



# Are Young People Losing Their Faith Because of Science?

*by John G. West, Ph.D.*

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*SUMMARY: Young people leave their faith for a variety of reasons, but for a significant number of them beliefs about science play an important role. These beliefs are often formed before young people enter college, which means that churches need to address the relationship between science and faith when young people are in middle school and high school, if not earlier.*

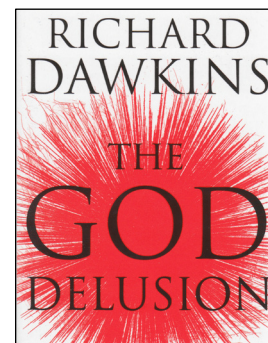
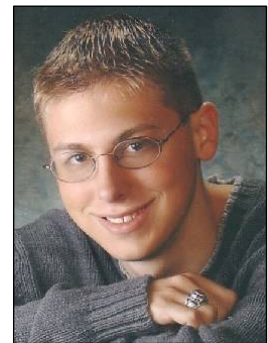
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Jesse Kilgore was a bright, inquisitive community college student in New York who loved to debate issues. But one day in the fall of 2008, the 22-year-old walked into the woods and killed himself.<sup>1</sup>

Jesse had been raised in a devout evangelical Christian home, and his father served as a military chaplain. He enjoyed defending his faith to his friends and acquaintances. However, in the last months of his life, Jesse had been hiding a deep secret from his father: A college professor had recommended that Jesse read atheist biologist Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*, which argues that science refutes belief in God. The book left Jesse devastated.

In the days following Jesse's suicide, Jesse's father learned that his son had revealed his growing inner turmoil to a few selected friends. In fact, just an hour before he took his own life, Jesse confided in his uncle, Rich May:

He started telling me about the fact that he had been taking this biology class and as a result there were a lot of things that really challenged his belief and kinda shaken him and made him lose his faith in what he believed in. [He] specifically mentioned, too, that his professor recommended that he get *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins.



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\* Associate Director of the Center for Science and Culture at Discovery Institute and former Chair of the Department of Political Science and Geography at Seattle Pacific University. Dr. West is the author or editor of 11 books, and he wrote the script for the documentary *The Toughest Test in College* (Focus on the Family/Tyndale), which explores the challenges faced by Christian young people when they enter college.

May recalled that when he heard of Jesse's death, he had "an instant realization" that his nephew had "ended his life... because he completely lost hope in the purpose of life." Jesse's dad, Keith Kilgore, later commented:

I woefully underestimated the heat and the challenges that he was going to take by going to that university... I thought he was bulletproof. I thought that what he would encounter there, that he could stand just about anything they could throw at him. But when he read that Richard Dawkins' book ... it ambushed his belief system.

Most young people who encounter the message that science and faith are in conflict will not end their lives. Nevertheless, Jesse's tragic story provides a window into how emotionally and spiritually devastating the belief that science refutes faith can be for a young man or woman. But just how widespread is the problem?

### **What the Research Shows**

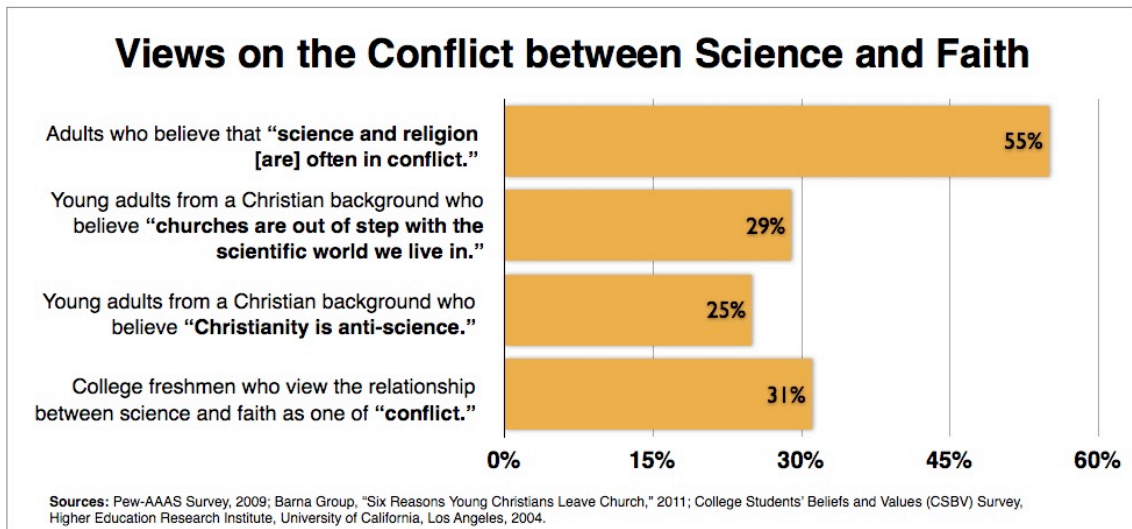
Studies indicate that 59-70% of young people who regularly attend church during their teen years will drop out of organized religion at least during part of their early adult life.<sup>2</sup> There is debate over how many of these young people will permanently leave the church and how many will return later in life.<sup>3</sup> Although some of their disengagement relates to intellectual questions (including questions about science), much of it is probably tied to transitions related to school and work and lifestyle choices.

**Despite their lack of church attendance, most of these "disengaged" young people still consider themselves Christians.<sup>4</sup> However, a significant subset of the "disengaged" go beyond dropping out of church and stop identifying themselves as Christians altogether. For a significant number of these young people, science appears to play an important role in their decision to leave the faith.**

Among the growing number of Americans who describe themselves as unaffiliated with any particular faith, nearly a third (32%) believe that "[m]odern science proves religion is superstition," while nearly a quarter (23-24%) identify this belief as an "important reason" they became unaffiliated. The percentages are even higher for those raised as mainline Protestants: 39% of those currently unaffiliated who grew up as mainline Protestants now believe that "[m]odern science proves religion is superstition," and 31% identify this belief as an "important reason" they became unaffiliated.<sup>5</sup>

Behind these statistics are people like Kyle Simpson. Raised as a devout Christian, the twenty-something Kyle now no longer believes in God, although he says he wants to believe.<sup>6</sup> Scientific claims played a key role in his change of mind. Interviewed by National Public Radio as part of a larger story on young people who leave their faith, Kyle explained:

I don't [believe in God] but I really want to. That's the problem with questions like these is you don't have anything that clearly states, 'Yes, this is fact,' so I'm constantly struggling. But looking right at the facts—evolution and science—they're saying, no there is none.



Kyle’s story is not surprising given that young people are growing up in a culture where the belief that science contradicts faith is widely expressed in the media, popular culture, and books by famous scientists such as evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and physicist Stephen Hawking.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, according to a recent national survey, 55% of American adults believe that “science and religion [are] often in conflict.”<sup>8</sup> (See the graph above.) This same attitude can be found among young adults originally raised as Christians. Nearly a third of young adults with a Christian background believe that “churches are out of step with the scientific world we live in,” and a quarter of them think “Christianity is anti-science.”<sup>9</sup>

The science versus religion message is often reinforced in college, especially in the natural and social sciences. While there are a number of distinguished scientists who believe in God, they are clearly in the minority in the scientific community, especially in college science departments and fields like evolutionary biology:

- At America’s top research universities, nearly 64% of faculty in the natural and social sciences identify themselves as atheists or agnostics.<sup>10</sup>
- At two-year and four-year colleges and universities, 61% of biologists consider themselves atheists or agnostics.<sup>11</sup>
- Among leading scientists in the field of evolution, 87% deny existence of God, 88% disbelieve in life after death, and 90% reject idea that evolution is directed toward an “ultimate purpose.”<sup>12</sup>

The secularism of many science professors finds its way into some college-level science textbooks, which undercut traditional religious beliefs in the name of science. For example, one prominent college-level evolutionary biology textbook told students: “By coupling undirected, purposeless variation to the blind, uncaring process of natural selection, Darwin made theological or spiritual explanations of the life processes superfluous.”<sup>13</sup>

Even outside of science classes, the science refutes religion message can be a prominent theme at colleges and universities. At Ball State University in Indiana, an English professor teaches an honors course on “Dangerous Ideas.” The sole textbook for

the course is an anthology edited by a prominent atheist in which the authors assert that “Science Must Destroy Religion,” that “[t]here is no God; no Intelligent Designer; no higher purpose to our lives,” and even that scientists should function as our society’s “high priests.”<sup>14</sup>

Christian science professors who try to offer a different viewpoint are often muzzled or blacklisted. The University of Kentucky rejected the hiring of outstanding astronomer Martin Gaskell after faculty expressed fear that Gaskell was “potentially evangelical.”<sup>15</sup> The same Ball State University that allowed the “Dangerous Ideas” course to be taught has tried to prevent a Christian physicist from teaching an honors seminar on the “Boundaries of Science” that includes a discussion of intelligent design.<sup>16</sup> As a result of such censorship on college campuses, most students are unlikely to be exposed to a balanced discussion on issues relating to faith and science on college campuses.

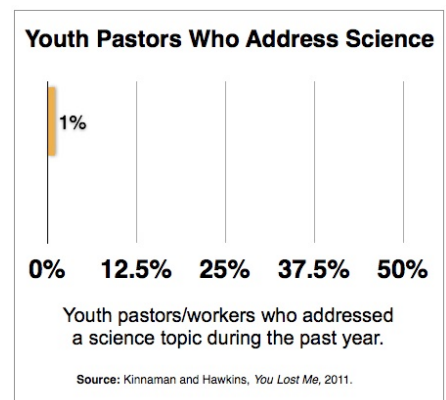
**Although many colleges and universities are undoubtedly fertile ground for promoting the idea that science and faith are in conflict, recent research suggests that a significant percentage of students *already* embrace the science versus religion mindset by the time they enter college.**

In a 2004 survey of more than 100,000 incoming college freshmen, nearly a third of first-year male students (30.6%) and nearly a fourth of first-year female students (22%) agreed with the statement “[t]he universe arose by chance.” Moreover, almost a third (30.8%) of all freshman viewed the relationship between science and faith as one of “conflict.” Another third of all freshman (31.9%) viewed the relationship between science and faith as one of “independence”—suggesting a compartmentalized view of religion as irrelevant to questions raised by science.<sup>17</sup>

**This research suggests that if churches want to be effective in answering student questions about science and faith, they cannot wait until adulthood or rely on college ministries to do the job. They need to be engaging young people on these issues when they are in middle school and high school, if not earlier.**

### **Obstacles to Churches Dealing with Science and Faith Issues**

According to one survey, most pastors indicate that addressing science issues with their congregations is somewhat or very important. Indeed, 79% of them said they “included scientific themes in at least one sermon in the past year,” while “40% had included them in at least ten sermons.”<sup>18</sup> By contrast, a larger survey of Protestant pastors indicated that only 35% of them teach on the specific topic of “creation and evolution” more than once a year, and 37% address the topic “seldom” or “never.”<sup>19</sup> Given that many of the claimed conflicts between science and faith arise from contemporary debates over Darwinian evolution, the reticence to address this “elephant in the living room” is unfortunate. **Of much greater concern is a survey of Christian youth pastors which revealed that only 1% addressed *any* topic related to science within the past year.**<sup>20</sup>



There are many reasons pastors, church leaders, and youth ministers may shy away from significant engagement with science and faith issues:

- They may feel a lack of expertise to address scientific claims.
- They may think that understanding science is not crucial to being a Christian.
- They may fear that addressing science and faith issues will polarize their congregation.
- Youth ministers may think that lifestyle and relationship issues are paramount, and that intellectual questions about science won't be interesting to many students.

While there are certainly some valid concerns here, they shouldn't prevent churches from ministering in this area. Pastors and church leaders do not need to be scientific experts in order to help their congregations explore the relationship between science and faith; there are many good resources available for pastors and educators to draw on (for examples, see the resources listed in the next section). While understanding science isn't necessarily crucial to being a Christian, at the same time, scientific-sounding claims are frequently being made that purport to undercut various Christian beliefs. Christians who are not equipped to deal with these claims are at a serious disadvantage.

It is nevertheless true that some topics (such as the age of the earth) can lead to polarization within the Church. But pastors and other church leaders can help defuse potential divisiveness by modeling a gracious and charitable attitude, and by encouraging their congregations to focus on certain key truths rather than marginal issues on which thoughtful Christians may disagree. Some of those key truths might include:

- Christianity is not anti-science. Indeed, the Judeo-Christian worldview helped nurture the scientific revolution.<sup>21</sup>
- Even many secular scientists affirm the incredible fine-tuning of the laws of physics that make life possible. We live on a “privileged planet” designed in a multitude of ways for life and for scientific discovery.<sup>22</sup>
- Inside our cells are molecular machines of exquisite beauty and complexity that point powerfully to purposeful design.<sup>23</sup>
- Human beings are special and unique in a multitude of ways.<sup>24</sup>
- Science is a wonderful human enterprise, but it is fallible and can be abused. It is therefore rational (and not “anti-science”) to explore competing scientific explanations, and to scrutinize cultural claims made in the name of science.<sup>25</sup>

In any good youth ministry program it is undeniable that teens need to learn how their faith speaks to lifestyle choices and relationships. But addressing those topics is not enough. Jesus clearly calls on his followers to love God with their *minds* as well as their hearts and strength (Matthew 22:37). The Apostle Paul likewise admonishes the church in Romans to be “transformed by the renewing of [their] minds” (Romans 12:2). It is paramount that Churches nurture the minds of their young people. Failing to do so will

further alienate some of the most inquisitive and thoughtful minds of the rising generation. Among young adults who have completely left the faith, there is a common refrain that their churches failed to engage their minds. In the words of Larry Taunton, who has interviewed many of these young people: “They felt their churches offered superficial answers to life’s difficult questions,” including debates over science.<sup>26</sup>

Simply from the standpoint of discipling young people to be “salt” and “light” in the culture (Matthew 5:13-16), teaching them how to integrate faith and science is critically important. With issues of science and technology at the center of so many of our political, ethical, and social decisions, can we really afford another generation of leading scientists dominated by self-identified atheists and agnostics? **Some 52% of young people in Christian youth groups say they plan to pursue a career in a field relating to science or technology.**<sup>27</sup> If churches want these young people to flourish in their callings and to have a positive impact on the culture, church leaders need to be intentional about equipping them with the tools they will need to relate their faith to their science.

### **Key Resources for Dealing with Science and Faith Issues**

Thus far I have discussed why it is important for churches to be pro-active in dealing with science and faith issues. Perhaps you would like to take action, but it seems a daunting endeavor. Where should you start? Fortunately, there are a growing number of practical resources available to enable churches, Christian schools, and parents to address the relationship between science and faith in a constructive manner. Here is just a sampling, but you can find a longer list at <http://www.scienceandgod.com/resources>:

- ***Science and Faith: Are They Really in Conflict?*** Scheduled for September 2014, this two-hour worldwide simulcast event will provide an easy way for churches and Christian schools to reach both adults and young people with the message that science and faith are friends, not foes. The event will feature renowned Oxford University Professor **John Lennox** and Discovery Institute Senior Fellow **Stephen Meyer**, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Darwin’s Doubt* and teacher of Focus on the Family’s *TrueU: Does God Exist?* DVD series. The simulcast will be emceed by bestselling author **Eric Metaxas**.
- ***The Toughest Test in College.*** This dramatic 45-minute documentary for teens and parents features compelling interviews with many Christian young people about their experiences in college, and it includes insights from leading experts on issues relating to science and faith. Available for free from Discovery Institute to qualified churches and schools, this DVD can be used in a variety of ways, including as part of an annual “College Prep Night” for high school teens and their parents. Free downloadable materials are available for use by churches and Christian schools with this resource.
- ***TrueU: Does God Exist?*** Produced by Focus on the Family, this 10-part DVD series features bestselling author Dr. Stephen Meyer and explores how scientific discoveries over the past century have made belief in God more defensible, not

less. This is a tremendous resource for high school students, college students, and adults. To maximize your use of the series, there are free lesson plans, discussion questions, outlines, and other resources available to download.

- ***Discovering Intelligent Design***. This new supplementary science curriculum (textbook, workbook, and DVD) presents the best evidence from physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology and related fields that provide evidence that nature is the product of intelligent design rather than blind unguided processes. Especially beneficial for homeschool educators and private schools.
- ***Faith and Evolution.Org***. For those who have questions about evolution and its relationship to faith, this educational website provides free access to hundreds of articles, debates, questions and answers, and even downloadable curricula.
- ***Science and Faith Update***. Produced monthly, this free e-newsletter from Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture highlights new articles, books, videos, events, and other resources related to science and faith. Subscribing to this newsletter is a great way to stay updated on practical science and faith resources you can use in your church, ministry, or school.

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations and other material related to Jesse Kilgore come from "The Story of Jesse Kilgore and the Consequences of Teaching One Side of Evolution," *ID the Future* podcast, Dec. 17, 2008, [http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/12/the\\_story\\_of\\_jesse\\_kilgore\\_and014721.html](http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/12/the_story_of_jesse_kilgore_and014721.html); and Bob Unruh, "Dad Links Son's Suicide to 'The God Delusion,'" *WND*, Nov. 20, 2008, <http://www.wnd.com/2008/11/81459/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," Barna Group, Sept. 28, 2011, <https://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/528-six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church>. Scott McConnell, "LifeWay Research Finds Reasons 18- to 22-Year-Olds Drop Out of Church," Aug. 7, 2007, <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church>; "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years," Barna Group, Sept. 11, 2006, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years-.UmBvnSTB2o1>.

<sup>3</sup> See discussion in Drew Dyck, "The Leavers: Young Doubtters Exit the Church," *Christianity Today* online, Nov. 19, 2010, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/november/27.40.html?paging=off>; also see the data on young people returning to church in "LifeWay Research Finds Reasons 18- to 22-Year-Olds Drop Out of Church."

<sup>4</sup> "As for religious identity, most twentysomethings maintain outward allegiance to Christianity: 78% of twentysomethings say they are Christians, compared with 83% of teenagers." In addition, "[y]oung adults were just as likely as older Americans to attend special worship events not sponsored by a local church, to participate in a spiritually oriented small group at work, to have a conversation with someone else who holds them accountable for living faith principles, and to attend a house church not associated with a conventional church. Interestingly, there was one area in which the spiritual activities of twentysomethings outpaced their predecessors: visiting faith-related websites." "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years," Barna Group.

<sup>5</sup> "Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, April 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2009/04/fullreport.pdf>, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in "More Young People Are Moving Away From Religion, But Why?" *NPR*, Jan. 15, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/01/15/169342349/more-young-people-are-moving-away-from-religion-but-why>.

<sup>7</sup> For Hawking's promotion of atheism, see Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, "Why God Did Not Create the Universe," *The Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 3, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704206804575467921609024244.html>, which is an



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excerpt from his book *The Grand Design*. For a good response, see John Lennox, *God and Stephen Hawking: Whose Design Is It Anyway?* (Lion, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> “Scientific Achievements Less Prominent Than a Decade Ago; Public Praises Science; Scientists Fault Public, Media,” July 9, 2009, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press survey in collaboration with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/528.pdf>, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> “Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church,” Barna Group.

<sup>10</sup> Elaine Howard Ecklund, “Religion and Spirituality among University Students,” Social Science Research Council, Feb. 5, 2007, <http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Ecklund.pdf>, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, “How Religious are America’s College and University Professors?” Social Science Research Council, Feb. 6, 2007, [http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Gross\\_Simmons.pdf](http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Gross_Simmons.pdf), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory W. Graffin and William B. Provine, “Evolution, Religion and Free Will,” *American Scientist*, vol. 95 (July-August 2007), pp. 294-297. Results also available at the Cornell Evolution Project, <http://www.polypterus.com/results.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Futuyma, *Evolutionary Biology*, third edition (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, 1998), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> For documentation, see Letter to Ball State University President about Academic Freedom, Sept. 10, 2013, <http://www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/filesDB-download.php?command=download&id=9701>, pp. 6-8.

<sup>15</sup> Casey Luskin, “University of Kentucky Pays \$100,000+ to Settle Gaskell Discrimination Lawsuit,” *Evolution News and Views*, Jan. 18, 2011, [http://www.evolutionnews.org/2011/01/university\\_of\\_kentucky\\_pays\\_10042931.html](http://www.evolutionnews.org/2011/01/university_of_kentucky_pays_10042931.html).

<sup>16</sup> John G. West, “Ball State President’s Orwellian Attack on Academic Freedom,” *Evolution News and Views*, August 1, 2013, [http://www.evolutionnews.org/2013/08/ball\\_state\\_pres075041.html](http://www.evolutionnews.org/2013/08/ball_state_pres075041.html).

<sup>17</sup> 2004 College Students’ Beliefs and Values (CSBV) Survey, conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, Los Angeles. A description of the survey can be found at <http://spirituality.ucla.edu/background/methodology/longitudinal-study.php>; a summary of the results can be downloaded at [http://www.ats.msstate.edu/pdf/reports/2004CSBV\\_Report.pdf](http://www.ats.msstate.edu/pdf/reports/2004CSBV_Report.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> “A Survey of Clergy and Their Views on Origins,” BioLogos.org, May 8, 2013, <http://biologos.org/blog/a-survey-of-clergy-and-their-views-on-origins>.

<sup>19</sup> “Protestant Pastors’ Views on Creation: Survey of 1,000 Protestant Pastors,” LifeWay Research, Jan. 9, 2012, accessible under the “Related Content” column at <http://www.lifeway.com/Article/Research-Poll-Pastors-oppose-evolution-split-on-earths-age>.

<sup>20</sup> David Kinnaman with Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church... and Rethinking Faith* (Baker Books), p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God* (Princeton University Press, 2003), pp 121-199.

<sup>22</sup> Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards, *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos Is Designed for Discovery* (Regnery, 2004); Michael Denton, *Nature’s Destiny: How the Laws of Biology Reveal Purpose in the Universe* (Free Press, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Michael Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*, second edition (Free Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> James LeFanu, *Why Us? How Science Rediscovered the Mystery of Ourselves* (Pantheon, 2009); Ann Gauger, Douglas Axe, and Casey Luskin, *Science and Human Origins* (Discovery Institute Press, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> For an elaboration on this point, see John G. West, editor, *The Magician’s Twin: C.S. Lewis on Science, Scientism, and Society* (Discovery Institute Press, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Larry Alex Taunton, “Listening to Young Atheists: Lessons for a Stronger Christianity,” *The Atlantic* online, June 6, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/listening-to-young-atheists-lessons-for-a-stronger-christianity/276584/>.

<sup>27</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, p. 140.