

A Few Minutes with Dr. William Lane Craig: Interview by John D. Martin

William Lane Craig

SUMMARY

An interview on defense of the faith.

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From March 28th to March 30th, Christian philosopher, theologian, author, and speaker Dr. William Lane Craig presented a series of workshops and discussions on the Purdue University Campus in West Lafayette, In. The series culminated with a debate on the existence of God with atheist philosopher Dr. Austin Dacey. Tuesday afternoon. Dr. Craig graciously took time out of his hectic schedule to converse with me on behalf of *Boundless*. What follows is a transcript of my interview.

Boundless: Hi, Dr. Craig. I'd like to talk just briefly about matters concerning apologetics and campus evangelism. Specifically, I have questions that concern undergraduates living and working in a secular setting. I have just a general biographical question to start with: What brought you into this particular ministry?

Craig: Well, I come from a non-Christian family, so when I came to Christ in high school, I wanted to share my faith with my brother and with non-Christian friends in high school. So I was immediately confronted with the necessity of providing reasons for my new-found faith. So right from the start, I was giving reasons for my faith. This interest was sharpened as I went to Wheaton College, where I was taught to integrate my faith and learning. It was there that I felt the call to go into an area of evangelism that would appeal to the head as well as the heart.

Boundless: OK. I'd like to talk about questions in campus apologetics and evangelism. What are the greatest challenges to Christians who want to present intellectual arguments for their faith on college campuses today?

Craig: I think the major obstacle today is religious pluralism or relativism. Students don't think that religious beliefs are knowledge. They don't think that they are expressions of facts, and they don't think that they are things that can be known. And so they think that religious beliefs are mere expressions of personal taste or opinion. As a result, when Christians claim that they know the truth about these matters, people are deeply offended and think of Christians as bigoted, dogmatic, and even immoral people. I think that's the greatest challenge. Another one related to it would be that, because of the moral issues that Christians take stands on today, many non-Christian students regard us as really immoral people, really bad people. They ... Well, one non-Christian student put it to me this way: He said, "Why is it that Christians always come down on the wrong side of moral questions like abortion, homosexuality, and so forth?" For him, Christians are really immoral people because of the stances they take, and that's a huge obstacle in commending our

faith.

Boundless: How has this sort of campus apologetics-oriented ministry changed in recent years? In light of this pluralism, relativism business, has it changed?

Craig: I don't think it has changed. I think that we need to keep on doing the same things except that we need to address more squarely and head-on issues like pluralism and relativism, and so I am very eager to give talks on this. It's interesting. When I give a talk on this and lay out the problems in a very graphic way, I make the problems as hard as I can before I try to solve them. The reaction I get from students is very positive. I do not get hostility or skepticism. I find that if you give a good, solid, well-argued rational response, it seems to meet the need. So I don't think that we should change in any way, except to be more direct and to confront the issues straightforwardly.

Boundless: Briefly, could you explain the difference between social pluralism and philosophical pluralism? ... Just in a nutshell.

Craig: Right. Political pluralism is something that we all affirm because we live in a democratic society that emphasizes a Bill of Rights. We all have freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom of opinion, and so forth. And so we all, especially Christians who believe in freedom of conscience, want to affirm this sort of political pluralism. But the error is to think that political pluralism implies pluralism with respect to truth [i.e. philosophical pluralism]. That's what I deny. I argue that the proper basis of tolerance is that every human being is made in the image of God and therefore endowed with certain God-given rights, like freedom of belief, freedom of expression. Therefore, tolerance means that I may disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. Unfortunately, in our politically correct age, too many people have the impression that tolerance means, "I dare not disagree with what you say, lest I be branded bigoted or dogmatic for having dared to say it."

Boundless: Yes, it's an erroneous conflation of "tolerance" with "agreement" or "approval."

Craig: Yes.

Boundless: Let's see ... next question ... What arguments against Theism seem most effective?

Craig: I think undoubtedly the problem of innocent suffering. This has tremendous emotional appeal, especially among a lot of students who come from hurtful and dysfunctional family backgrounds and so carry a lot of emotional scars themselves. I think that in many cases, students are wondering, "Why did God allow me to be raised as a child in a home that has left me so emotionally dysfunctional?" That problem, I think, resonates with students, and it's very hard to overcome.

Boundless: What arguments in favor of Theism seem most effective?

Craig: Interestingly enough, I think the moral argument is the most effective. I, personally, like the scientific and philosophical arguments, based on science and cosmology. But I find that those don't really move students as much as the moral argument, which says that apart from God, there is no absolute foundation for moral values. Therefore, if you're going to affirm the value of things like tolerance, love, fair play, the rights of women, and so forth, you need to have a transcendent anchor point. You need to have God. I think students [are so familiar with the idea *God is dead, therefore everything is relative*] that they resonate with that argument when you tell them that apart from God, there are no moral absolutes. Then you just help them see how horrible the world would be without moral absolutes, and that they themselves — if they look at their own consciences introspectively — already affirm moral absolutes, despite the lip service that they might give to relativism. So this argument has tremendous appeal to students. It is one to which they respond.

Boundless: Now, on to the converse: What are the least effective arguments against Theism?

Craig: You know, that's a really hard question. I suppose that they would be arguments that are too abstract and philosophical. For example, in a recent debate I had with Walter Sinnott-Armstrong at Dartmouth College, he argued that if God is timeless, then he could not act in history. Well, that argument is so abstract and removed from everyday experience that I don't think that it moves many people.

Boundless: Now suppose that you're talking to undergraduate Intervarsity students somewhere: What would you tell them were ineffective arguments against Atheism?

Craig: Undoubtedly, I think that the ontological argument would be the least effective argument for God. I have been so tempted to use the ontological argument in a debate someday! I think it's a sound argument. I think it's a good argument for God's existence. But, whenever I try to explain it, it is so abstract and so far over people's heads that, in the end, I scratch it because nobody ever understands it. That one doesn't work very well. I am still sorely tempted to try it someday.

Boundless: And now, on the "Charismatic and Pentecostal's Advocate" question: I have many friends and acquaintances who are in churches like Assemblies of God and Church of God in Christ, and they confront me sometimes when I talk about apologetics with the assertion that none of it matters. They say "Conversion is all the Holy Spirit. You're never going to argue someone into the Kingdom, etc." How do you respond to that sort of criticism?

Craig: What I say is, just as the Holy Spirit can use preaching, He can also use apologetics and arguments to draw someone to Himself. The key here is to realize that the Holy Spirit uses means. He uses means by which to draw people to Himself. There's no reason to think that He can't use argument and evidence, just as much as preaching. When you look at the book of Acts, that's exactly the way Paul operated. He would argue with people. He would hold lectures in the hall of

Tyrannus. He would discuss these things with the philosophers on Mars Hill. I find, in dealing with people from a Charismatic or Pentecostal background, that the most effective thing to do is simply to let them see you use arguments in evangelism. And they get excited. It's only because they haven't seen it done effectively that they're skeptical. I just came from a large Assemblies of God Church in Edmonton, Canada, a couple of weeks ago, where we had over 900 people in the 20-some age range. I spoke of the absurdity of life without God, and they just ate it up. You can't just go on emotions and be a whole person. Even folks in this sub-culture of Charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity have minds that want answers. When they see it in action, coupled with passionate commitment to Christ, they love it, too. They really eat it up.

Boundless: Could you suggest perhaps a reading list for the undergraduate Christian who wants to build up his or her philosophical arsenal in defense of the Christian faith?

Craig: I would begin first by mastering some biblical materials. For example, I would get Donald Guthrie's *New Testament Introduction*, published by Intervarsity. Then I would also get the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, published also by Intervarsity. If you want a good philosophical intro, J.P. Moreland and I wrote a book called *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, published by Intervarsity. That's a somewhat difficult or intermediate level book, but nevertheless it would really be a great one to have. Another good book to have would be *Reason for the Hope Within*, edited by Michael Murray. There is a series of booklets published by Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, written by Christian philosophers, on a whole range of apologetic issues. I would encourage people to get that whole series of about fifteen booklets and work through those. My own book, *Reasonable Faith*, presents, I think, a very sound, positive apologetic for the Christian faith, based on the existence of God and the resurrection of Jesus as its two pillars. I would also recommend one more book, *Jesus Under Fire*, edited by Wilkins and Moreland, published by Zondervan. It's a terrific book in response to the so-called Jesus Seminar. Very timely, I think.

Boundless: Is it along the same lines as Boyd's *Cynic, Sage, or Son of God*?

Craig: Yeah, but it's written by a range of Evangelical authors who each contribute a chapter. So, you get a real range of expertise there.

Boundless: And could you recommend something along the lines of pre-evangelistic reading, say for those dealing with a skeptical roommate, friend, fraternity brother, or sorority sister? Someone who doesn't really want to read the Bible. What would you recommend for such a person?

Craig: I think Lee Strobel's books *The Case for the Creator* and *The Case for Christ* would be good books to put in the hands of a seeker. God has used those books to bring a lot of people to Christ, I understand.

Boundless: Thank you for your time, Dr. Craig!