Silverman's Wager

Herb Silverman, professor of mathematics at Charleston College and founding chair of the Coalition for the Community of Reason, proposes his own wager to counter Pascal's:

> Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) and Herb Silverman (1942–20??) have had two common interests: mathematics, which led to our mutual profession, and theology, which led to our respective wagers. Though a Christian, Pascal was also a doubter. In Number 233 of his Pensées he says, "If there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits, He has no affinity to us. We are then incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is." Pascal later went on to say, "Reason can decide nothing here." He then concluded, in his now famous wager, that belief in God was the only rational choice to make: "If God does not exist, one will lose nothing by believing in him; while if he does exist, one will lose everything by not believing."
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> Before stating my own wager, let me make a couple of comments about Pascal's. His first conditional statement could just as well refer to the Tooth Fairy or the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Were we to devote our entire life to such fruitless searches, we would be left with an unproductive and wasted life—certainly a loss.
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> The second conditional statement is even more problematic. Pascal assumes the only existing god would be his Christian version—one who rewards believers with eternal bliss and punishes nonbelievers with eternal damnation. Moreover, it would be a god who either could not distinguish genuine from feigned belief or who would simply reward hypocrites for pretending a faith that they lack.
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> I agree with Pascal that no god is comprehensible to us. But suppose, for the sake of argument, I posit the existence of a creator who actually cares about human beings and elects to spend an eternity with a chosen few. What selection criteria would such a Supreme Being adopt? I expect this divine scientist would prefer having a "personal relationship" with the same kind of folks I would—intelligent, honest, rational people who require some evidence before holding a belief. Pascal would undoubtedly agree with me that our most promising students ask provocative questions until convinced by rational arguments, while our dullest students mindlessly accept what they think we want them to believe. Wouldn't a supreme teacher concur? My kind of Supreme Being would favor eternal discourse with a Carl Sagan over a Pat Robertson.
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> Such a superior intellect would presumably be bored by and want little contact with humans who so confidently draw unwarranted conclusions about his unprovable existence. This brilliant designer would be as appalled as I am by those who profess and glorify blind faith. With that kind of deity in mind, I modestly make my own wager. It is almost a plagiarism. I change none of Pascal's words, except that his last *not* now appears earlier in the wager. But what a difference a *not* makes!
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> I hereby propose "Silverman's Wager": If God does not exist, one will lose nothing by not believing in him; while if he does exist, one will lose everything by believing.[74]