

IS THERE A GOD?

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(Adapted from an article by Thomas Whitelaw)

INTRODUCTION

Whether or not there is a God, a supreme personal intelligence, eternal, all-powerful and all-knowing, the Creator, upholder and ruler of the universe, inherent in and yet transcending all things, gracious and merciful, the Father and Redeemer of mankind, is surely the most profound problem that can test the human mind. Lying as it does at the foundation of all man's religious beliefs — as to responsibility and duty, sin and salvation, immortality and future blessedness, as to the possibility of a resurrection, as to the value of prayer, the credibility of miracle, the reality of providence, — with the reply given to it are bound up not only the happiness of the individual in this world and the next, but also the welfare and progress of the human race.

Nevertheless, the question has received various responses — determined by the beliefs or lack of belief of the respondent.

The Atheist asserts that there is no God.

The Agnostic professes that he cannot tell whether there is a God or not.

The Materialist boasts that he does not need a God, that he can run the universe without one.

The (Bible) Fool wishes there was no God.

The Christian answers that he cannot do without a God.

The aim of this short article is to examine the responses to the question posed in its title, from those who consider that they fall into any of the categories shown — and from those who are unsure into which category they belong.

THE ANSWER OF THE ATHEIST

“There Is No God”

In these days it is insufficient to respond to this bold and confident negation by simply saying that the theoretical atheist is somewhat of a rarity, and that his statement is as much the outcome of ignorance as of impiety. When we read from “Why I Am Not A Christian” that the philosopher (and atheist), Bertrand Russell, said “*We must settle for unyielding despair ... all the work of individual lives will ultimately collapse in a fiery explosion, the death of the solar system*” — or the words attributed to philosopher, Eric Hoffer, “*Take man's most fantastic invention - God. Man invents God in the image of his longings, in the image of what he wants to be, then proceeds to imitate that image, vie with it, and strive to overcome it.*” and it becomes apparent that theoretical atheism is not extinct. To that end the following observations with regard to it may prove helpful.

1. Belief that there is no God does not amount to a demonstration that no God exists. Neither, it is true, does belief that God exists prove the truth of the proposition, except to the individual in whose heart that belief has been awakened by the Divine Spirit. To anyone else it carries no weight as an argument in support of the theistic position. At the same time it is of importance, while conceding this, to emphasise the

fact that disbelief in the existence of a Divine Being is not equivalent to a demonstration that there is no God.

2. A demonstration that no God exists is, from the nature of the case, impossible.

Here again it may be true that reason cannot demonstrate (that is, by logic) the existence of God; but it is equally true that reason cannot disprove the existence of God. It was well observed by one academic that *“the divine existence is a truth so plain that it needs no proof, as it is a truth so high that it admits of none.”* But the situation is altered when it comes to a positive denial of that existence. The idea of God once formed in the mind, whether as an intuition or as a deduction, cannot be laid aside without convincing evidence that it is delusional and unreal. And such evidence cannot be produced. As has been long ago observed, before one can positively assert that there is no God, he must claim for himself the wisdom and ubiquity of God. He must explore the entire circuit of the universe to be sure that no God is there. He must have interrogated all the generations of mankind and all the hierarchies of heaven to be certain they had never heard of a God. In short, *“For man not to know God, he has only to sink beneath the level of our common nature. But to deny God he must be God himself.”*

3. Denial of the divine existence is not warranted by inability to see traces of God’s presence in the universe.

Prof. Huxley, who once described himself in a letter to Charles Kingsley as *“exactly what the Christian world called, and, so far as he could judge, was justified in calling him, an atheist and infidel,”* appeared to think it was. *“I cannot see,”* he wrote, *“one shadow or tittle of evidence that the Great Unknown underlying the phenomena of the universe stands to us in the relation of a Father, loves us and cares for us as Christianity asserts.”* Blatchford also with equal emphasis affirms: *“I cannot believe that God is a personal God who interferes in human affairs. I cannot see in science, or in experience, or in history, any signs of such a God or of such intervention.”* Neither of these writers, however, it may be presumed, would on reflection suggest that their inability to see the footprints or hear the voices of the Creator was proof that no Creator existed, any more than a blind man would maintain there was no sun because he could not see it, or a deaf man would contend there was no sound because he never heard it. The incapacity of Huxley and Blatchford to either see or hear God may, and no doubt does, serve as an explanation of their atheistic creed, but assuredly it is no justification of that creed, since a more profound mind than either has said: *“The invisible things of God since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even His everlasting power and divinity; so that they who believe not are without excuse.”*

4. The majority of mankind, from the beginning of the world onward, have believed in the existence of a Supreme Being.

They may frequently, as the apostle Paul says, have *“changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things;”* but deeply seated in their natures, debased though these were by sin, lay the conception of a Superhuman Power to whom they owed allegiance and whose favour was indispensable to their happiness. It was a saying of Plutarch that in his day a man might travel the world over without finding a city without temples and gods. Within the last century or so, isolated cases have been cited of tribes — the Andaman Islanders by Sir John Lubbock, and the Fuegians, by Admiral Fitzroy — who have exhibited no signs that they possessed a knowledge either of God or of religion. But it

is at least open to question whether the investigators on whose testimony such instances are advanced did not fail to discover traces of what they sought either through lack of familiarity with the language of the natives, or through starting with the presupposition that the religious conceptions of the natives must be equivalent to their own. In any case, on the principle that exceptions prove the rule, it may be set down as incontrovertible that the vast majority of mankind have possessed some idea of a Supreme Being; so that if the truth or falsehood of the proposition, "There is no God," is to be determined by the counting of votes, the question is settled in the negative, that is, against the atheist's creed.

2. THE CONFESSION OF THE AGNOSTIC

"I Cannot Tell Whether There Is A God Or Not"

Without dogmatically affirming that there is no God, the Agnostic practically insinuates that whether there, is a God or not, nobody can tell and it does not much matter. His view is that man, with his powers of thought and reason, and with his best appliances of scientific research, cannot hold a conversation, face to face, with God or obtain reliable information concerning Him. He contends that man can only build up an imaginary picture, like an exaggerated or overgrown man, and call that God. In other words, the agnostic contends that man can only make a God after his own image and in his own likeness without being sure whether any corresponding reality stands behind it, or even if there is, whether that reality can be said to come up to the measure of a Divine Being or be entitled to be designated God. The agnostic does not deny that behind the phenomena of the universe there may be a Power. But whether there is or not, and if there is, whether that Power is a Force or a Person, are among the things unknown and unknowable, so that practically, God being outside and beyond the sphere of man's knowledge, it can never be of consequence whether there be a God or not — it can never be more than a subject of curious speculation, like that which used to engage the leisure time of some astronomers, whether there be inhabitants in the planet Mars or not. As thus expounded, the creed of the agnostic is open to serious objections.

1. It entirely ignores the spiritual factor in man's nature, - either denying the soul's existence altogether, or viewing it as merely a function of the body. Or, if regarding it as a separate entity distinct from the body, and using its faculties to understand and reason about external objects, yet denying its ability to discern spiritual realities. On either alternative, it is contradicted by both Scripture and experience. From Genesis to Revelation the Bible proceeds upon the assumption that man is more than "six feet of clay," "curiously carved and wondrously articulated," that "there is a spirit in man," and that this spirit has power not only to recognise the presence of things unseen but to come into touch with God and to be touched by Him. Or, as Scripture puts it, to see and know God and to be seen and known by Him. Nor can it be denied that man is conscious of being more than animated matter, and of having power to understand more than comes within the range of his senses, for he can and does hold both ideas and feelings that have at least no direct connection with the senses, and can originate thoughts, emotions and acts of will that have not been stimulated by external objects. And as to knowing God, Christian experience attests the truth of Scripture when it says that this knowledge is no figure of speech or illusion of the mind, but a sober reality. It is as certain as language can make it that Abraham and Jacob, Moses and Joshua, Samuel and David, Isaiah and Jeremiah, had

no doubt whatever that they knew God and were known by Him; and multitudes of Christians exist today whom it would not be easy to convince that they could not and did not know God, although not through the medium of the senses or even of the pure reason.

2. It takes for granted that things cannot be adequately known unless they are fully known. This proposition, however, cannot be sustained in either Science or Philosophy, in ordinary life or in religious experience. Science knows there are such things as life (vegetable and animal), and force (electricity and magnetism for example), but confesses its ignorance of what life and force are as to their essence - all that is understood about them being their properties and effects. Philosophy can expound the laws of thought, but is incapable of discovering the secret of thought itself, how it is stimulated in the soul by nerve-movements caused by impressions from without, and how it can express itself by originating counter movements in the body. In ordinary life human beings know each other adequately for all practical purposes while aware that in each there are depths which the other cannot fathom, each being shut off from the other by what may be called "the limitations of personality." Nor is the case different in religious experience. The Christian, like Paul, may have no difficulty in saying, "*Christ liveth in me,*" but he cannot explain to himself or others, how. Hence the inference must be rejected that because the finite mind cannot fully comprehend the infinite, therefore it cannot know the infinite at all, and must remain forever uncertain whether there is a God or not. Scripture, it should be noted, does not say that any finite mind can fully understand God; but it does say that men may know God from the things which He has made, and more especially from the Image of Himself which has been furnished in Jesus Christ, so that if they fail to know Him, they are without excuse.

3. It virtually undermines the foundations of morality. For if one cannot tell whether there is a God or not, how can one be sure that there is any such thing as morality? The distinctions between right and wrong, which we make in the regulation of our conduct, may be altogether baseless. It is true, a struggle may be made to keep them up out of a careful regard for future safety, out of a desire to be on the winning side in case there should be a God. But it is doubtful if the imperative "ought" would long resound within one's soul, were the conclusion once reached that no one could tell whether behind the phenomena of nature or of consciousness there was a God or not.

3. THE BOAST OF THE MATERIALIST

"I Do Not Need A God; I Can Run The Universe Without One."

Only grant him to begin with an ocean of atoms and a force to set them in motion and he will forthwith explain the mystery of creation. If we have what he calls a scientific imagination, he will let us see the whole process, - the molecules or atoms circling and whirling, dancing and skipping, combining and dividing, advancing and retiring, selecting partners and forming groups, closing in their ranks and opening them out again, building up space-filling masses, growing hotter and hotter as they wheel through space, whirling swifter and swifter, till through sheer velocity they swell and burst, after which they break up into fragments and cool down into a complete planetary system.

Inviting us to light upon this globe, the materialist will show us how through long centuries, mounting up to millions of years, the various rocks which form the earth's crust were deposited. Indeed, if we will dive with him to the bottom of the ocean he will point out the first speck of dead matter that sprang into life, protoplasm, though he cannot tell when or how.

Having startled us with this, he will lead us up the Great Staircase of Nature with its 26 or 27 steps, and tell us how on this step the vegetable grew into an animal, and how after many more steps the animal became a man, and thus the whole evolutionary drama will be unrolled. Concerning this theory of the universe, however, it is pertinent to make these remarks:

1. Taken at its full value, with unquestioning admission of the alleged scientific facts on which it is based, it is at best only an inference or working hypothesis, which may or may not be true and which certainly cannot claim to be beyond dispute.

2. So far from securing universal acceptance, it has been repudiated by scientists of the highest repute. "The Kant-Laplace theory of the origin of the solar system by the whirling masses of nebulous matter, till rings flew off and became the worlds we see," says a German writer, "can no more be defended by any scientist" (Neue Kirchliche Zeitschrift, 1905; p.957).

The attempt to explain in this way the origin of the universe, says Merz, can be described as "belonging to the romance of science" (European Thought in the 19th Century, p.285). Indeed Laplace himself put it forward "with great reserve, and only as a likely suggestion" (ibid., p.285). As regards the derivation of man from the lower animals, it is enough to remember that the late Prof. Virchow maintained that "we cannot designate it as a revelation of science, that man descends from the ape or from any other animal" (Nature, Dec. 8, 1877); that Prof. Paulsen, speaking of Haeckel, says "he belongs already to a dead generation," and calls his theory of materialistic evolution "an example of incredible frivolity in the treatment of serious problems" (see Princeton Review, Oct., 1906, p.443); that Prof. Von E. Pfenningsdorf declares "the materialistic explanation of the world to be untenable" (see Theologische Rundschau, 1905, p.85); that Fleischman in his book, "Die Deszendenz Theorie," denies evolution altogether; that Dr. Rudolph Otto admits that "popular Darwinism (Darwinisms Vulgaris)," by which he means "that man is really descended from monkeys," is "theoretically worthless" (Naturalism and Religion, p.94); and that Prof. Pettigrew of St. Andrew's University writes: "There is, it appears to me, no proof that man is directly descended from the ape, and indirectly from the mollusc or monad" (Design in Nature, Vol. III, p.1324).

3. Conceding all that evolutionists demand, that from matter and force the present cosmos has been developed, the question remains, whether this excludes or renders unnecessary the intervention of God as the prime mover in the process. If it does, one would like to know from where matter and force came. For the atoms or molecules, formerly supposed to be ultimate and indivisible, have now been proved by science to be manufactured and capable of being analysed into myriads of electrons; and it is hardly to be supposed that they manufactured themselves. Moreover, one would like to know how these atoms or electrons came to attract and repel one another and form combinations, if there was no original cause behind them and no aim before them? If even matter be construed as a form of energy, or force, the difficulty is not removed, since force in its last analysis is the output of will and will

implies intelligence or conscious personality. From this conclusion escape is impossible, except by assuming that matter and force existed from eternity; in which case they must have contained in themselves the germs of life and intelligence - in other words must themselves have been God, in potential if not in reality. But against this pantheistic assumption must still lie the difficulty of explaining how or why the God that was latent in matter or force was so long in arriving at consciousness in man, and how before man appeared, the latent God being unconscious could have directed the evolutionary process which fashioned the cosmos. Till these inquiries are satisfactorily answered, it will not be possible to accept the materialistic solution of the Universe.

4. THE DESIRE OF THE (BIBLE) FOOL:

“I Wish There Was No God”

Only a few words need be given to this rejoinder, as the fool does not say in his intellect, but only in his heart, ‘there is no God’. In his case the wish is father to the thought. Secretly persuaded in his mind that there is a God, he would much rather there had been none. It would suit him better. But the fact that he cannot advance to a categorical denial of the Divine Existence is an indirect witness to the innate conviction which the human heart possesses, that there is a God in whom man lives and moves and has his being.

5. THE DECLARATION OF THE CHRISTIAN

“I Cannot Do Without A God. Without A God I Can Neither Account For The Universe Around Me, Nor Explain Jesus Christ Above Me, Nor Understand The Spiritual Experiences Within Me”

1. Without a God the material universe around the Christian is and remains a perplexing enigma. When he surveys that portion of the universe which lies open to his gaze, he sees marks of wisdom, power and goodness that irresistibly suggest the idea of a God. When he looks upon the heavens with its countless stars, and considers their disposition and order, their balancing and circling, he instinctively argues that these shining suns and systems must have been created, arranged and upheld by a Divine Mind. When, restricting his attention to the earth on which he stands, he notes the indications of design or of adaptation of means to end which are visible everywhere, as witnessed, for example, in the constancy of nature’s laws and forces, in the endless variety of nature’s forms, inanimate and animate, as well as in their wonderful gradation not only in their kinds but also in the times of their appearing, and in the marvellous adjustment of organs to environment, he feels constrained to reason that these things are not the result of blind chance or the spontaneous output of matter, which in itself, so far as known to him, is powerless, lifeless and unintelligent, but can only be the handiwork of a Creative Mind. When further he reflects that in the whole round of human experience, effects have never been known to be produced without causes; that designs have never been known to be conceived or built without designers and workmen; that dead matter has never been known to spring into life either spontaneously or by the application of means; that one kind of life has never been known to change itself spontaneously or to be changed artificially into another, neither a vegetable into an animal, nor an animal into a man; and when lastly, accepting the guidance of science, he perceives that in the upward ascent of nature inanimate matter was followed by vegetable life, and this again by animal existence,

and this by man precisely as Scripture asserts, he once more feels himself shut up to the conclusion that the whole cosmos must be the production of a Supreme Intelligence, infinitely powerful, wise and good. Like the Hebrew psalmist he feels impelled to say, "*O Lord! how manifold are Thy works: in wisdom hast Thou made them all!*"

Should the philosopher interject, that this argument does not necessarily require an Infinite Intelligence but only a workman capable of constructing such a universe as the present, the answer is that if such a workman existed he himself would require to be accounted for, since beings that are finite must have begun to be, and therefore must have been caused. Accordingly, this workman must have been preceded by another greater than himself, and that by another still greater, and so on travelling backwards forever. Hence, it was argued by Kant that pure reason could not demonstrate the existence of God, but only of a competent creative deity or world-builder. But this reasoning is faulty and misleading. The human mind cannot rest in an endless succession of effects without a First Cause, like a chain depending from nothing. Kant himself seemed to recognise the unsatisfactory character of his logic, since, after casting out God from the universe as Creator, he sought to bring Him in again as Supreme Moral Governor.

But if man's moral nature cannot be explained without a Supreme Moral Lawgiver, on what principle can it be reasoned that man's intellectual nature demands less than a Supreme Intelligence?

2. Without a God the Christian cannot explain to himself the Person of Jesus.

Leaving out what the Gospels report about His virgin birth (though we do not regard the narratives as unhistorical or the fact recorded as incredible), and fixing attention solely on the four records, the Christian discerns a personality that cannot be accounted for on ordinary principles. It is not merely that Jesus performed works such as no other man did, and spoke words such as never fell from mortal lips; it is that in addition His life was one of incomparable goodness - of self-sacrificing love, lowly humility, patient meekness and spotless purity - such as never before had been witnessed on earth, and never since has been exhibited by any of His followers. It is that Jesus, being such a personality as described by those who beheld His glory to be that of the only-begotten from a Father, full of grace and truth, put forth such pretensions and claims as were wholly unfitting in the lips of a mere man, and much more of a sinful man, declaring Himself to be the Light of the World and the Bread of Life: giving out that He had power to forgive sins and to raise the dead; that He had pre-existed before He came to earth and would return to that pre-existent state when His work was done, which work was to die for men's sins; that He would rise from the dead and ascend up into heaven, both of which He actually did; and asserting that He was the Son of God, the equal of the Father and the future Judge of mankind. The Christian studying this picture perceives that, while to it belong the characteristics of a man, it also wears the likeness of a God, and he reasons that if that picture was drawn from the life (and how otherwise could it have been drawn?) then a God must once have walked this earth in the person of Jesus. For the Christian no other conclusion is possible.

Certainly not that of the New Theology, which makes of Jesus a sinful man, distinguishing Him from Christ, the so-called ideal figure of the creeds, and calling Him divine only in the sense that other men are divine though in a lesser degree than He. But even the New Theology cannot escape from the implication of its own creed. For if Jesus was the most divine man that ever lived on earth, then naturally His Word

should carry more weight than that of any other, and He taught emphatically, not only that there was a personal God whose Son He was, but that men should pray: "*Our Father which art in Heaven.*"

3. Without a God the Christian cannot understand the facts of his own consciousness.

Take first the idea of God of which he finds himself possessed on arriving at the age of intelligence and responsibility. How it comes to pass that this great idea should arise within him if no such being as God exists, is something he cannot understand. To say that he has simply inherited it from his parents or absorbed it from his contemporaries is not to solve the problem, but only to put it back from generation to generation. The question remains, How did this idea first originate in the soul? To answer that it gradually grew up out of totemism and animism as practised by the races of pre-history who, impelled by superstitious fears, conceived material objects to be inhabited by spirits, is equally an evasion of the problem. Because again the question arises, How did these pre-historic races arrive at the conception of spirits as distinguished from bodies or material objects in general? If it is claimed that veneration for deceased ancestors gave birth to the conception of a God, one must further demand by what process of reasoning they were conducted from the conception of as many gods as there were deceased ancestors to that of one Supreme Deity or Lord of all. The only satisfactory explanation of the latent consciousness of God which man in all ages and lands has shown himself to be possessed of is, that it is one of the soul's intuitions, a part of the intellectual and moral furniture with which it comes into the world; that at first this idea or intuition lies within the soul as a seed corn which gradually opens out as the soul rises into full possession of its powers and is appealed to by external nature; that had sin not entered into the world this idea or intuition would have expanded into full bloom, filling the soul with a clear and radiant conception of the Divine Being, in whose image it has been made; but that now in consequence of the blighting influence of sin this idea or intuition has been everywhere more or less dimmed and weakened and, in many instances, corrupted and debased.

Then rising to the distinctly religious experience of conversion, the Christian encounters a whole series or group of phenomena which to him are inexplicable, if there is no God. Conscious of a change partly intellectual but mainly moral and spiritual, a change so complete as to amount to an inward revolution, what Scripture calls a new birth or a new creation, he cannot trace it to education or to environment, to philosophical reflection or to prudent considerations.

The only reasonable account he can furnish of it is that he has been laid hold of by an unseen but Superhuman Power, so that he feels constrained to say like Paul: "*By the grace of God I am what I am.*" And not only so, but as the result of this inward change upon his nature, he realises that he stands in a new relation to that Supreme Power which has renewed him, that he can and does enter into personal communion with Him through Jesus Christ, addressing to Him prayers and receiving from Him benefits and blessings in answer to those prayers. These experiences of which the Christian is conscious may be characterised by the non-Christian as illusions, but to the Christian they are realities; and being realities they make it simply impossible for him to believe there is no God. Rather they inspire him with confidence that "***God is, and is the Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him, and that of Him and through Him and to Him are all things; to whom be glory for ever. Amen.***"