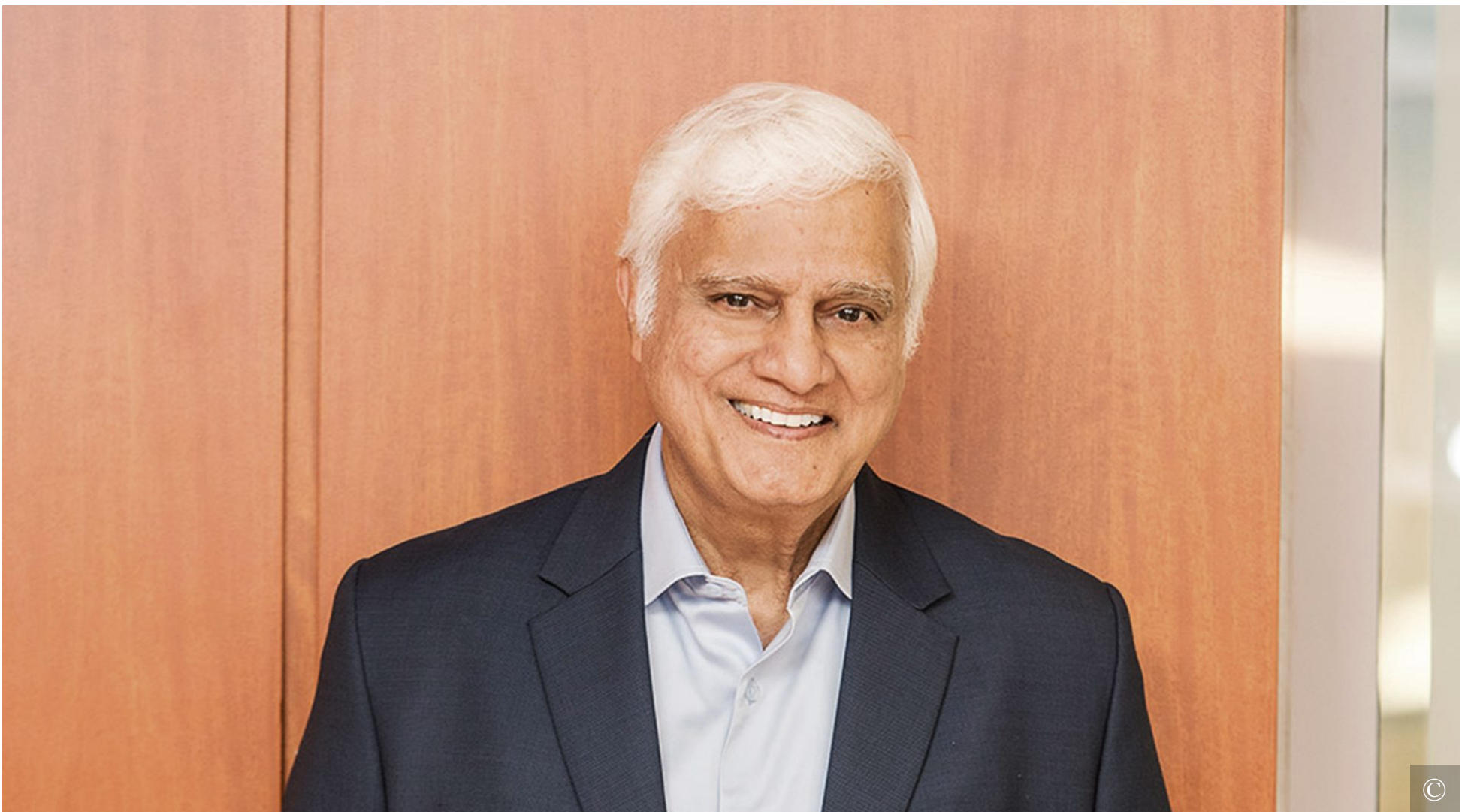


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# Ravi Zacharias (1946–2020) and His Legacy

MAY 19, 2020 — ALISTER MCGRATH



Ravi Zacharias (1946–2020) will be remembered for his landmark contributions to Christian apologetics, especially his concern to connect the gospel with the life of the mind.

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Zacharias died on May 19, 2020, from cancer.

## Zacharias's Life

Born in the Indian city of Chennai (formerly known as Madras), Zacharias came to faith in Christ through the ministry of Youth for Christ, and quickly developed a passion for evangelism. Following the family's relocation to Ontario, Canada, in the late 1960s, Zacharias studied at Ontario Bible College to develop his skills as an evangelist. After serving as a district evangelist for the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada in southern Ontario, Zacharias studied for an MDiv under Norman Geisler and John Warwick Montgomery at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. This experience proved significant in convincing him that American evangelicalism was losing its capacity to engage the intellectual issues that prevented reflective skeptics from coming to faith.

Following his ordination in the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Zacharias served as associate professor of evangelism and contemporary thought at Alliance Theological Seminary in Nyack, New York, from 1980. It

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was an important appointment at the denomination's national seminary, offering Zacharias the opportunity to influence a rising generation of pastors. It was, however, a demanding role, which left Zacharias little time for the practice of evangelism, or developing the apologetic strategies he increasingly believed were essential to

engaging skeptical audiences.

During a conference of evangelists in Amsterdam in 1983, Zacharias felt he was being called to reach out to the intellectually resistant, particularly those who would shape public opinion and policy. There was, however, no obvious way in which he could achieve this goal. In 1984, however, following an unexpected offer of substantial financial support from the businessman David Dale (“D. D.”) Davis, Zacharias was able to establish his own ministry, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM), now headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia. From the outset, its core objectives were to deal with the unaddressed intellectual issues that troubled believers, and which stood in the way of skeptics taking the gospel seriously. While RZIM’s motto gradually evolved, its basic principle remained the same: to “help the thinker believe and the believer think.”

## **Zacharias’s Legacy**

For many today, these ideas are uncontroversial. Yet they diverged significantly from mainstream evangelical approaches to evangelism in the 1980s, which often seemed anti-intellectual in their tone. Zacharias’s reading of writers such as Norman Geisler, C. S. Lewis, and Francis Schaeffer persuaded him both of the importance of trying to connect the gospel with the life of the mind, as well as the importance of developing a range of apologetic approaches, adapted to the different cultural locations of audiences.

This latter concern lay behind the establishment of RZIM offices in various regions of the world—such as India, Singapore, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.

Although sharing generic apologetic approaches and goals, each regional operation was sensitive and responsive to its cultural location, and the distinct challenges and opportunities that these created.

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As evangelicalism became increasingly aware of the importance of rediscovering and reasserting the public truth of the gospel, Zacharias emerged as one of the leading exponents of the new concern to engage

cultural and political opinion-makers. Many would single out the first Veritas Forum at Harvard University in 1992 as marking a significant change in the apologetic landscape. Christian writers—including Zacharias—showed they were able to defend the rationality and relevance of the gospel in public debate.

RZIM now began to develop a series of publications that engaged the questions raised about faith by intelligent non-believers, most of which were written by Zacharias himself. Early examples include *Can Man Live Without God* (1994) and *Deliver Us from Evil: Restoring the Soul in a Disintegrating Culture* (1996). Zacharias’s approach was to demonstrate that Christianity makes rational sense on the one hand, and is able to offer deeply satisfying existential answers to life’s grand questions on the other. The success of his approach led Zacharias to explore a dialogue format, inviting his readers to enter into an imagined discussion between Christ and classic and contemporary

cultural figures, including *The Lotus and the Cross: Jesus Talks with Buddha* (2001), and *Sense and Sensuality: Jesus Talks with Oscar Wilde* (2002). Zacharias also played a pivotal role in establishing the Centre for Christian Apologetics (OCCA) in 2004, which offered a year-long course in apologetics for those who felt called to this ministry. Leading figures associated with this centre included Os Guinness and John Lennox. The Zacharias Institute, an Atlanta-based apologetics training center, was launched in 2017. In addition to his extensive speaking and writing ministries, Zacharias developed radio, TV, and web-based programs, especially his series Let My People Think, which has achieved substantial influence globally.

Zacharias draws on a range of apologetic approaches, which he weaves into his presentations. We have already noted the importance of Geisler, Lewis, and Schaeffer; this list can easily be extended to include writers such as G. K. Chesterton and Fyodor

Dostoyevsky. This shouldn't, however, be understood to imply that Zacharias is a derivative thinker, lacking originality. His "3-4-5 Grid" is a good example of his distinct approach, which emphasizes the importance of a worldview's rationality, while insisting that its existential importance cannot be overlooked. The issue isn't simply whether a worldview is *rational*; the deeper question is whether it is *livable*.

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# Faithful Legacy Amid Controversy

Like most other public figures, Zacharias attracted controversy. His emphasis on the importance of finding common ground with his audiences was evident in his decision to travel to Salt Lake City in November 2004, and speak at the Mormon Tabernacle on “Who Is the Truth? Defending Jesus Christ as The Way, The Truth and The Life.” It was, however, a controversial decision, which riled some of his supporters. Zacharias nevertheless believed it was the right thing to do, creating openings for the gospel. He returned to speak at the Tabernacle for a second time in January 2014.

Zacharias’s legacy is substantial, and is best seen in the many opinion-shapers and policy-makers who point to his influence as a turning point, and in the extensive public ministries of RZIM.



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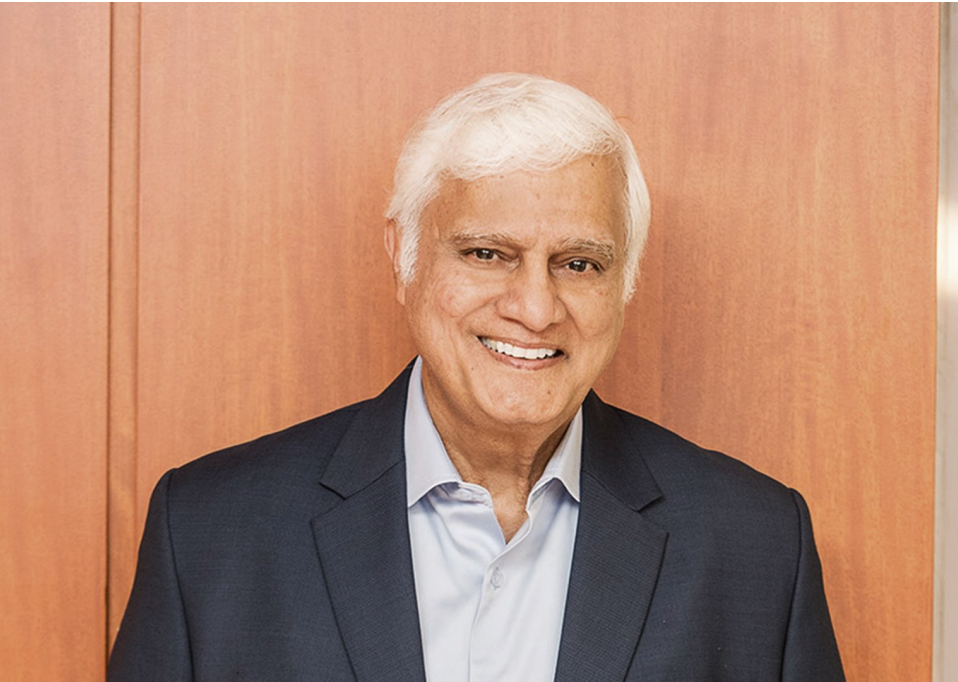
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