

Is Anybody Out There?

In the Beginning -- God?

Wouldn't it be great to know *for sure* about the existence of God?

For centuries, great minds -- philosophers, theologians and scientists -- have argued various positions hoping to settle the issues of whether or not God exists. But today the topic is debated as intensely as ever. Sincere, smart people are still on all sides of the issue.

Why do some people seem so certain, and others remain skeptical? Where do *you* stand? If you believe He exists, how do you know? And if He doesn't, why are so many people convinced He does?

Most of us in this culture grew up hearing about God -- as well as about the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. Many of us said bedtime prayers. We hoped God would give us a new bike if we were good. Or we feared God's anger after stealing something from the drugstore.

Surrounded by such input since childhood, the idea of a "higher power" has been ingrained in us. In fact, many people accept God as reality without even questioning. Yet as we get older, we outgrow other childish dreams and fantasies. Once we learn the truth about the Easter Bunny, what do we do with God? Maybe He's the product of wishful thinking too. Is there any *evidence* available for the existence of God? Or maybe we shouldn't look for evidence -- is God offended at people who need reasons for believing?

Often people who have suffered greatly have the hardest time believing in God. Or, we should say, they have trouble believing in the goodness of God. Norman Mailer, author of The Gospel According to the Son, shared this perspective: "If God is all good, then he is not all powerful. If God is all-powerful, then he is not all good. I am a disbeliever in the omnipotence of God because of the Holocaust: But for 35 years or so, I have been believing that he is doing the best he can." (Time Magazine, May 5, 1997). Mailer is not an atheist, he's an angry-theist. The God of his childhood didn't fit into his adult world, so he had to redefine God -- or abandon Him.

What is it that you believe about the existence of God? How can you be sure? Is belief in God intellectual suicide? Tough questions . . . but worth taking the time to find answers.

"More consequences for thought and action follow the affirmation or denial of God than from answering any other basic question."

Positions About God

If you were to hit the streets, survey in hand, what do you think people would say about the existence of God? Certainly you would find a wide variety of answers. Here's a summary of the positions people take with respect to the existence of God:

- ♦ *The atheist* says no god or gods exist at all. "The universe happened by chance; there is no ultimate designer."
- ♦ *The agnostic* says it is not possible to know if there is a god or not. "God may exist, but no one can know for sure."
- ♦ *The deist* says God created the universe but has left it alone ever since. "God set the world in motion like a wind-up toy and does not get involved."
- ♦ *The theist* says God does exist and is involved with creation. "God is not only out there, He cares about His creation and desires to have a continuing active participation in it."
- ♦ *The polytheist* says many gods exist. "You have a god, I have a god, and there are many gods out there."
- ♦ *The pantheist* says that God exists in and through everything in the universe, and is one with the universe. "God is part of everything; He is in the trees, in me, in you -- even in that survey you're carrying."

How Can Anyone Be Sure God Exists?

Beyond Reasonable Doubt?

Our senses are very important to us. They give us valuable information about the real world.

Think of the common experience of driving a car. Because of sight, we see the road and avoid other cars. Because of our touch, we feel the steering wheel and can press the brake pedal. Because of hearing, we know an emergency vehicle is somewhere in the vicinity even before we see it, and so we slow down. Because of taste and smell, we enjoy the triple-burger deluxe from the drive-thru. In short, our senses provide for our needs and protect us from danger.

Many things aren't available to our world of five senses, yet we are dependent on those realities. Microwaves cannot be seen, but they cook our food. Television and radio waves likewise cannot be perceived without specialized receivers. Even something as basic as love is impossible to touch, taste, see, smell, or hear—but who denies love exists or that it is necessary to human survival?

God, too, eludes our five senses. We can't see Him with our eyes and we can't reach out and touch Him with our hands. For some, God's failure to show up in the realm of touch, taste, sight, smell, or hearing is enough to settle the issue. "He doesn't exist," they say, "if I can't verify Him with my senses." Many people recognize this as probably jumping to conclusions. Maybe there are other ways to perceive what is real. What if we could gain information about God through intuition? What if we had senses yet undetected -- like a spiritual sense? And what if known abilities like our capacity for reason could be used in our search for reliable information about God?

Consider how we piece together information and come to conclusions in the legal world. No one attempts to prove guilt or innocence "beyond a shadow of doubt." Unlike mathematical proofs, nothing in the realm of experience can be proven with absolute certainty -- even an atheist will grant that. In the legal world, we talk of reasonable doubt, and reasonable certainty. As long as we are human, with all our limitations, this level of confidence will have to do. And when it comes to being sure of God, it's also what we must strive for. We cannot prove God's existence beyond all possible doubt. But we can look at the "preponderance of the evidence" -- and end up with reasonable certainty about God.

Proof is only applicable to very rarefied areas of philosophy and mathematics . . . for the most part, we are driven to acting on good evidence, without the luxury of proof. There is good evidence of the link between cause and effect. There is good evidence that the sun will rise tomorrow. There is good reason to believe that I am the same man as I was ten years ago. There is good reason to believe my mother loves me and is not just fattening me up for the moment when she will pop arsenic into my tea. And there is good reason to believe in God. Very good reason. Not conclusive proof, but very good reason just the same . . . I believe it is much harder to reject the existence of a supreme being than accept it.

-- Michael Green,

Faith for the Non-religious

is impossible to touch, taste, see, smell or hear -- but

Arguments Against the Existence of God

Self-creation--The universe came into being spontaneously (with no known causal agent); quantum motion and combinations of space, time, and chance--not God--eventually produced the structures we observe in the universe; everything we see can be explained in terms of known processes; therefore, there is no need to postulate a supreme deity because, in terms of the observable universe, there is nothing required for him to do.

Spontaneous generation--Life came about through a series of natural forces working together without the assistance of a supreme being; changes that have occurred in living beings over time give strong evidence that life evolved rather than was created.

The probability of life originating from accident is comparable to the probability of the unabridged dictionary resulting from an explosion in a printing factory.

*-- Professor Edwin Carlston,
biologist at Princeton University*

The presence of evil--The existence of evil in the world implies that a loving and all-powerful God cannot exist.

Arguments For the Existence of God

Cosmological--The fact there is something (rather than nothing at all) needs an explanation. There must be a cause behind a corresponding effect; the universe is an effect, so something must have caused it. By definition, God is not an effect--He's eternal; matter does not display this quality but rather is dependent, changeable, and according to the current scientific theories had a beginning (the Big Bang).

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

Teleological--The complex nature of the universe implies that there must have been a designer behind its structure. If you have a watch, there has to be a watchmaker. If there's order (and the universe does show purpose and design), there must be a designer.

A single human chromosome contains 20 billion bits of information. This corresponds to four thousand, 500-page books--and that's only one chromosome!

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge.

There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.

Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the end of the world (Psalm 19:1-4).

"My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior Spirit who reveals Himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God." (Albert Einstein)

Moral--All people seem to have a conscience that sends a signal of right and wrong. The exact standard may vary from culture to culture, but generalizations can be made that transcend all cultures. A moral creator, who put this standard in all humans best explains the universality of this trait. "If no set of moral ideas were better than another, there would be no sense in preferring civilized morality to Nazi morality. The moment you say one lot of morals is better than another, you are in fact measuring them by an ultimate standard." (C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity).

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law . . . they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness (Romans 1:19; 2:14-15).

Experiential--Lots of otherwise rational, reasonable people believe in God, and claim He answers their prayers, guides them, and comforts them in times of need. They claim He has changes their lives, given them hope, made a difference in their values, and radically altered their behavior toward fellow human beings.

Sociologists in Latin America have documented how the act of conversion can lead to significant social change: A man goes forward to receive Christ at an evangelist meeting. He joins a local church, which counsels him to stop getting drunk on weekends. With their help, he does so. He starts showing up at work on Monday mornings, and eventually gets promoted to foreman. With new faith and a renewed sense of worth, he stops beating his wife and becomes a better father to his children. Newly empowered, his wife takes a job that allows her to afford education for her children. Multiply that by several scores of converted citizens, and soon the economy base of the entire village rises.

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!
(2 Corinthians 5:17)*

Heart of the Matter

A Doubting Thomas Finds Proof

In spite of all the philosophical arguments for the existence of God, people still have doubts. It is difficult to be convinced to the very core of your being with only short, simple arguments. Even if you recognize that God may--or even *probably*--exists, it still may be hard to believe.

It's important to realize that you aren't the first one to have doubts. The Bible is full of stories of people who questioned God in one way or another. It also tells how God responded to doubters. Probably the most famous "hard sell" was Thomas, one of Jesus' close companions. He came to be called "Doubting Thomas" because of his skeptical response to the claim Jesus was alive again after being dead for three days. Thomas said he wouldn't be able to believe in Jesus' resurrection--even though he readily acknowledged the tomb was empty--unless he could actually touch Jesus and feel the wounds left over from the crucifixion. He wanted sensory proof that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Jesus did show up, and He spoke to Thomas:

Then Jesus said to Thomas, *“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”*
Thomas said to him, *“My Lord and my God!”* Then Jesus told him
“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:27-29).

Notice the curious mixture in Jesus’ words. While He seems very understanding of Thomas’ doubts, His words have a firmness to them. He seems to think Thomas had enough evidence without His appearing personally in order for Thomas to believe. Remember, Jesus had predicted His resurrection--and Thomas had heard those predictions. There was the empty tomb. And other people had seen Jesus--reliable witness whom Thomas knew. So Thomas’ disbelief was more a matter of his will than lack of evidence. A rebuke was not entirely out of order.

Yet the bottom line is that Jesus met Thomas at his point of need. And Jesus promises a blessing to the many others--all the rest of us down through the ages--who would come to believe in Him based on the historical evidence God provided.

Afraid to Believe?

Notice that believing in God is more than just an intellectual search. Our emotions get involved. When we make a request, what we’re really asking is not merely, “God, if you’re there, show me.” We want to know if He cares. We want to know if we’re important to Him--important enough that He would reach into our experience, into our lives, and make a connection.

We need to know about God’s character as well as about His existence. After all, if God does exist but is some kind of monster, who would want to relate to Him? For some reason, most of us are afraid of God. We have preconceived ideas about Him that scare us away, and that fear affects the very reasoning power and ability to observe what’s going on around us that could give us the evidence we need to believe.

The Ground Has Shifted

Up until about a quarter century ago, “faith” tended to be ridiculed by the academic elite. It was frequently said, for example, that modern science has made the notion of an all-powerful, creative God both unnecessary and untenable. Such statements were shamelessly prejudiced--often invented by someone hostile to religion rather than someone informed by science. God never stopped being God!

Now the ground has shifted. More and more scientists and philosophers have stepped forward to affirm that what we know from our own investigations of the universe we inhabit reveal the fingerprints of deity. Charles Townes, who shared the 1964 Nobel Prize in Physics for discovering the principles of the laser, has written: “Many have a

feeling that somehow intelligence must have been involved in the laws of the universe.” What in the world would make a physicist sound like a theologian?

Physicists have weighed in against the assumption that the origin of the universe and life within it can be accounted for by random events. Thomas Huxley’s famous and oft-quoted claim that a large enough number of monkeys pecking randomly on typewriters for an infinite time would eventually produce the complete works of Shakespeare is preposterous. It is not only improbable. It is impossible.

Our universe is “custom-made” for life and consciousness. If the constants of nature--things like the strength of gravity, the charge of an electron, or the mass of a proton--were infinitesimally different, atoms could not hold together, stars would not burn, and life could never have appeared on this planet.

As one scientist put it: The claim that a tornado smashing through a junkyard produced a Boeing 747 is far more plausible than anyone’s assertion that random events in nature could produce intelligent life on Planet Earth. William Paley’s claim that an orderly world demands a creator for the same reasons that a watch demands a watchmaker is still a perfectly good argument. It is stronger now than ever before.

If you or your children ever felt intimidated by the blustering of unbelief, there is no need for it. Hard facts and sound reasoning are on the side of faith. And the strongest case for theism is made from the source that uninformed people have been led to think was its enemy--science. God has left his fingerprints on his handiwork!

The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” (Psalm 14:1)

“To a large degree, we are all prisoners of our genes, family beliefs, mentors, experiences, traditions and culture. Each represents a bar on the window of our prison cell. Our perception of what is true and eternal is colored by each bar. To deny this truth is not just to add another bar, but to add one which is stronger than the rest combined. Our only escape is through a never-ending quest for truth. Christian integrity in a setting of intellectual freedom demands that we never stop searching. The world and the church are better because men and women dare to question that which has already been settled, if for no other reason than the personal confirmation of one’s belief, rather than having one’s faith simply passed on from generation to generation.

Error can be passed on as easily as truth. It can be defended with equal vigor. But when error is passed on and defended as truth, succeeding generations are imprisoned, and the church suffers.

Tragically, many prisoners grow accustomed to their prison cells, and need the security and safety they offer.”