

LEARNING TO THINK CRITICALLY

Ravi Zacharias

Danielle DuRant: It's great to be with you, Ravi, to talk about critical thinking and engaging an audience. Would you begin by defining critical thinking for us?

Ravi Zacharias: Let me put it in the simplest words I can. The word “critical” often comes through as negative; that is, you’re criticizing somebody. Strangely enough, if you use the word “critique,” it comes through more positively because you are critiquing a book or critiquing an essay. I think critical thinking has two components to it. The main component is when you’re analyzing any propositional statement or system of thought, you are engaged with critical thinking whether you like it or not. So the only question is, are you doing it well? Are you doing it in a way that is befitting the subject or are you doing it unjustly? The second aspect of it is the ethical implications of whatever it is you have processed.

So I like to think of critical thinking as an analytical process of evaluating the truth component of the statement or thought you are processing. That has to be done. If you are looking at a worldview, any assertion, or any challenge to your own worldview, you have to evaluate it on the basis of truth, the coherence of what is being claimed, and then the implications of what this means for your personal life. So first there is an analytical component to it—the truth component, the synthesizing component. And second, at the end of it there must be an application or an imperative component to it. We must think critically especially in defending our worldview or in challenging a counter perspective. So critical analysis of worldviews is what critical thinking is all about.

DD: Many vocations involve critical thinking, whether you are a surgeon, a lawyer, a teacher. Why is it so important for the Christian particularly to engage in critical thinking and to develop critical thinking skills?

RZ: The Christian still for some reason is charged illegitimately with being the only one who is exclusive. I have said it many times before: all worldviews claim exclusivity, but somehow it is popular to hit the Christian as the only one that lays claim to this. Yes, we do lay claim to the fact that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. There is an exclusive claim made by Jesus in the pages of the Scriptures. But exclusivity is also claimed in the pantheistic worldviews and in all of the monotheistic worldviews. So for the Christian, it should be done gently, it should be done efficiently, effectively, and with respect when you are talking to anybody.

I’ve just come back from parts of the world where I had to be so careful in what I said and how I said it because ninety percent of the audience sitting in front of me was not sympathetic towards my belief. I was engaged in a critical analysis of my own worldview and then showed why it was tenable and

coherent. So for the Christian today, and especially for our young, it is important to instruct them not only on how to defend what we believe but also how to do it with gentleness and respect. As Peter tells us in I Peter 3:15-16, to do that with gentleness and respect to always be able to give a reason for the hope that is within you. It is imperative upon us to do it justifiably and to do it respectfully.

DD: What about the Christian who says, "I really don't need to learn this skill; I just need to study the Bible."

RZ: I wish that person were right because I would love to be that way too! Interestingly, many Muslims actually live like that. I have talked to one of the leading muftis, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, and he said, "I just have to tell you what the Qur'an says and that's what I believe." Well, what happens in a world of pluralistic options? What happens to the world of reason? What happens to legitimizing the process, not just the end conclusion you've come to? Is that what it is all about? "I'm not going to listen to any other argument; I'm just going to believe what I claim to believe." Can you do that in a court of law? "I'm not going to defend what I'm saying; I'm just telling you I didn't do it." It doesn't work.

We do believe that the Bible is the Word of God, but we come through a process of legitimizing that claim. We just didn't make that claim; we tell you why we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, and the Bible itself lays claim to this methodology. For example, in the Gospel of John, when the Holy Spirit comes, Jesus said that the Spirit would bring conviction of truth, righteousness, and things to come. Peter says this is that which was spoken of by the prophet Joel. So while he's harking to Scripture, he's harking back also to an empirical way of justifying it: this is a fulfillment of prophecy which was spoken of hundreds of years ago. There is a rational process, existential relevance, and a methodology we must adhere to. In a world full of challenges, you have to come to something outside of the text that you are defending rather than saying this is the text I believe.

DD: So critical thinking is clearly an essential and a necessary bridge, particularly to an unbelieving or skeptical audience. How did Francis Schaeffer use this discipline to compel non-believers to see the irrationality of their beliefs?

RZ: That's a good question because I think Francis Schaeffer broke new ground. When I was a young student in the 70s just entering into my theological training, Schaeffer was a big name. He authored such works as *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, *The God Who Is There*, and *Death in the City*. Schaeffer was a pastor but became branded more as a philosopher, and with the opening of L'Abri, young existentialists would stop by and interact. Regarding Schaeffer's method, he took the skepticism of an Immanuel Kant and pointed out how Immanuel Kant came to a point in his thinking that you really can't make any meaningful statements about God. He moved God-talk into a nimbus, into a realm where you can't critically talk about God, so it bred a kind of skepticism, which Schaeffer took to task.

Schaeffer was very adept in what he did: he took the existentialist and the nihilist to their point of despair, to where it was that their philosophy bred a despairing worldview, such as nihilism meaning “nothingness.” He showed them through art or philosophy that these points of despair had to be addressed and why Christ brings meaning and hope. Schaeffer did it very effectively and he ministered to a lot of people in the 70s and 80s.

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I remember meeting him just once when we hosted him in Nyack, New York. He was pretty feeble at that point. If Schaeffer can be credited with anything, it was breaking wide open this terrain for the Christian, charging us, “You better start defending what you believe and know where we are heading.” So when Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop wrote in [*Whatever Happened to the Human Race*](#) that humanity was moving in the direction of destruction, whether in sexuality or in the sanctity of life, Schaeffer pointed out that we were moving towards the extinction of meaning. Philosophy was leading us there in terms of its assumptions. But the fact of the matter is, life is intended to be meaningful, and Schaeffer showed how Christ addresses that. That is the bridge Schaeffer provided between the despair of the 60s and the postmodernism of the 90s. It is a very valuable reminder to us of how to approach this.

DD: And if I recall correctly, I believe it was Schaeffer who popularized the statement “all truth is God’s truth.”

RZ: Yes, he did. And I think it was often misused by people who didn’t understand what he was saying. What Schaeffer was actually saying is that if something is true, it would also be true in what God has said of reality and the nature of life, destiny, origin, meaning, and so on. So if it is true, it is not just “secularly true;” it is also true in the theological realm. It was interesting what Mahatma Gandhi said: “Truth is God and God is truth.” Now Gandhi was depersonalizing it in a way and making an abstraction out of it, but the fact of the matter is there is no contradiction in God. There is nothing that causes God to disintegrate within Himself; so I would say that Gandhi abstracted what Schaeffer then personalized.

DD: What about people such as the new atheists who accuse Christians of being irrational and lacking critical thinking skills? After all, we believe in a Jesus who walked on water and was born of the Virgin Mary. That seems fairly irrational to the average skeptic.

RZ: You know, I find the atheist very clever in what they do. For example, why do they discount miracles? According to David Hume, because the natural law functions routinely—so why do you look for miracles, an oddity in the midst of natural law? So they did away with the miraculous because they were going with what was normative and what was routine. But then when it came to ethics, they very

cleverly switched the terms. If you started talking about an absolute, which was normative, they would interject an exception like, “What happens if you walk into your home and your family member is being assaulted? Are you telling me you will not fight or take a baseball bat or something?” Very fascinating. When it came to natural law in the realm of the sun and the planets, they did not allow for the exceptions. But when it came to ethics, it was the exception that debunked the absolute. So what do those two reactions have in common? They both want to get rid of God—because if you bring in the miraculous in natural law, you have to accommodate the presence of God. If you take the normative and the absolute in ethics, you have to invoke upon the very person of God. So it is more the atheist that is anti-reason and anti-rational, but the accusation that is made against the Christian is leveraged to their advantage now.

But what about the origin of the universe? Is it repeatable? No. They themselves say this could never happen again. What about the contingencies that it took? Thirty some contingencies the exactitude demanded. The very fact that you and I are here is the process of what even atheists would sometimes say is so awesome that it is tantamount to being something like a miracle. Some of the scientists have used that very word. So what I say to them is, you have already accepted that which is not repeatable. You have already accepted that which is so rare. You have already accepted the fact that when you come to a singularity, you are actually seeing the laws of physics do not apply to all of those origins. Do we really think that the consummation of love between a man and a woman and the birth of a child is just something that is explainable so naturalistically? Rather than seeing the miracle of birth and the wonder of it, we think just by describing it that we have debunked the notion of the miracle.

So when we talk about walking on water and the miraculous, we are talking about a theistic framework. When you are able to defend the existence of God, you also talk about the intervention of God in history and the intervention of God in the process of a natural law. To me, the very fact of natural law is a miraculous expression of God to sustain life. You remember when we had the two astronauts visiting us here at the office. They talked about looking through the windows of space as they were orbiting the earth and seeing something so unique about this planet and its particularity. I think we live with the miraculous every day.

Now the atheist is unfortunately partially correct when he or she attacks the Christian faith and we make no proper defense of it. So I think the defense of the existence of God, the defense of the very person of Jesus Christ, and the defense of the miraculous can be done and ought to be done.

I would ask the atheist how is it that they defend moral reasoning in an amoral universe that by non-moral origins has arrived at this kind of thinking and this kind of argument. I think they have a lot more to explain than the Christian does.

DD: So it sounds like there are a few essential questions that every Christian ought to be able to answer. You mentioned the existence of God and the uniqueness of Christ.

RZ: Very much so, Danielle, for two reasons. The first one talks about the existence of God in general terms, a theistic framework. We assume as Christians that God exists. But I was just in Paris talking to two leading French businessmen and neither of them thinks within a theistic framework. They were talking about the French elections, and somewhere in the conversation around the table somebody asked if they taught ethics or on anything spiritual. “Oh no, no we don’t deal with that at all,” they said. Then they talked about three candidates that were in the running for election and one of the businessmen—who was one of their students—said that the first candidate was addicted to alcohol, the second was addicted to women, and the third was addicted to corruption. These are their words! And so my wife, Margie, said, “Maybe they do need to start teaching something about spiritual values and ethics.”

Then something very strange happened. As we were having dinner, we looked out of the window into the Paris night sky and there was a beautiful streak of white across the dark clouds. The man sitting next to me, a leading businessman who is very well known in France, said, “Maybe there is a God.”

We need to recognize that without the theistic framework, this world will implode under the weight of our own addictions, principally to ourselves. So you move beyond the theistic framework to the Christian framework in the presentation of Jesus Christ. I’m not talking about the presentation of Christendom nor in a sense of even Christianity. Rather, who is Jesus? What did He claim? Why it is that He is the one who is able to redeem the heart, transform our lives, and give us that new hunger that we so need to make life meaningful in this world?

DD: We’re talking about critical thinking skills, but of course we’re not dismissing the fact that it’s the Word of God that converts and changes people’s lives, transforming them.

RZ: Absolutely. I think that’s an important point to make: that really, critical thinking is to lay bare what is readily visible to reason, but it is the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, says John 6, that draws us. We will never come to Him; transformation of the human heart is ultimately a spiritual thing. I saw that happen even on this trip with a man for whom family and friends have been praying for eleven years. He was hard-nosed tough. We were sitting on a sofa chatting on a yacht that they had chartered because they wanted to ask me their questions. He was talking about a broken relationship and how he went to the one with whom the relationship was broken and said, “I’d love to rebuild this

if you would turn your back upon these other things that are drawing you away from the family.” He said the partner was hesitant and just put it in a corner.

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A few minutes later I said to him, “What’s keeping you from Christ?” He said, “This conditional love from God—that either you come to me or you will end up in this kind of a destiny.” I looked at him and I said, “I’m fascinated. In the opening part of our conversation you said that you looked at the person you loved and said, ‘Why don’t we rebuild if you turn your back upon these other attachments?’ Were you laying a condition or were you reminding this person that love has built-in conditions if it is to find fulfillment? What do you think God is saying to you? God is not offering you a conditional love. He’s built a framework of love and relationship where there are preconditions necessary if you are to find fulfillment in these things, just as this yacht on the water has met the preconditions of how to stay afloat. Is this some kind of a conditional thing that is to put us in jeopardy or a conditional thing to help us enjoy what it is like to float on this water?”

And I kid you not: he suddenly just burst out into tears. A man in his fifties, he literally got on his knees and just sobbed and sobbed. For the first time, he saw that if we are to enjoy the love of God, we are going to enjoy it only when we deal with it within the framework that God has designed it to be enjoyed. So it sounds like there are a few essential questions that every Christian ought to be able to answer. You mentioned the existence of God and the uniqueness of Christ.

DD: Wow, that’s really powerful. That reminds me of the scene in The Mission, if you recall that film from years ago. The actor Robert De Niro has this huge bag of metal on his back and he feels that he has to carry this burden because he’s killed a man. He’s holding on to this baggage throughout the movie, climbing through the mountains. Finally someone cuts it off of him and everyone laughs with joy because they recognize the absurdity of him holding on to this burden. It seems that you’ve expressed that even the boundaries that God sets for us are for our safety and for our good.

RZ: Yes. That scene you are talking about reminds me of the Roman law and when Paul says, “Who shall deliver me from this body of death?” If you murdered someone, one of the punishment possibilities was for you to carry the corpse on your back. You literally carried that “dead weight,” so you’d think twice especially about the size of the person you’d want to kill! Paul says, “Who shall deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God”—He does.

We bear the burdens of our own violations. A skeptic said to me in a dinner in Abu Dhabi, “After listening to you tonight, I have to say to you the one thing that’s missing in our culture here is the

redemptive aspect.” Amazing! He said that they can talk you into believing there is forgiveness, but you pay. There is a price to be paid. Then he said, “I’m thinking of this redemptive aspect when you and I realize our redeemer paid the price for something we could not even pay for and gave us that new birth and that new life.”

So critical thinking sounds like such an abstract thing but rightly applied leads us to the crises of reasoning in life apart from God. He is the transcendent point for reasoning, hope, meaning, and destiny. The Bible says, “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18). God is a reasoning God, and He pleads and calls to show us that his way is the way that puts it back together. Our way is the way that destroys it.

DD: You’ve already alluded to some of the amazing opportunities that you’ve had recently to speak in the Middle East and with atheists in Europe. Would you tell us about your invitation from the sheik?

RZ: I was in Bahrain, Dubai, and then in Abu Dhabi. In Bahrain I was asked to speak on “Is Peace Possible?” and then in Abu Dhabi I was hosted by the sheikh who actually funded the whole event and came and sat in the front row. It was a phenomenal moment. In Bahrain, when I finished speaking on the possibility of peace, which I subtitled, “Our Way or God’s Way,” the brigadier from my table walked right up towards the platform as I stepped down and gave me a hug in his flowing robes. He said, “Please take this message to the rest of the world; we need it.” In Abu Dhabi, the sheikh, who is a member of the royal family, sat through my whole talk of 45 minutes on “Foundations for Living.” He also walked up to the platform, embraced me, kissed me on both sides of the face, and said, “I hope this is the beginning of a long friendship.” Then he had me visit their university the next day and to speak at their national library.

Here’s what I want to say: I have to be very careful. Sometimes I wish I could give the whole nine yards in the first setting; there’s nothing I’d want to do than that. But as Christian apologists, we take one step at a time. You have to earn the right to be heard. I did bring the gospel. I did present Jesus Christ. Would I have liked to have done more? Absolutely. I think the opportunity is coming as I’ve been invited back.

You open these doors very carefully because you know you’ve not opened them, God’s opened them, and you have to walk wisely. They have absolutely no doubt what I believe, why I believe it. So we have to know there are genuine seekers. Coming from India, I know exactly what all that means. I think even of Elisha in 2 Kings 5. When Naaman was healed of his leprosy, he asked Elisha, “What do I do now? When I go back and my master leans on my arm, by virtue of his weight on my arm I have to bow before the Temple of Rimmon.” Elisha didn’t tell him, “Do it” or “Don’t do it.” Elisha said, “Go in

peace.” That is, “Go, and God will be with you.” I think it is interesting that he said essentially that at the right time, you will know exactly what to do and God will give you strength.

DD: I imagine you faced some challenging questions in these settings.

RZ: Yes. They were very, very pointed and there were some tough ones. We couldn't deal with all of them. I have to go beyond the question to the questioner. For example, one of the questions asked in Dubai was, “You've talked about ‘Can man live without God’ but who is this God?” That was one question and fifty percent of the audience was from the Islamic worldview. So I said, “The ultimate definition to me is the creator of the universe and the one who has called us to Himself who is the redeemer of the universe provided for us through his Son, Jesus Christ. He offered to indwell us with the presence of his Holy Spirit to be able to deal with temptation and the struggles of this world. So I'm talking about the God that is spoken of in the Old and the New Testaments.”

DD: Going back to critical thinking, what about the role of the Holy Spirit in this process? I'm thinking there may be some who would say, “I really don't need to sharpen my critical thinking skills because the Holy Spirit is the revealer of truth.”

RZ: Well, any time anything is taken to an extreme, it is an improper use of reasoning. If somebody says, “I don't need any critical thinking; the Holy Spirit is all I need and the Bible is all I need,” I would ask, “Why do you think Saul of Tarsus was chosen as the one to become the apologist of his time? Why was Moses? Why was Daniel?” These people were well-learned in all the philosophies of their time. We were in Ephesus recently and that's where Paul set up the school of Tyrannus. Why? To dialogue and to debate. He would even use their own poets.

We need to differentiate between the path to the gospel and the power of the gospel—they are two different things. The path to removes the prejudices and hurdles, and to start quoting the Scriptures at that time is to quote the very thing that is a hurdle. You are defending that which you are going to use and defend. You know, people in the West may have a completely different view of evangelism to those of us who come from the East. I know how long it took to clear the obstacles for my father in bringing him to a point where he could hear the gospel. I was recently with Chinese business people. One of them was devotedly committed to worshipping his ancestors and talked about it. Thus for me to start immediately sharing the gospel, what he is registering at that point is, “Are you asking me to turn my back upon my ancestors?” So we have to realize the implications of how they are reading what you are saying and those have to be addressed.

DD: You mentioned Ephesus and I'm thinking of our work in Turkey. I did not know how few Christians there are in this biblical land or that a Turkish Christian is seen as basically not being Turkish. That is, if you are a

Christian in Turkey, you can't be Turkish because you would be of another faith. These are hurdles one has to step over.

RZ: It's very hard, very hard. I remember a friend I grew up with and we played cricket together. I remember he used to have a phrase he would use when he would talk to me after I became a Christian. He would say, "You've lost your originality." It was his way of saying, "You're not an Indian anymore." I would say to him, "Why do you say that? Would you say that to a Muslim in India? 'You've lost your originality.' Would you say that to a Buddhist in India? Why are you saying that? You're saying it because I'm a Christian, because I have become a follower of Jesus Christ. But are you aware of the fact that He spoke in parables? He spoke with wisdom; He spoke in proverbs. He was talking to us as Easterners."

The parables are all laden with Eastern motif, but this cultural, familial tie is a very real tie, and we don't realize how tough it is. But when they come to know Christ, they know what the implications are. Sometimes in the West we just think we have added another thing to our belief. In the East you have to know there is a renunciation that takes place of some beliefs. Now, does that mean disrespect for the family? No, absolutely not. A young man who comes to know Christ will actually love his parents even more and respect them. It is just that we do not deify them because we know there is one God and one mediator between God and man, and that's the person of Christ Jesus.

DD: As we close, would there be some resources that you would recommend for Christians to engage deeper in critical thinking?

RZ: There are so many. There are many books written on logic; there are many books written on reason. Dr. Norman Geisler's book [*Come Let Us Reason*](#) is a tough one but it gives you the formal fallacies of reasoning. A book that helped me a great deal years ago was Mortimer Adler's [*Ten Philosophical Mistakes*](#). In that, Dr. Adler talks about a word's meaning and various concepts and categories. It is good to get a handle on these things. There are many more recent books that authors have penned on critical thinking. I like Dr. Geisler's book [*When Critics Ask*](#), which deals with different fallacies. I like the book by Arlie Hoover that he wrote years ago called [*Poking Holes in Faulty Logic*](#). So to sum it up, come to terms with what the fallacies are, what the mistakes are, what the laws of logic are, but most importantly, observe—and that's a good aspect of critical thinking, by the way. Observe how it is done and what it was that was done in the process of countering an argument. There are various books on how to argue that involve a more hostile way of winning an argument, yet I don't think that's what the Christian is all about. But if you [read books by C. S. Lewis](#), [read books by Frances Schaeffer](#), if you read ones by good apologists, you can see what they are doing. That's the best way to engage in learning how to think critically, and I would add, constructively.

You see, in warfare the goal of one party is to destroy the other. In Christian engagement, the goal is to win the person who is of the other worldview—not to destroy the person. So to quote, “The weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God” (2 Cor 10:4).