

1.

GOD

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.*

Is there a God? How can we know? What evidence is there that God exists? Does it really matter one way or another? If there is a God, what is God like? These are the questions we'll consider in this chapter.

A GROWING REJECTION OF "GOD"

In the last thirty years, an increasing number of people reject the idea that there is a God. This growth in atheism has brought with it a number of vocal and at times hostile "evangelists" who seek to demonstrate that belief in God is absurd, anti-intellectual, even dangerous, and that the world needs to be rid of it.

Steven Weinberg, a theoretical physicist and atheist, once noted that “the world needs to wake up from the long nightmare of religion. Anything we scientists can do to weaken the hold of religion should be done, and may in fact be our greatest contribution to civilization.”¹ A host of others have taken up the challenge; people such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett are among the best known and most vocal advocates of this position.

To be honest, I understand their convictions. When certain Christians insist on reading the creation accounts in Genesis as science, and adding up the genealogies in the Bible asserting that the universe was created less than ten thousand years ago, it is an affront to nearly every discipline of modern science. When Islamic extremists cry “God is great” as they detonate suicide bombs, it is easy to conclude that the problem is belief in God. When religious people study their scriptures and find commands that lead them to deny equality to women or to demonize gay and lesbian people, it is easy for the atheist to equate belief in God with injustice and ignorance. And these few examples don’t begin to exhaust the reasons why people such as Weinberg have felt they were doing the world a favor by turning people away from God.

Is God, or belief in God, to be equated with anti-intellectualism, violence, and bigotry? Or would these very human impulses exist regardless of belief in God? After all, the officially atheist regimes under Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Pol Pot burned books, imprisoned and slaughtered millions, and fostered their own forms of bigotry. God or no God, human beings will find reasons to

oppress and kill one another. They will resist progress in ideas, justify their own prejudices, and act upon those prejudices.

Just as Christians or theists might hold their convictions with a bit of humility, recognizing that the facts leading them to their convictions might have other explanations, I believe atheists would do well to maintain a similar humility to the question of God. Einstein articulated this well when he stated that on the question of God, he maintained “the attitude of humility corresponding to the weakness of our intellectual understanding of nature and of our own being.”²

THE GOD CHRISTIANS BELIEVE IN

The Apostles’ Creed begins, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” Christians believe there is a God, a Supreme Being, an Ultimate Reality that created the universe.

Many would be willing to use the term “God” when referring to the creative and powerful forces that gave rise to, and hold together, the universe as we know it—forces such as the mysterious “dark energy” of astrophysics. When Einstein referred to God, it seems to me that he was willing to use the word in such a way—not a personal being, but an impersonal power or force, or perhaps a mystery of science yet unsolved. Yet Christians perceive God not simply as a force of nature, but as an entity, a Being, that is both intelligent and powerful.

Max Planck, the brilliant theoretical physicist and father of quantum theory, captured part of this idea in a 1944 speech in which he said, “All matter originates and exists only by virtue of a force which brings the particle of an atom to vibration

and holds this most minute solar system of the atom together. We must assume behind this force the existence of a conscious and intelligent mind. This mind is the matrix of all matter.”³ Planck, a Nobel Laureate, did not see his work in the field of quantum mechanics as incompatible with his Christian faith. Sustaining and holding the universe together was an almighty force that was both “conscious” and “intelligent.”

George Lemaître, a Catholic priest and cosmological physicist, was perhaps best known as the father of the Big Bang theory. He championed the idea that the universe had a beginning, a day on which it was born. His theory of cosmic expansion pointed backward to “a day when there was no yesterday.” Lemaître did not see this idea as proof of God’s existence, but he did seem to recognize that his theory, now widely accepted, made it intellectually possible to reconcile faith and science.

There are many scientists who believe that science and faith are incompatible, but many others throughout history have believed, and continue to believe, that the two are not mutually exclusive. During the “scientific revolution” of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, some of the leading luminaries were Christian believers—people such as Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal, and Galileo, who, despite the church’s blunder in criticizing his conclusions, continued to maintain his faith in God.

My point is that, despite frequent statements by some scientists that science and Christian faith are incompatible, there are numerous other scientists who have played significant roles in the advancement of knowledge *and* who

believed in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

Christians believe that God is the creative force, the power, the source from which everything that exists derives its existence and upon which all that exists is contingent.

We see this idea in the name by which God reveals himself to Moses in Exodus 3:13-14. There God speaks to Moses in the midst of the wilderness of Sinai. A voice speaks from a burning bush. God calls Moses to lead the children of Israel, slaves in Egypt, to freedom and the Promised Land. Moses, who lives in a polytheistic world, says to the voice, “[The Israelites] are going to ask me, ‘What’s this God’s name?’ What am I supposed to say to them?” In other words, Moses is asking, “Of all the many deities people worship, which one are you?” In response,

God said to Moses, “I Am Who I Am. So say to the Israelites, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’”

This phrase, *I Am Who I Am*, is in Hebrew a wordplay on the proper name Yahweh (or Jehovah), usually rendered in English Bibles as LORD. What kind of name is I Am? I believe that God is revealing himself to Moses, and through Moses to Israel, as being itself, the source of all that is, from which everything that is has come to be and continues to be.

Here’s where theology and physics might meet. Physicists speak of fundamental forces (strong, weak, gravity, and electromagnetic) that are responsible for governing, shaping, and sustaining the universe. They speak of particles that permeate the universe, and of things such as dark energy and

dark matter, most of which cannot be seen and are not yet fully understood but which play a critical role in forming and sustaining the universe we inhabit.

When I hear physicists talking about these things they cannot see, which cannot be fully explained but which permeate the universe, which make possible all that exists, I can't help thinking of Paul speaking in Athens to the leading philosophers of that city. Paul described God as the one who made the world and everything in it, and then went on to quote the sixth-century-B.C. Greek philosopher-poet Epimenides, who wrote, "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28 NRSV).

Many physicists accept and occasionally use the term "God" as shorthand for describing the mysterious, invisible forces that govern the universe, but Christianity doesn't stop there. Christians also see God as a being, an entity with all the attributes of personhood: intelligence, emotion, reason, logic, and will. God knows, feels, loves, thinks, wills, acts, and creates. The Creed, drawing from Jesus' primary way of addressing God, speaks of God as Father, a very personal, intimate, and relational term. God is the force and power behind everything, *and* God is a being who defines the very meaning of personhood. Whatever makes us persons, Christians believe, is derivative of or a reflection of God's personhood. Scripture writers describe this belief by saying that human beings were created in the *Imago Dei*—the image of God.

So when we look at the universe as it is, we see a reflection not just of the random functioning of various forces, but a

reflection of the creativity, joy, beauty, and majesty of the One who has created.

EVIDENCE FOR GOD?

Christians (and other theists) believe in God. But is there any evidence that God exists? Is there good reason to believe?

Throughout most of human history, the argument for God's existence, the case for God, started with the fact that the universe exists and that we exist. It seemed unthinkable to most human beings that the beauty and majesty of creation should either (a) have always existed without a beginning or (b) have spontaneously generated out of nothing with no One to create it. Further, the order evident in creation—the natural laws, the complexity of what we can observe, including human beings capable of reason—seem further evidence of a Being, a Mind behind the creation of the cosmos.

Those who reject the idea of God make the case, as cosmologist Lawrence Krauss does in his best-selling *A Universe from Nothing*, that the universe could exist without an external force. I appreciate Krauss's book. I love astronomy and am fascinated by astrophysics and cosmology (though I admit there are ideas in the field that make my brain hurt and which I don't fully comprehend!).

I have a telescope, and I love to take it out in the backyard on dark nights, turning my gaze to planets, stars, star clusters, nebulae, and galaxies. As I peer through the eyepiece, I see the light of stars that took thousands and in some cases millions of years to reach my eye. Inevitably I find myself thinking how

magnificently large our universe is, and how small my part in it is. Often my mind returns to the words of Psalm 8:3-4.

*When I look up at your skies,
at what your fingers made—
the moon and the stars
that you set firmly in place—
what are human beings
that you think about them;
what are human beings
that you pay attention to them?*

Reading Krauss and others helps me understand the scientific data and the current theories of cosmology and astrophysics. I am fascinated by them. But none of these leads me to Krauss's conclusion that there is no God. Perhaps it's because, as Krauss notes in his book, "Data rarely impress people who have decided in advance that something is wrong with the picture."⁴ But if his contention applies to Christians and other theists, I think it also applies to atheists. The question of God is unlikely to be resolved by science. Theists and atheists can look at the same data and reach different conclusions. I see the fingerprints of God when I read the work of scientists. To me, the mysterious, invisible forces that gave rise to our universe and hold it together seem to be the handiwork of God; the scientist simply uses a different name.

I also see the guiding hand of God in the evolution of our universe. Narrow the focus to life on our planet and, once again, I see the handiwork of God. I grasp and accept that Darwin's theory of evolution is a brilliant and helpful way

of understanding the differentiation of life on our planet. But knowing the mechanism (evolution) does not therefore disprove that there was One who designed the mechanism and worked through it. Reading Darwin doesn't diminish my conviction that there is something more at play in the development of life on our planet than just evolution.

Oxford mathematician John Lennox notes that the odds for the self-organization of life on earth are in the neighborhood of 1 to 10 to the 40,000 power—very slim odds indeed. Astronomer Fred Hoyle suggested an often-cited analogy for the improbability of life on earth organizing on its own, saying the chances were about the same as those of a gale-force wind blowing through a junkyard and, after it passed, revealing that a Boeing 747 had spontaneously assembled itself.⁵

A simpler analogy might be to inquire what it would take for cocoa, eggs, flower, sugar, and oil to assemble themselves spontaneously into a three-layer chocolate cake. No matter how many billion years we might wait, there will be no three-layer chocolate cake without its being mixed, baked, and iced by someone who knows what a chocolate cake should look and taste like.

Here's my point: when the atheist considers the universe, our planet, and life on the planet, there will always be a natural explanation that does not require God—some *x*-factor that helps to explain the inexplicable. (Today, so-called multiverses are a popular *x*-factor thought by many to hold a key.) To the theist, the truth inevitably lies one layer beyond these explanations, because every solution proposed by the scientific community points to the need for another *x*-factor.

For Christians this *x*-factor, this unseen force behind the existence and development of the universe, is God.

This fundamental disagreement in how we explain the origins of all that is cannot ultimately be resolved, and that is why debates between atheists and theists are usually unsatisfying and do little to persuade the unpersuaded on either side. Ultimately these debates come down to who got the better sound bite, who came up with the quickest and best response, or who did a better job of thinking on their feet. But in the end the atheist has chosen a belief, a creed, as has the Christian. Both look at the same data and reach different conclusions.

As a Christian, I see God's glory and creativity throughout creation. The atheist, looking at the same things, sees the glory and creativity of nature. At some point we choose either to believe or to reject the idea that there is One whose power and mind have brought forth the cosmos. Paul was one who believed that the universe itself points to the existence of God: "Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities—God's eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made" (Romans 1:20). Likewise the psalmist writes:

*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 reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.*