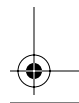
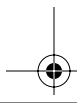
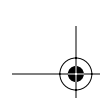


INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1983 or '84, my best friend, John, and I returned to my house after a day at Parris Lake in Southern California. As soon as we walked in the door I turned on my radio, which was tuned to the station based at the University of Redlands. Simultaneously I hit the “play” and “record” buttons on the radio’s cassette player. The station, KUOR, always had something cool on the air, something that couldn’t be heard on any other station in San Bernardino, where John and I grew up. That evening, KUOR was playing punk, and one of the songs I recorded was titled (I thought) “Well Go Ahead and Die.” It became my favorite eighties punk song. But I never knew who recorded it, and I never understood its lyrics, except for the line “Early man walked away, and Spider-Man’s in control,” which doesn’t exactly make sense.

Fast-forward to 1994. I had been out of the Navy for four years and was working my way through a master’s program at California State University, Sonoma. As had been the case since 1990, I was working as a counselor at a psychiatric facility. One evening at work a patient, whom I’ll call Rob, was playing an album (this was before the CD era) that caught my attention. The music’s driving bass and guitars, the harmony, the intelligent lyrics—it was all quite catchy. Rob, who himself was pretty bright, was playing Bad Religion’s *Stranger Than Fiction*. The next day I bought my own copy—on cassette—and *Stranger Than Fiction* became something that helped Rob and





me connect. Rob told me about Bad Religion's lead singer, who he said was a professor at Boston College. In the evenings when Rob and I would talk, he would analyze BR's lyrics, making philosophical connections among songs on different records.

**Father, can you hear me?
How have I let you down?
I curse the day that I was born,
And all the sorrow in this world. . . .
When all soldiers lay their weapons
down,
Or when all kings and all queens
relinquish their crowns,
Or when the only true messiah
rescues us from ourselves . . .
It's easy to imagine there will be . . .
Sorrow, no more.**

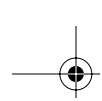
**Greg Graffin, "Sorrow,"
The Process of Belief (2002)**

Fast-forward again to 2001. I'm living in Dallas now, cleaning the bathroom at home and listening to another Bad Religion tape, *All Ages*, which I had bought a few years before but hadn't listened to very often. The next song came on, and I realized that my favorite eighties punk tune was by BR, whose sound had changed over the years. I also learned that the song's real title was "We're Only Gonna Die," and that the lyrics I thought were about Spider-Man actually said, "Early man walked away as modern man took control." Yes, all those years I

had been mistakenly singing about an action hero.

Fast-forward one last time to early 2003. On the headmaster's desk at the Christian preparatory school where I was teaching was Bad Religion's new CD—modern technology at last!—*The Process of Belief*. The headmaster told me that his son, a college student in Maine, had recommended the CD to him, and he intended to play a couple BR songs to his theology students the next day. He wanted his students to think about the lyrics and reflect on how they would respond in conversation to a person who took BR's point of view. The fol-





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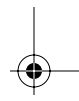
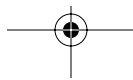
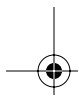
lowing morning I heard “Sorrow,” one of the best songs on *Process*, blaring from the classroom across the hall.

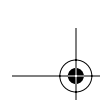
Like “We’re Only Gonna Die” and all of the songs on *Stranger Than Fiction*, “Sorrow” grabbed me. Within a few months I had bought all the BR recordings I didn’t already own, this time on CD. I listened to them constantly—while working in the yard (now I lived in Arkansas), while training for marathons in Dallas and Anchorage, while washing the dishes. I learned that BR’s front man, Greg Graffin, wasn’t a professor at Boston College and never had been. Rather, he was completing a Ph.D. in evolutionary biology at Cornell.

In the late summer of 2003, I decided on a whim to send Greg Graffin an e-mail.

It’s probably not accurate to say that the correspondence that followed between Greg and me led to a “relationship” or “friendship,” at least not in the traditional sense of those words. I don’t know that anyone can really do that through e-mail. But I do think our exchanges grew into a genuine and overall friendly conversation. We’re two guys of similar age, temperament, musical taste and intellectual interests who both grew up in Southern California. We’re both curious about how ideas shape behavior and cultures. We both tend to be nonconformists, though we can live within “the system” so long as it doesn’t step on us or tax our individuality. We both work hard, and we’re proud of what we’ve accomplished. We’re both committed to learning. At the time of this writing, we’re both in our late thirties.

A major difference between us is that Greg is an atheist songwriter whose lyrics often concern themselves with religion. I’m a Christian with a deep commitment to God that





somehow coexists with a skeptical disposition toward much of what I hear people say about God.

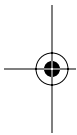
Though I have been a Christian since my early teens, I have sometimes felt more at home with atheists than with fellow believers. Two of my favorite books were written by atheists, Albert Camus and John Kekes, and another favorite was written by a very bad example of a Christian, the British novelist and travel writer Evelyn Waugh.

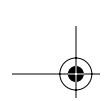
*In his best novel, **The Plague (1947)**, Camus writes of a priest, **Father Paneloux**, who outwardly maintained an aura of serenity as disease ravaged a quarantined city. "But from the day on which he saw a child die, something seemed to change in him. And his face bore traces of the rising tension of his thoughts." One reason Camus's writing is so powerful is that he refuses to try to explain the suffering of the innocent. Instead, his response is to be morally enraged and to try and do something to stop it. I think this is the response God wants from people.*

*The books I recommend by Kekes are **Moral Wisdom and Good Lives (1995)** and **Facing Evil (1990)**. Kekes's approach is stoical, less from the soul than from the disciplined mind, but he has powerful and realistic insight into the human condition. Of course, Kekes never uses the theological concept of the Fall, but his moral philosophy springs from a serious assessment of the fallen world.*

Preston Jones

I mention these writers in my letters (see pages 46-48), and I have added relevant quotes from them to this book. Evelyn Waugh's great novel *Brideshead Revisited* became a topic of discussion between Greg and me. If you haven't read this novel, or seen the BBC film production of it, I hope you will.





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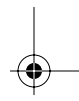
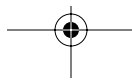
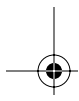
I suppose that sometimes I've felt more at ease with thoughtful atheists than with Christians because atheists often come to their beliefs after asking difficult questions about evil, suffering and the seeming indifference of the universe. I grew up in a very tough neighborhood; three kids I knew personally were murdered, and I myself was shot at and mobbed by thugs. A few years ago, a guy I didn't know took four bullets to the head in my parents' driveway.

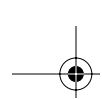
Curiously, perhaps, I have never questioned God about the violence in the neighborhood I grew up in. It has always been clear to me that the people who made that neighborhood the way it was could have done otherwise. They've had access to educational opportunities, counseling and job training. They're responsible for the mess they created.

But I saw a lot during my time in the Navy (1986 to 1990) that knocked me off balance. My Sunday school lessons didn't seem to help me understand what I saw in the Philippines and Thailand, though they did help to keep me out of trouble.

As I have grown older, I've often thought that, as great and important as the churches I grew up in were, and as grateful as I am for the basic moral lessons I learned in them (which over the years helped me avoid many personal disasters), they really didn't seem to take the Bible seriously as a commentary on the complicated, crazy, amazing and often frightening human situation. It's such a ferociously realistic, truthful and profound book.

Sometimes I think that American Christians are reluctant to face the profundity of the Bible and Christian tradition. I don't think it's because they're Christians. I think it's because





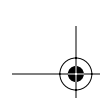
they're Americans. I don't mean to sound anti-American—my students can assure you I'm not. But I'm hardly the first person to recognize that the United States isn't a country that values the life of the mind. As a generalization, it seems safe to say that Americans prefer Wal-Mart to libraries, Big Macs to big ideas, and TV to education. This worries me, and I find that for whatever reason, many atheists, like Greg, share my concerns.

In places like Olongapo [in the Philippines] something malicious had its way—not only in the brothels [where young women and girls were trapped], but in the minds of a good number of my fellow sailors who found this bizarre new world too alluring to resist. Never did the omnipotent being in whom I had been taught to believe seem so absent, so weak as he did on those city blocks. Never did [the] doctrine of the total depravity of humankind seem so true. Never was I so thankful for my good fortune as a child to have had the Bible rammed down my throat by shaky-voiced old ladies. Even as I questioned God's existence, Sunday school lessons echoed in my mind.

Preston Jones, "The Evil That We Do" (1997)

As you read this book it's important to remember that Greg's and my correspondence wasn't originally meant for public consumption. We wrote because we enjoyed the give and take, and for a brief space of time we had the time to devote to what we considered a private project. A couple months into our correspondence I thought that what we had written might be useful to others. Greg agreed. As the correspondence was edited for publication, some personal or peripheral material was deleted and a few sentences were in-





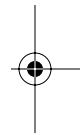
Introduction

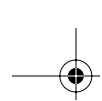
serted in various places to add clarity to a few exchanges. But nothing substantial was added to our exchanges after the fact.

Certainly, after we decided that others might be interested in our correspondence, we could have gone back and made our notes more formal; we could have added more scholarly references; we could have carefully defined the terms we used; we could have eliminated loose ends; we could have turned the conversation into a more formal debate. But we preferred to let the conversation remain what it was. I know this might make parts of the book frustrating for readers: some questions are raised but not answered, some topics are left unresolved, and the only comprehensive theme is the conversation itself.

The approach we have taken makes for an unusual book. But we think it's worthwhile for people to see what an uncanned, unorchestrated conversation between people of very different beliefs can look like. If you find yourself thinking, "Greg should have said . . ." or "Why didn't Preston say . . . ?" or "They're both wrong!" or "He should have quoted so-and-so!" then we hope you will fill in what you think is missing. Indeed, this book will be most useful to readers who participate in the conversation—with other students or a teacher in a classroom, with a study group or in their personal studies. To encourage this, I have added material that builds on the correspondence. The study guide at the end of the book will also be useful.

To Christian readers I want to say this: I know that some of what I have written and some of the positions I take might be offensive. This concerns me because, while I want to challenge people to think—and I also like being challenged—I





have no interest in being merely obnoxious or dismissive. If you think I am wrong about something, I hope you will let me know.

I also should say that I don't expect professional philosophers and theologians to be impressed with my musings. I read some philosophy, psychology and theology (I wish I had more time for all three and much more), but most of the time I'm thinking about classes I need to teach, and when I have my research hat on, I study late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century North America. I'm making this correspondence available because I hope it will promote thought and conversation. This book is intended as a starting point for people interested in putting their intellects to work.

I want to emphasize that this book does not consist of a debate. I know that, despite what I say, some readers will still construe it as such. But I never kept score between Greg and myself. I never had an impulse to see who was "winning," to see which of us was making the better points. Greg didn't either. I tried to maintain this disposition throughout the editing process.

My hope is that Greg's and my correspondence will encourage people to use the brains God gave them.

Preston Jones
John Brown University

