother listing any. He gives no space to the great work done by Christians in the fields of medicine, literacy, agriculture, famine relief, etc. He ignores the good work of organizations like Mercy Ships which takes life-changing medical help to people in third world nations in the name of Christ, *except* to charge such groups with spreading misinformation and wasting time teaching such things as the virgin birth of Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

In another place Harris commits the fallacy called *causal oversimplification*. As he sees it, religion is the cause of conflicts in Palestine, the Balkans, Sudan, Nigeria, and other countries.

In 2004, the BBC published what it called a “War Audit” which was conducted to determine how significant religion has been in war, at least in the last century.<sup>5</sup> The authors of the

report noted that

at a philosophical level, the main religious traditions have little truck with war or violence. All advocate peace as the norm and see genuine spirituality as involving a disavowal of violence. It is mainly when organised religious institutions become involved with state institutions or when a political opposition is trying to take power that people begin advocating religious justifications for war.

They continue:

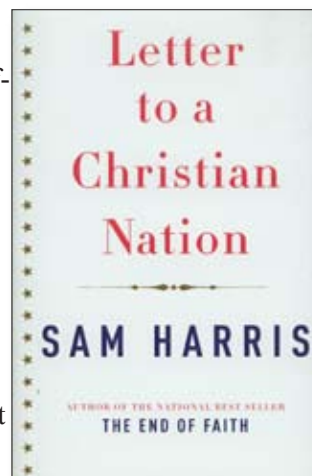
After reviewing historical analyses by a diverse array of specialists, we concluded that there have been few

genuinely religious wars in the last 100 years. The Israel/Arab wars from 1948 to now, often painted in the media and other places as wars over religion, or wars arising from religious differences, have in fact been wars of nationalism, liberation of territory or self-defense.

In fact, they say that “we need to go back to the wars of Arab expansion, the Crusades and the Reformation Wars for genuine wars over religion.”

The fallacy of *causal oversimplification* is seen also in Harris’s claim that “the anti-Semitism that built the Nazi death camps was a direct inheritance from medieval Christianity.”<sup>6</sup>

The reality of Christian anti-Semitism through the ages cannot be denied. However, Harris’s evaluation is simplistic. For example, he fails to tell us is that the Jews were persecuted quite apart from Christianity and even before Christianity came into existence. For example, there were serious tensions between the Jews and the Greeks of Alexandria in the first century B.C. that spilled over into the next century. Things got so bad that Jews were forced to live in one section of the city, their houses were looted and their synagogues were burned. Historian H. I. Bell reports that “men, women, and even



children [were] beaten to death, dragged living through the streets, or flung on to improvised bonfires.”<sup>7</sup>

Harris also fails to note the shift from *religious* persecution to *racial* persecution which occurred in the nineteenth century, notably in Russia. Racial matters were clearly Hitler’s motivation. A significant factor in Hitler’s hatred of the Jews was the strong influence of *Darwinism* that led him to think that people who were racially or eugenically inferior needed to be eliminated from the evolving human race.<sup>8</sup>

One of Harris’s tactics is to lump all religions together and then smear Christianity with the evils of others, such as Islam, by implication. This is the fallacy of *faulty comparison*. It occurs when someone wrongly generalizes from individual cases to the whole. Because Islam and Christianity are both classified as religions, Harris apparently thinks that what counts against one counts against the other. But Christianity is very different from Islam and should not be blamed for what is done in the name of Islam or any other religion.

## A Fundamental Commitment to Atheism

A point we make repeatedly at Probe is that our beliefs and actions are rooted in a set of underlying beliefs, the most basic of which are themselves not provable. Harris, like many other atheists, seems to believe his atheism is a result of the evidence he sees (or doesn’t see) around him. He has things turned around.

For example, Harris admits that he doesn’t know why the universe exists, but he’s confident there’s no God behind it. That sounds like a philosophical presupposition. Harris might like to pretend that his beliefs are based solely on the “trinity” of science, reason, and nature, but his naturalism cannot be established by these. Rather, it informs his use of them. One of the (potentially!) maddening

things about the arguments of atheists these days is their frequent silence with respect to any justification of their own basic worldview commitments. Harris goes so far as to claim that atheism isn’t really a belief; that there shouldn’t even *be* the word “atheism.”<sup>9</sup> Although “atheism” has long been understood to mean the belief that there is no God, many atheists today deny that. It isn’t the belief that there is no God; it’s simply an absence of belief in God.<sup>10</sup>

We can go back and forth with atheists about whether they truly deny the existence of God, or we can let that stand and simply ask what they *do* believe about ultimate reality, for surely they believe *something*. Naturalism

is a metaphysical position, and it has serious problems of its own.<sup>11</sup> It isn’t the neutral proper starting point atheists like to claim. If Christians are responsible to give good

reasons for their belief in Christian theism, atheists must give reasons for their naturalism.

### Notes

- 1 Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
- 2 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 5 Greg Austin, Todd Kranock and Thom Oommen, “God and War: An Audit & An Exploration,” [news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/world/04/war\\_audit\\_pdf/pdf/war\\_audit.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/world/04/war_audit_pdf/pdf/war_audit.pdf).
- 6 Harris, *Letter*, 41.
- 7 H. I. Bell, “Anti-Semitism in Alexandria,” *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 31. (1941), 1-18.
- 8 Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
- 9 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 10 See Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Temple University Press, 1990), 463.
- 11 See Norman Geisler, *Is Man the Measure? An Evaluation of Contemporary Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), chap. 11.

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“One of Harris’s tactics is to lump all religions together and then smear Christianity with the evils of others, such as Islam, by implication. This is the fallacy of faulty comparison.”



## The Probe Vanguard

Spring 2009 Vol.19 No.1

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*The Probe Vanguard is published quarterly by Probe Ministries for the benefit of its donors.*

Articles in the *Probe Vanguard* are condensed from programs aired on *Probe*, a daily radio show heard in forty-three states on more than 400 stations.

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*A higher standard.  
A higher purpose.*

# A Word from the President



You may have noticed increased attention to Charles Darwin these past few weeks. February 12 was Darwin's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, and coming up this November is the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of his most well-known book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle of Life*. With Darwinism under attack increasingly around the world, one gets the impression that the Darwin lobby needs some good publicity. There are over three hundred celebrations scheduled in Great Britain alone where Darwin's picture now graces the £10 note along with Queen Elizabeth. Universities and museums around the world are scheduling evolution symposia and Darwiniana celebrations to coincide with these two dovetailing anniversaries. Nowhere, however, will you hear the negative impact of evolution in the global struggle over racism, nationalism, eugenics, ethics, education, and many other pursuits. Those were just misapplications of Darwin's ideas! For instance you will hear that Darwin was vigorously opposed to human slavery and was an active abolitionist. This is true. What you won't hear is that Darwin clearly believed that, although all races were *human*, they weren't all *equal*. In the *Descent of Man*, published in 1871, Darwin clearly stated that the current gap between humans and apes was between the Negro and Australian aborigine on the human side and the gorilla on the ape side. As Simon and Garfunkel once proclaimed, "we hear what we want to hear and disregard the rest."

## New York Student Conference!

Rick Wade

In 1994 Probe began its Student *Mind Games* Conference at the Ozark Conference Center in Arkansas. The dream was to hold five week-long conferences each summer. We never reached that goal, but we did hold up to three conferences in a summer. We had a great working relationship with the OCC staff, and our time there was some of the richest all year.

Life is full of change, and a big change for us is the end of the Ozark Student *Mind Games* Conference. We're sorry to see that era pass.

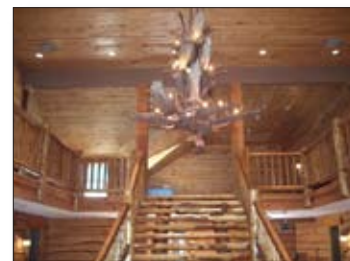
But this isn't the end of the student conference! This year we'll be hosted by the Sacandaga Bible Conference Center located in eastern New York (an hour northwest of Albany) for the week of August 9 to 14.



The executive director, Dr. Doug Blanc, is enthusiastic about our time there. Dr. Blanc knows about the habits of mind of young people. In addition to overseeing the conference center, he teaches philosophy and religion at a local college.

Sacandaga has summer camps, retreats, and conferences. The Probe conference will be a new kind of ministry for them. We are very happy to be forging this new relationship in a part of the US we've long wanted to reach.

Are you a New Yorker with upper high school kids? Do you know of any? For more information, click on the title above, or go to [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org) and click on the Student *Mind Games* button at the top.



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