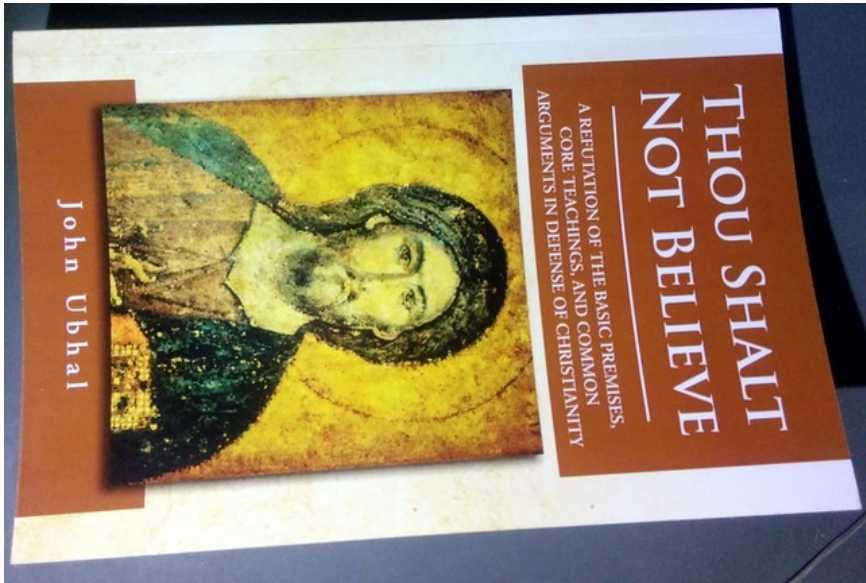


# **Book Review: Thou Shalt Not Believe by John Ubhal**

**Ubhal, John. *Thou Shalt Not Believe: A Refutation of the Basic Premises, Core Teachings, and Common Arguments in Defense of Christianity*. Ecaiva Books, 2016. 312 pp. ISBN: 978-1539057727. \$14.95.**



*Thou Shalt Not Believe* by [John Ubhal](#) consists of an introduction, 29 standalone chapters (each of which broaches a reason why Christianity is false or not useful), a conclusion, a biographical postscript recounting the author's own harrowing experience with Christianity, a Works Cited section, and a useful Index. The book doesn't try to be the first or last word on any of its wide subject matter, but it does distill into short, readable chapters many topics and controversies which will likely be of interest to many people (especially doubters) investigating Christianity (from a decidedly non-Christian perspective, as the title suggests).

Disclaimer: I personally know the author and had some input into an early manuscript. I purchased the retail paperback copy reviewed here with my own money and was not asked to write a review.

# I don't believe in heaven but I do believe in hell

I am a christian who is somewhere outside of Ubhal's intended audience, which seems to be fundamentalist Christians who are looking for reasons to no longer be fundamentalist Christians. Many of the chapters simply take a literalist approach to 'reading' the bible in order to refute such a reading of the bible, a somewhat frustrating exercise for anyone except maybe an already-doubting biblical literalist.

The heart of Ubhal's logical case against Christianity is contained in the first chapter ("The Basic Premises and Core Teachings of Christianity"):

[I]f people do not need to be saved from sin, then they do not need a savior. If people do not need a savior, then they do not need Jesus. And if people do not need Jesus, Christianity has no relevance for humankind. (13)

According to Ubhal's reading of the bible, the wages of sin are not merely death but eternal damnation (which he insists are quite different). And since eternal damnation is both cruel and has no basis in human experience, the premise in the above line of reasoning can be affirmed by anyone with a modicum of empathy or scientific rationality, thus: Christianity has no relevance for humankind. □

This formulation reduces Christianity to a mere mechanism of "salvation," but what does it save people from? Ubhal presents a

version of Christianity which begins with the concept of sin and its centuries of theological baggage and implicit assumptions, from which he deduces that Christianity offers a non-solution (Jesus as Savior) to a non-problem (eternal damnation). But this is not my understanding of christianity, which begins, in contrast, with the existential crisis of death and offers, or claims to offer, hope for meaning in a life guaranteed to end. Sin as a moral category is secondary, a flawed and awkward theological attempt at theorizing death. To Ubhal, “the Bible very specifically and vividly teaches that hell exists as an eternal fire of everlasting punishment.” (35) I can’t disagree, but I find in the descriptions of hell put forward by Jesus and his New Testament editors less the foundations for the cartoon hell of popular culture and more the expressions of anxiety about the immense permanence of death and the failure of all previous nationalist and religious attempts at ignoring or transcending its imminence.

Ubhal acknowledges that the biosphere, without any special regard for humanity, “features a constant struggle for survival for all things in the face of scarce resources and numerous calamities, and is full of suffering.” (76) And this is an author who is confident that humans, who exist nowhere but in the calamity of this fragile biosphere, don’t need saving from anything!

In his introduction to *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis presents a series of suspicious dichotomies in which first morality, then theism, and finally the mystic claims of Jesus are said to be either the result of madness or of divine revelation. (Ubhal addresses one version of the latter dichotomy in Chapter 17, “The Trilemma”.) Lewis thinks it is these divine revelations

which illuminate and make humans aware of pain (including death):

In a sense, [Christianity] creates, rather than solves, the problem of pain, for pain would be no problem unless, side by side with our daily experience of this painful world, we had received what we think a good assurance that ultimate reality is righteous and loving.

— C.S. Lewis

Lewis credits human nature, with its consciousness of the moral, for producing Christianity; Ubhal blames Christianity, with its moralistic nonsense, for obscuring the natural plight of humans in a harsh biosphere. They both agree that Christianity is the cause of pain in the same way a magistrate is the cause of punishment. Lewis views the judge as acting according to a real code of law; Ubhal views the judge as acting to an arbitrary (and frankly harmful) code of law. In my view, both are mistaken. I recognize pain not because I have assurance of a better reality, as Lewis maintains, but because I can *imagine* a better reality however impossible. Ubhal, in particular, is so preoccupied with the idea that [sin is “guilt”](#) or death is “blame” that he mistakes christianity’s grappling for hope in the face of suffering as the source of suffering itself.

At times Ubhal’s literalist approach to the bible feels like it was designed to discover the most boring reading possible of some of the world’s most engaged-with texts. Chapter 10 (“Failed Prophecies”), for example, is a list of Biblical prophetic

predictions which did not come to pass. But instead of engaging in the predictions, what their authors were trying to get across, why they were included in a religious canon in the first place, why they are still valued, what the significance of the prophecies have been over the millennia, how or if they can be salvaged and re-applied, etc., he simply notes that they are wrong and so the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy is wrong and so thou shalt not believe in the stodgy version of Christianity that he has decided is the most 'honest' version.

In Chapter 11 (“Empirical Arguments Against the Creation and the Flood”) he takes aim at the historicity of the Genesis accounts. “Unless the claims of such texts are literally true, they lose all their persuasive power, since they are then mere human creations that do not give any real information about the way things are.” (103) Or likewise in his conclusion:

Those who make the Bible say only what they want it to say tacitly acknowledge that they believe the Bible is unnecessary and that people only need their own experiences and reasoning skills to gain the understanding they need or want. Thus it is just as well to throw the Bible out altogether once one starts picking and choosing which passages to take seriously and which ones to dismiss or interpret away. (263-264)

But all works of art are “mere human creations”; it doesn't follow that they have no value or no inherent meaning. To argue

that books are unnecessary (to what end?) because people possess the capacity to reason is a backward and surprisingly anti-intellectual and anti-literate argument to make for someone who has written and published a book. In fact the reason books are useful is *because* people read them in light of their own experiences and ability to reason, including the ability to dismiss whatever they find to be untrue or unuseful. Test everything; hold fast to what is good.

## **'Til I return to the communism of the worms (without god or master there, six feet underneath the earth)**

In a famous verse in Matthew 19 Jesus says that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. When his disciples interpret this to mean that nobody can be saved, Jesus reassures them that with god all things are possible. The lesson Ubhal draws from this passage is that “according to Jesus people can only be moral with the help of God.” (157) But like the disciples this ignores what Jesus said: that it would require a miracle for a *rich* person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (not ‘be moral’). In his haste to reduce Jesus’s teachings to an impossible moralistic system, Ubhal glosses over Jesus’s core message here: that christians seek a social order without rich people.

But I agree with and am glad to see his criticism of the authoritarian nature of early christian communism as described in Acts. (173-175) He briefly notes a distinction between early

Christian communism and most socialisms today: The Christian communism did not seem to orient itself primarily as a class conflict. (Perhaps one of early Christianity's failings came about because of the success it eventually found among the owning/aristocratic Roman classes, blurring whatever class conflict the first christians were motivated by). But it is wrong to say early christians completely lacked a conscious class antagonism. As examples see James' fiery diatribe against the rich (which is considered canon by all Christians) in [James 5:1-6](#), and the emphasis by the author of Ephesians that the christian "struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" ([Ephesians 6:10-13](#)).

## **Because at least in Hell there's rock 'n' roll and ain't no Jesus Christ**

Disagreements over the interpretation of texts and basic premise of christianity aside, Ubhal raises many valid criticisms of the doctrines, defenses, hypocrisies, and understanding of science demonstrated by many varieties of Christianity. But so do scores of other books available in the 'Why I Am Not a Christian and Neither Can You' genre. There are two qualities for which Ubhal's book stands out.

The first is the author's background in comparative religions which is apparent in several sections. Readers interested in Christianity and its failings will also inadvertently learn how other world religions (and especially Buddhism) compare on



several points.

The second is the autobiographical postscript in which the author shifts gears from attacking Christianity on rational grounds to subjectively describing the harmful effects a sincere belief in Christianity can (and has quite often) had on some people's psyches. This personal account brings into focus the urgency of escaping the Christian obsessions with sin, guilt, and eternal damnation. Its potential to lead others who are similarly afflicted by Christianity to the freedom of disbelief makes it the most valuable chapter of the book.

## Typography

The book was produced by CreateSpace, Amazon's print-on-demand service (according to the date on the back page, my copy was printed the day after I placed my order). There is no colophon or statement of paper durability, but the book is easy to read, printed in relatively large serif type (with all-cap sans-serif headings) on opaque white paper. The perfect binding feels durable and has held up without wear to a full read through and much subsequent page flipping.

My only complaint is about the running headers which consist of the author's name (verso) and title of the book (recto) throughout, providing no contextual information when navigating the book. It would be much more useful (especially while taking notes for a review) if at least the chapter title was included in one header. I only remember seeing one typographical error in the entire book, and it was minor.

A inexpensive Kindle version is available, as is [a DRM-free ePub](#)

from Smashwords.

## The author's response (September 12, 2018)

John Ubhal kindly took the time to respond to this review on his weblog: ["Response to Chris Burkhardt's Review of Thou Shalt Not Believe"](#)

In Section 5 of his response he clarifies that he is "addressing the Bible as a book or collection of books that many people regard as containing *factual* claims about the universe and about history that are divinely revealed or inspired," and that he is also arguing "against treating books, specifically the Bible, but others as well, as infallible/sacred." That summarizes my initial frustrations with his reading of the Bible, which is that he first insists on reading the Bible as a divine list of facts and then denounces it for being read that way. But of course, as I wrote in my review, that reading and its refutation articulated in *Thou Shalt Not Believe* can be valuable to people who have already learned to read the Bible in such a rigid manner and who are now looking for reasons to reject it.

More interesting to me (since I'm not convinced the Bible is so important anyway) is Ubhal's alternative to the christian narrative that people need saving from anything at all. To my insistence that christianity is at least hoping for a meaningful transformation, he writes, with cynical boldness, "Humans don't need saving from the biosphere. And if they do, death works just fine, so long as there is no afterlife of agony or torment." Not entirely satisfied with this Epicurean acceptance of impermanence (has anyone ever been?), he immediately also

offers ethical living and technology as potential roads to salvation in peace-of-mind and material comfort.

While that is a step forward from the superstition and idolatry rampant in much of Christianity, it is still a ways, in my view, from adequately answering the existential critique which serves as christianity's philosophic starting point in the radically pessimistic teachings of [Qoheleth](#).

## See Also

- John Ubhal's "[Response to Chris Burkhardt's Review of Thou Shalt Not Believe](#)"
- Louis Burkhardt's [review of Thou Shalt Not Believe](#)
- John Ubhal's [Response to Louis Burkhardt's Review of Thou Shalt Not Believe](#)
- <https://johnubhal.com/>