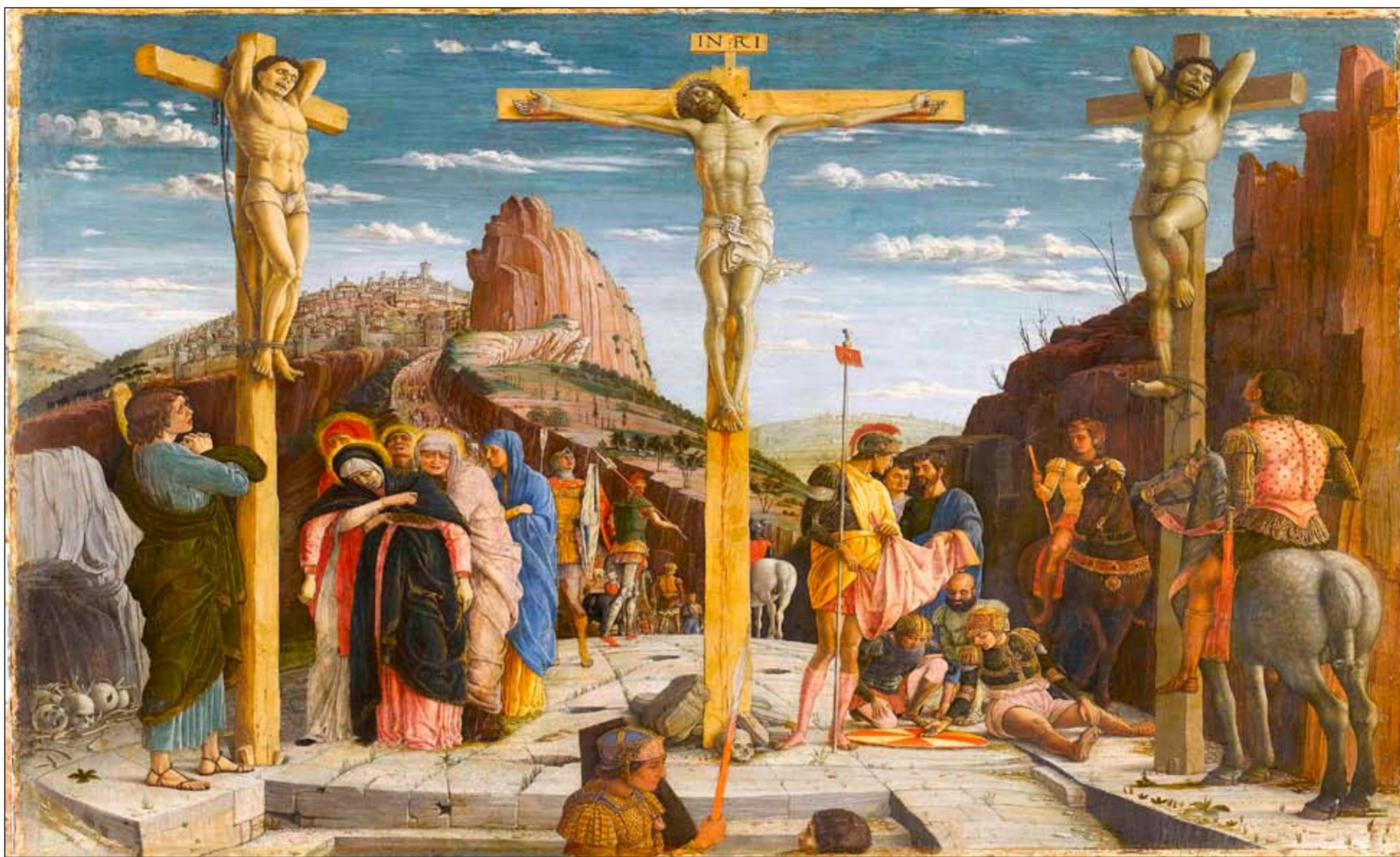


SUNDAY FEATURES

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13

Andrea Mantegna, *Crucifixion* (1457-1459).

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

You say God is dead? There's an app for that

An explosion of smart-phone software has placed an arsenal of trivia at the fingertips of every corner-bar debater with talking points on sports, politics and how to kill a zombie. Now it is taking on the least trivial topic of all: God.

Publishers of Christian material have begun producing iPhone applications that can cough up quick comebacks and rhetorical strategies for believers who want to fight back against what they view as a new strain of strident atheism. And a competing crop of apps is arming nonbelievers for battle.

"Say someone calls you narrow-minded because you think Jesus is the only way to God," says one top-selling application introduced in March by a Christian publishing company. "Your first answer should be: 'What do you mean by narrow-minded?'"

For religious skeptics, the "BibleThumper" iPhone app boasts that it "allows the atheist to keep the most funny and irrational Bible verses right in their pocket" to be "always ready to confront fundamentalist Christians or have a little fun among friends."

The war of ideas between believers and nonbelievers has been part of the Western tradition at least since Socrates. For the most part, it has been waged by intellectual giants: Augustine, Spinoza, Aquinas, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche.

Yet for good or ill, combatants entering the lists today are mainly everyday people, drawn in part by the popularity of books like Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great*. The fierceness of their debate reflects the fractious talk-show culture unintentionally described so aptly in the title of the Glenn Beck best seller *Arguing With Idiots*.

In a dozen new phone applications, whether faith-based or faith-bashing, the prospective debater is given a primer on the basic rules of engagement — how to parry the circular argument, the false dichotomy, the ad hominem attack, the straw man — and then coached on all the likely flash points of contention. Why Darwinism is scientifically sound, or not. The differences between intelligent design and creationism, and whether either theory has any merit. The proof that America was, or was not, founded on Christian principles.

Users can scroll from topic to topic to prepare themselves or, in the heat of a dispute, search for the point at hand — and the perfect retort.

Software creators on both sides say they are only trying to help others see the truth. But most applications focus less on scholarly exegesis than on scoring points.

One app, "Fast Facts, Challenges & Tactics" by LifeWay Christian Resources, suggests that in "reasoning with an unbeliever" it is sometimes effective to invoke the "anthropic principle," which posits, more or less, that the world as we know it is mathematically too improbable to be an accident.

It offers an example: "The Bible's 66 books were written over a span of 1,500 years by 40 different authors on three different continents who wrote in three different languages. Yet this diverse collection has a unified story line and no contradictions."

"The Atheist Pocket Debater," on the other hand, asserts that because miracles like Moses' parting of the waters are not occurring in modern times, "it is unreasonable to accept that the events happened" at all. "If you take any miracle from the Bible," it explains, "and tell your co-workers at your job that this recently happened to someone, you will undoubtedly be laughed at."

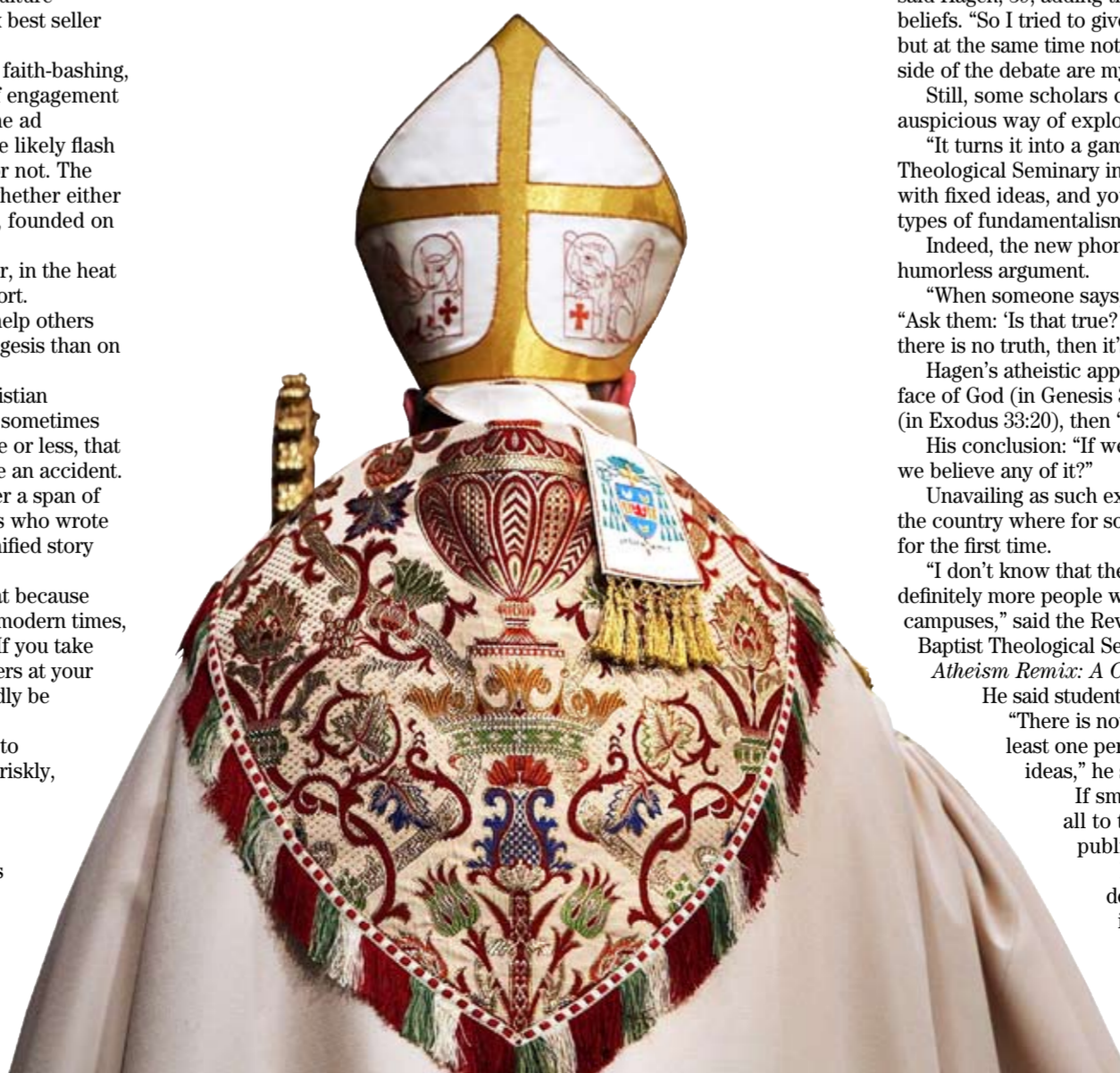
These applications and others — like "One-Minute Answers to Skeptics" and "Answers for Catholics" — appear to be selling briskly, if nowhere near as fast as the top sellers among the book apps in their iPhone category: ghost stories, free books and the King James Bible.

Sean McDowell, the editor of *Fast Facts* and some textbooks for Bible students, said he has become increasingly aware of a skill gap between believers and nonbelievers, who he feels tend to be instinctively more savvy at arguing.

"Christians who believe, but cannot explain why they

*Move over Aquinas
and Nietzsche: A
new arsenal of weapons
is being rolled out
to arm believers and
nonbelievers alike*

BY PAUL VITELLO
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK



believe, become 'Bible-thumpers' who seem dogmatic and insecure about their convictions," he said. "We have to deal with that."

"Nowadays, atheists are coming to the forefront at every level of society — from the top of academia all the way down to the level of the average Joe," added McDowell, a seminary PhD candidate whose phone app was produced by the B&H Publishing Group, one of the US' largest distributors of Bibles and religious textbooks.

Jason Hagen may be that average guy. A musician and a real estate investor who lives in Queens, Hagen decided to write the text for "The Atheist Pocket Debater" this year after buying his first iPhone and finding dozens of apps for religious people, but none for nonbelievers like himself.

In creating what became the digital equivalent of a 50,000-word tract, he gleaned material from the recent anti-faith books and got author Michel Shermer's permission to reprint essays from Shermer's monthly magazine, *Skeptic*.

Hagen pitched his idea to Apple, which referred him to an independent programmer who helped him develop the application; the company pays Hagen US\$0.50 for each download of the US\$1.99 app. He said a few thousand had sold.

What inspired him, he said, was a lifetime of frustration as the son of a fundamentalist Christian preacher in rural Virginia.

"I know what people go through, growing up in the culture I grew up in," said Hagen, 39, adding that his father had only recently learned of his true beliefs. "So I tried to give people the tools they need to defend themselves, but at the same time not ridicule anybody. Basically, the people on the other side of the debate are my parents."

Still, some scholars consider that approach to the debate the least auspicious way of exploring the mystery of existence.

"It turns it into a game," said Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan. "Both sides come to the discussion with fixed ideas, and you have what amounts to a contest between different types of fundamentalism."

Indeed, the new phone applications seem to promise hours of unrelieved, humorless argument.

"When someone says, 'There is no truth,'" the Fast Facts app advises, "Ask them: 'Is that true? Is it true there is no truth?' Because if it's true that there is no truth, then it's false that 'there is no truth.'"

Hagen's atheistic app resonates with the same certitude. If Jacob saw the face of God (in Genesis 32:30), and God said, "No man shall see me and live" (in Exodus 33:20), then "which one is the liar?" he asks.

His conclusion: "If we know the Bible has content that is false, how can we believe any of it?"

Unavailing as such exchanges may seem, they are a fact of life in parts of the country where for some people, taboos against voicing doubt have lifted for the first time.

"I don't know that there's more atheists in the country, but there are definitely more people who are openly atheist, especially on college campuses," said the Reverend R. Albert Mohler Jr, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and author of *Atheism Remix: A Christian Confronts the New Atheists*.

He said students have asked him how to deal with nonbelievers.

"There is not one student on this campus who doesn't have at least one person in his circle of family and friends voicing these ideas," he said.

If smart-phone software can improve the conversation, all to the good, he said. "The app store is our new public commons."

Michael Beaty, chairman of the philosophy department at Baylor University, a Christian university in Waco, Texas, was not so sure.

"We'd be better off if these people were studying Nietzsche and Kant," he said.