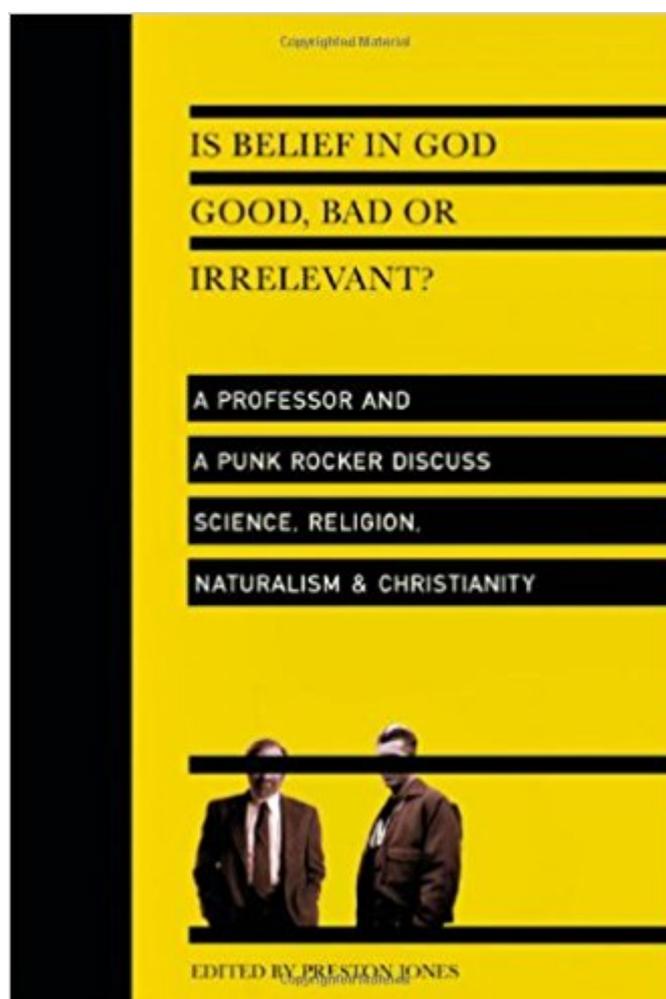


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# Is Belief In God Good, Bad Or Irrelevant?: A Professor And A Punk Rocker Discuss Science, Religion, Naturalism & Christianity



## Synopsis

Greg Graffin is frontman, singer and songwriter for the punk band Bad Religion. He also happens to have a Ph.D. in zoology and wrote his dissertation on evolution, atheism and naturalism. Preston Jones is a history professor at a Christian college and a fan of Bad Religion's music. One day, on a whim, Preston sent Greg an appreciative e-mail. That was the start of an extraordinary correspondence. For several months, Preston and Greg sent e-mails back and forth on big topics like God, religion, knowledge, evil, evolution, biology, destiny and the nature of reality. Preston believes in God; Greg sees insufficient evidence for God's existence. Over the course of their friendly debate, they tackle such cosmic questions as: Is religion rational or irrational? Does morality require belief in God? Do people only believe in God because they are genetically predisposed toward religion? How do you make sense of suffering in the world? Is this universe all there is? And what does it all matter? In this engaging book, Preston and Greg's actual e-mail correspondence is reproduced, along with bonus materials that provide additional background and context. Each makes his case for why he thinks his worldview is more compelling and explanatory. While they find some places to agree, neither one convinces the other. They can't both be right. So which worldview is more plausible? You decide.

## Book Information

Paperback: 165 pages

Publisher: IVP Books; Third Printing edition (June 18, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0830833773

ISBN-13: 978-0830833771

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.5 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (56 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #296,995 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #65 in [Books > Arts &](#)

[Photography > Music > Biographies > Punk](#) #172 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs >](#)

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## Customer Reviews

What do you get when put a conservative university professor who happens to be a Christian in the same room with a punk rocker who happens to be an atheist? Trouble, you would expect. Well the

two may not have shared the same room, but they have shared in a lot of correspondence, debating and discussing their worldviews. And trouble was not the outcome, but a spirited, intelligent and no-holds-barred exchange of ideas and beliefs. Preston Jones, a history professor and committed Christian, had long enjoyed the music of Bad Religion, especially its lyrics. He eventually wrote to the band's front man and song writer, Greg Graffin. A lively correspondence ensued, and that exchange is the subject of this book. The letters written by these two are frank, forthright and forceful. Their discussions are lively and vigorous, sometimes heated but always irenic. The respectful debate encountered here covers a wide range of topics, music included. Graffin is not your run of the mill punk rocker. He has written a PhD in evolutionary biology, and his lyrics drip with deep reflections and careful thoughts. They express, of course, the mind of a sceptic. Graffin does not believe in God, and he is willing to face a world without God head on, with all that entails. Yet despite his commitment to philosophical naturalism and his unbridled faith in science, he has questions, he is searching, and he is aware of his own limits. His songs are filled with thoughts about religion, life, meaning and purpose. Jones, on the other hand, is a believer who offers many insights and explanations from his own Christian faith, but can appeal to other sources as well. Thus they discuss not just biblical matters, but literature, music, science, art and many other topics. The two square off on numerous hot potato issues, such as the problem of suffering, the meaning of personhood, the theory of evolution, and the search for significance. No topic is too sacred to cover, and no avenue is too off limits to explore. This informed, entertaining and valuable collection of letters shows that people from two quite differing worldviews can still treat each other with respect as they passionately share their own beliefs and challenge those of the other person. Because this book is published by a Christian publisher, and the editor is a Christian, it of course takes on an apologetic approach. But it is not preachy nor moralistic. It simply lays out the honest thoughts of two deep and committed thinkers. Jones includes study questions, quotations and other bits of information throughout the book to help the reader go further with these discussions. By the end of the book Graffin has not yet "seen the light" but he shows an interest in, an appreciation of, the Christian worldview, and the case Jones seeks to make for it. And Jones sees in Graffin an intelligent and thoughtful proponent of atheism. The fact that Graffin is willing to dig deep in his reflections and probe thoroughly the big questions of life makes him superior to many believers with their easy believe-ism and shallow, uninformed faith. Indeed, Jones says he is more "at ease with thoughtful atheists than with Christians" who refuse to acknowledge the many challenges and mysteries of life. At least Graffin is asking the right questions - and the hard, probing questions. Too many believers settle for a simplistic faith that does not grapple with the serious issues of life, be it

suffering, doubt or mystery. Thus Jones is more than happy to enter the intellectual arena with Graffin, and exchange blows. Iron sharpens iron, and believers need the challenge of non-believers to keep them on their theological toes and to keep themselves spiritually fresh and focused. Many people - believers and nonbelievers alike - are simply not thinking about, and agonising over, the difficult questions of life. But many are. And it is to this later group that a book like this has so much to offer. Non-believers will find here a case for Christianity that is free of clichés and biblical proof-texting, and one that is based on serious reflection, personal struggle, and solid answers. And believers will find here the thoughts, questions and feelings that many nonbelievers are grappling with. This will challenge them to take their faith more seriously, and remind them that honest questions deserve honest answers. It is hoped that by reading this book many more such dialogues will begin. We have a lot to learn from each other, and really hearing what people are saying - on both sides of the debate - is an important means by which believers can share their faith and seekers can get some welcome feedback. Let the debate continue.

It is rare to find a such balanced and informed discussion regarding religion. The participants pose their arguments in a friendly manner, but they are both clearly well studied in their respective fields. I'm a Bad Religion fan, and thus am quite familiar with Greg Graffin's opinions. I find Preston Jones quite impressive, he's clearly a devout Christian, but not fundamentalist, and is refreshingly accepting of other ideas. This conversation would have been very different - if not impossible - if it were between Graffin and oh, say, Pat Robertson. What makes this book so engaging is the fact that both men were able to HEAR what the other was saying, then give an informed response without resorting to the name-calling and finger-pointing so prevalent on the cable news networks. This is the kind of debate this country needs. I read this book at the same time as reading Graffin's PhD thesis, and together they've underscored the fact that my personal beliefs are much more in line with Graffin's than with Jones's. But, while I don't always understand Jones's opinions, I greatly respect him as a scholar and educator.

The premise of the book is a terrific idea: an informal, ongoing exchange between someone holding a conservative Christian worldview and someone holding an atheistic, naturalistic worldview. Unfortunately, the end result is disappointing and leaves the reader with a sense of what *might* have happened rather than what *did*. I will agree that both authors are to be lauded for their courtesy, patience and willingness to talk to each other - as well as share the conversations with us. I also agree that more open-ended dialogues like this would benefit many groups that hold opposing

worldviews. However, the dialogue as presented here seemed entirely one-sided. As noted, Graffin's PhD in evolutionary science was earned; he knows what he's talking about. Jones, much to my frustration, knew almost nothing about evolutionary science and almost as little about how science works overall. Jones presented many evangelical stereotypes and out-dated arguments and positions; Graffin was far more patient than I would have been (and I count myself as a Christian). Jones also doesn't seem spurred to do any research or follow up thinking once Graffin replies, which robs the reader of some potentially great critical analysis of both sides' positions. Indeed, Jones comes off almost as an adoring teenage fan rather than an adult professor of history. Only when the topic lands squarely in Jones' bailiwick does his text grow some heft - and that is only for a few pages at most. Jones' grasp of Christian theology seems both basic and, well, infantile; he fails to seriously challenge Graffin on any points, instead generally taking a drubbing. Other reviewers are quite correct in saying this is *\*not\** a debate; however, the lack of substantial arguments, ideas, or displays of knowledge from Jones were, for me, fairly discouraging. Graffin shows an impressive ability to articulate and support his ideas, while Jones relies on stale and one dimensional standard "arguments" or rhetorical statements. While this really has nothing to do with the quality of the content, Graffin oddly comes off as awkwardly detached; the tone of most of his emails seems fairly distant or impersonal. Jones' notes, on the other hand, convey warmth and friendliness. If the quality of the exchange wasn't so one-sided, this contrast might not be as apparent or off-putting, but as the book is, Graffin sometimes comes across in print as bored or exasperated by Jones' comments and mistakes. Since the book is *\*not\** a debate, it just sort of ends...neither participant seems changed or challenged by it, and the reader doesn't get the sense that the exchange made any real impact on the writers. Unsatisfying and lopsided; I recommend searching for other books based around formal debates for better results.

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