

Islamic Society: University of Derby.

Debate on the question: 'Does God exist?'

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Introduction

First, I note the two advertisements on some London buses:

- *There definitely is a God, so join the Christian Party and enjoy your life.*
- *There's probably no God. Now, stop worrying and enjoy your life.*

The terms 'definitely' and 'probably' seem to capture the essence of this debate. It's also interesting that 'enjoy your life' appears in both.

Quotations from the text of the Human Rights Act 1998.

Everyone's right to life shall be protected by law. Article 2.1

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observation. Article 9.1

Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law . . . and for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. Article 9.2

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. Article 10.1

The fact that the topic of this debate is still considered to be important after at least 3,000 years of recorded discussion and the fact of the existence of a wide range of religious traditions with very different ideas of 'God' suggests two things to me:

- 1 We shall not be able to answer the question to everyone's satisfaction in this debate.
- 2 It also suggests to me that it is impossible to answer the question for certain.

But *the fact* that the question: ‘Does God exist?’ is considered important is indicated by *the fact* that despite the impossibility of certain knowledge, people in various religious traditions assert that their God does exist. Their traditions and sacred texts also tend to lead them to assert that they know what their God is *actually like and what he – usually ‘he’ – requires*. They also tend to assert that their God is *the only true God* and that other gods are false or deficient. Paradoxically this is particularly the case in the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Various revelations to various people at various times seem to be the sources of this knowledge of God. For the majority of religious beliefs about God these revelations took place in distant history.

But I do not think that confidence in these revelations is justified. It cannot be secure and confident knowledge, not least because the various revelations are confusing and they sometimes conflict with and contradict each other. However, some people seem to be determined to believe in the revelations in their particular scriptures.

I am reminded of the trenchant observation by the French philosopher Montaigne (1533 – 1592 CE):

Nothing is so firmly believed as that which is least known.

Many people believe that the stars determine their fate. Many people believe that the sun moves round the earth. Flat Earth Society members believe that the earth is flat. Some people believe that God created the world about 4,000 years ago. But belief in something does not make it true however sincere that belief.

I now want to make six clear statements of my own general views:

- 1 Ideas are not true simply because they have been held for a long time. The timescale of beliefs is irrelevant to the truth or otherwise of the beliefs.
- 2 Ideas are not true simply because famous people have believed them to be true.
- 3 Ideas are not true simply because a lot of people believe them to be true.
- 4 Beliefs are not true because they are called ‘scriptures’ or ‘doctrines’.
- 5 Beliefs about God change within and between religions over time.
- 6 People should be able to change their beliefs about God and even to deny that God exists without being threatened, abused, oppressed, marginalized or even killed.

My personal background – in brief.

I shall refer specifically to the Christian religion because it was this system of belief in God which influenced my life and about which I know the most.

I was brought up as a Christian in a fairly strict but loving Methodist working class family. The meaning of my life in particular and of life in general was determined by the God in whom I was taught to believe. I was brought up to accept the certainty of God's existence. I belonged to a community of people who also believed these things. I needed to belong to that community of believers. I took this so seriously as to give up my job as a teacher and I become an ordained Methodist Minister.

A central belief in this Christian world view, and not only Christian, is that human beings are the pinnacle of God's creative and spiritual design. However, we are also sinful creatures and God needed to send prophets and finally Jesus, in the Christian story, to enable us to be saved. Saved, *but only if we believe the 'right' things.*

But I slowly began to doubt all this.

I began to come to the view that evolution was a better idea than God as the source of life on this planet. There is increasing and overwhelming evidence for evolution. The massive change in my thinking can be summarised as follows:

I now believe that we are the result of purposeless and impersonal evolutionary forces. We are no more and no less than animals.

Those ideas took some time for me to accept. As you can appreciate, it's a huge change from believing that I represent the culmination of God's creative purposes.

As I read more and more about science and in particular about physics, cosmology, the discovery of DNA and brain sciences I came to be very sceptical about the idea that God had created everything, including us. It seemed to me that evolution is more likely as the origins of plants and animals than God. Evolutionary study is based on careful and growing evidence. Evolution is not a simplistic linear process but convoluted, complex and with numerous 'failures' of replication with variation in the context of changing environmental circumstances. It's somewhat random.

So, I came to believe that human beings are animals with big brains.

Animals with brains the size of ours develop language. As we develop language we begin to ask questions. Given all the distressing and confusing problems that we face in life some questions force themselves on us:

Is there any **meaning** to life ? Is there any meaning to **my** life ?

I suggest that religions have arisen as responses to these very questions about **origin** and **meaning**. Various religions and various gods have been invented to give believers the security and comfort of feeling that there is a reliable source of the origin of meaning to life which originated outside ourselves.

But I slowly came to the view that there was no intellectually convincing reason for me to believe in an all powerful God as the origin of meaning and loving purpose.

For example:

If God is *all powerful* why does he not prevent horrendous, painful, distressing and destructive events from happening ? Comets colliding with our planet, earthquakes, tsunamis, continental drift, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, droughts, floods, plagues etc.

If God is *all loving* then why does he allow such a distressing range of human diseases ? Over 200 forms of cancer. Numerous genetic defects producing a vast range of serious and painful problems for babies, children and adults. You will recall the recent decision by NHS medical staff to turn off the ventilator supporting a 9 month old baby. The baby was suffering from a metabolic disorder producing brain damage and respiratory failure. Only one other such case was known to the doctors. I cannot believe that a God of love and power has deliberately caused this distressful and painful condition along with that of millions of others suffering from genetic disorders.

Then from a personal point of view I came to accept that emotionally I did not need to believe in God – I could believe in myself and other people. Some religious believers may view this as sheer sinful arrogance and condemn me for it. Indeed, some Christians I knew took exactly that attitude.

When I was a Christian I used to pretend that I was certain. I now think that *uncertainty* has a lot to be said for it. If I accept that I am uncertain, then I can expose myself to all sorts of ideas and arrive at my own views. And I am free to change my beliefs in the light of new and convincing evidence. Uncertainty is open and flexible. Dogma is closed and rigid.

If people try to be certain about things which are basically uncertain then they block out all other ways of understanding.

As a humanist I have come to the view that there is no meaning *to* life or *for* life which is outside ourselves. There is no meaning outside us in which to believe.

As a humanist I am content to accept that we are the inventors of our meanings, our beliefs and our values. Meaning is neither discovered nor revealed. These meanings, beliefs and values change over time and change with new knowledge.

A brief statement of my humanist values.

My underlying assumptions are:

1 My values represent my beliefs about what makes for people's psychological, social and political development.

- 2 *My values establish potential for self respect, creativity, dignity and well-being.*
- 3 *I cannot know whether the values in which I believe are true. I cannot know whether they are right in any ultimate sense. There is, for me, no ultimate sense. My values are valid for me.*
- 4 *My values are neither dogma nor orthodoxy. I do not expect everyone to adopt my values. I am always prepared to discuss them and I keep them under review.*
- 5 *I do not need to believe in God to believe that my values are important. They are important not because they represent any divine authority but simply because they are human. My values provide a framework for my living and my relationships.*

In more specific terms my own values include the following:

Valuing respect for people, valuing my own and others' sense of well-being and dignity. This includes their right, or option, to choose to be different from me and for me to be different from them. I think that this is perhaps my primary value. Killing, torture, humiliation, exploitation, oppression, verbal and other forms of abuse, inequalities of treatment based on gender, sex or any form of ethnic diversity, are basically disrespectful of people's well-being, sense of worth and dignity. Failing to treat others with respect and dignity prevents them from developing as human beings.

Part of this respect for people is valuing trust in relationships. Those relationships which have meant, and mean, most to me are those in which there is a high level of mutual trust. I have sometimes failed in this mutuality of trust and this failure has caused me some of my most distressing experiences. Trust is a risky business. 'Trust' was the theme of Onora O'Neill's 2002 BBC Reith Lectures.

I value being taken seriously and I try to take other people seriously.

I value a democratic social and political order which treats people as having value in themselves and therefore recognising a moral dimension to the whole of life.

In the context of democracy, I value conversation. As far as I can see it is only in democracies that open, challenging, developmental, critical conversations can take place. It's not possible to have a dialogue with those who are dogmatic. Dogmatism produces monologues.

I value my fragile optimism. There's a great deal which seriously undermines my optimism. The historian Eric Hobsbawm has said that *'The twentieth century was the most murderous in recorded history. The total number of deaths caused by or associated with its wars has been estimated at 187m, the equivalent of more than 10% of the world's population in 1913'*. I want to emphasise the term *'fragile optimism'*.

I value scepticism. My scepticism is directed at my own beliefs as well as those of others.

I value altruism not least because I live in a society, and a society can only operate on the basis that its members engage in actions which are in the public interest. Included in my valuing of altruism is a strong belief in the 'public sector'.

I value forgiveness as part of my attempt to be flexible and to be willing to compromise. Jonathan Sacks points out that forgiveness is the freedom to be different from the past which constructed us. *'Forgiveness means that we are not destined endlessly to replay the grievances of yesterday. It is the ability to live with the past without being held captive by the past. At times it is the only path through the thickets of hate to the open spaces of coexistence'*. (2003. p 179).

I value having people for whom I care and who care for me. Life without reciprocal caring would be bleak indeed.

I actually value something as simple as being courteous. I resent being treated discourteously as if I don't matter. Discourtesy is demeaning.

I value kindness: 'the quality of being friendly, generous and considerate'. (Pearsall (ed) The New Oxford English Dictionary 1998 p 1009).

I value compassion.

I also value trying to be consistent in putting my values into practice, but I notice that I am not always consistent and this sometimes causes me to feel anxious and hypocritical.

I therefore value my belonging to the human species and I look upon all other people as my fellows. I try not to think of 'us' and 'them'. We are all simply human.

It may seem strange to say it, but I value a western sense of time – that is the idea that time is sort of linear. I mean that I value the 'fact' (my belief) that my life had a beginning and it will have an end.

Finally, I value my mortality. This may seem slightly odd. What I mean is that I value my belief that I was not before I was conceived and that I will not be after my death. I find that I feel liberated by this particular belief. My mortality is not, I think, a burden to me. Conversely I would not value immortality. My death is uniquely the experience from which I cannot learn by reflecting on my experience of it.

There is no way known to me by which I could establish that my value statements are grounded in any form of external reality (God, the cosmos, metaphysics, sacred scriptures or any such). Nor is it the case, for me, that my values indicate any spiritual dimension to life.

I am grateful that I am not in a position to compel others to accept my values. Indeed, compulsion would contravene my first value of respect for people. In any serious discussion with those who differ from me I only have the power of persuasion. But that's all right, because persuasion is based on respect for persons – respecting their right to differ from me in fundamental respects. I only hope that if the worst came to the worst they might also respect my right to differ from them.

I don't see how we can avoid having some form of values. They are not, for me, indicative of a value basis to the universe. I choose my values. I live with my values. I can change them and have indeed changed them. They define my being, my meaning and my relatedness.

Conclusion

Does God exist? I do not have any evidence which persuades me that God does exist. I therefore choose to believe that God does not exist. The vicious, cruel and oppressive actions of some religious groups in history and currently actually support my sense that there is no God – or at least no God in whom I would wish to believe.

I also note that even within the same religious traditions there are often aggressive, on-going doctrinal differences as to the nature of 'their' God which create serious divisions and conflicts between different sets of believers in 'the same' God.

The fact that some people choose to believe that God exists suggests to me that they invent gods to meet their own needs for meaning, identity, purpose, certainty, comfort, security, group belonging and group cohesion – 'us' and 'them'. Such beliefs are exclusionary and excluding. (See Amartya Sen's book: 'Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny').

The gods in whom people believe seem to reflect the needs, aspirations and prejudices of believers.

From my point of view the idea of God exists only in people's minds and reflects their ways of thinking. Not, however, in my mind. I get on with my life in a generally satisfactory way without believing in God.

It seems to me that we human beings are both incredibly intelligent and caring and at the same time amazingly stupid and insensitive. I cannot believe that a loving and all powerful God could have been responsible for this situation. From my point of view it just happened. There is no solution to the human condition. We just have to try to make the best of it by compromise, critical discussion, courtesy and commitment to our lives together - and by respecting each other and respecting our right to hold different beliefs without attack, insult or condemnation.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in

Sacks J	2003	The Dignity of Difference How to avoid the clash of civilisations	Continuum
Sen A	2006	Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny.	Allen lane. Penguin Press

Amartya Sen's family came from Dhaka and he went to school in Bengal. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics and is currently a professor at Harvard. This book explores the dangers which ensue when people claim a singular source of identity such as religion. He spells out some of the violent consequences of this singular religious based identity.

If you interested in my own papers in this area then access: www.bowlandpress.com and click on '**Seminar Papers**'. These include:

- 'Giving up God: Losses and gains. An existential audit'.
- 'Beliefs and Identity'.

New Scientist.

In the 7 February 2009 edition of the 'New Scientist' there is an interesting article titled: '*Born Believers*'. In this article Michael Brooks explores recent research on the ways in which the structures of our brains may result in our 'seeing' causes, meanings and purposes in order to help us to survive. As children we have strong tendencies to believe what we are told so that we can develop a necessary sense of acceptance by the family and cultural group. Beliefs are a source of group cohesion. They are not necessarily replications of reality.