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IS THERE A GOD?

CONSIDER THE EVIDENCE

A FEW years ago London's red buses suddenly sprouted a rash of large print adverts. These words shouted at you: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." The banners had been paid for by the British Humanist Society, backed by famous atheists such as Richard Dawkins. Clearly the message was that if you believe in God your life will be miserable, and you will not be able to enjoy yourself. Of course there were many responses to the campaign, and it provoked discussion for weeks afterwards. But this is a subject that concerns us all. We have to have a point of view. Do we personally believe in a God, and if we do not, what difference is it going to make?

First, though, we need to define what we mean by 'God'. From antiquity, men have worshipped the sun, or constructed idols of men, women or animals and bowed down to them. This kind of god we would probably dismiss as primitive superstition. You could argue, too, that people today have made gods out of sports stars, or fast cars, or shopping, to all of which they devote much time and money. But the kind of god the humanists behind the London bus campaign meant was the Christian God, the God of the followers of Jesus. For the purpose of this discussion we are going to assume that this is the God of the Bible, a book which claims to be His revelation to mankind. Of course, you may dismiss this claim as fanciful. But if you think about it, if there is a God out there who really did make heaven and earth, plants, animals and humans, He would surely have communicated with the people He had made. The Bible records first-hand messages said to have come from God over a period of at least 1,500 years, from the time of Moses to the first century AD. It is also possible, as evidenced by his frequent editing of its place names, that Moses copied the first section, Genesis, from a much earlier set of records.

This is what the Bible says of itself:

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets."
(Hebrews 1:1)

"He spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old." (Luke 1:70)

"No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:20, 21)

(Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV). '2 Peter 1:20, 21' means the second letter of Peter, chapter one, verses twenty and twenty-one.)

There is nowhere else we can learn about the God of Christianity except from the Bible, so if we are to debate the existence of the Christian God, we must use this book as our reference. Clearly, that is

going to be a challenge, for we are talking about a book (actually sixty-six books bound as one) that is nearly 800,000 words long. But unless we are prepared to sit down and see what it actually says, as opposed to what people say that it says, we are not really in a position to debate the existence of the Christian God.

How could we 'prove' the existence of the God of the Bible?

It has to be said from the outset that our attitude to a topic that confronts us and demands a response, depends on our expectations. We shall tend to see what we want to see. Not everyone will be convinced by the same facts, and even when several people observe an event with their own eyes, they will disagree about its implications. The jurors in a court of law hear the same evidence, but frequently argue as to whether the accused is guilty. And inevitably if we are expected to put our lives in the hands of a God we cannot see, this is going to demand a certain amount of faith. It's a bit like boarding a ship to travel across the ocean without personally interviewing the captain. We have to take some things for granted. In fact the Bible itself says:

"Without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." (Hebrews 11:6)

Note that this implies we can draw near to the God of the Bible, and also that so far from being miserable because we believe in Him, He will actually reward us for our faith. But to return to our topic - how can we prove the existence of a God we cannot see?

We have chosen five lines of reasoning that you may or may not find convincing. After that we shall consider the implications of accepting or rejecting the existence of God.

1. Order in the universe

In recent times our knowledge of the universe has advanced greatly, both in its macro aspects such as the motion of planets and black holes and the death of stars, but also in the structure of matter itself, the nano-detail of atoms, protons, electrons, quarks and mesons. What is clear, in a field that is beyond the comprehension of most of us, is that there are certain dependable laws that govern on the one hand the organisation of the heavenly bodies, and on the other the inside of the atom. At its simplest, the periodic table of the elements we learned at school neatly tacks extra electrons one by one into circuits around the nucleus of the atom. This creates the basic sets of elements, for example the gases hydrogen and helium, and the familiar metals - iron, copper, nickel, cobalt and zinc - that from their very different qualities make life possible on the earth. This brilliantly simple model needs some explanation. There is a huge amount of energy locked up in the atom, holding its components in their regular paths. Where did this energy come from in the first place? It has to have a source. And how did the extra electrons slip into place in such a systematic way? Did it all happen by chance in some 'Big Bang'? Or was there a guiding hand that designed it first and then made it happen? Our instinct is to rebel against random effects producing order and consistency. In our experience, this does not usually happen.

Then there are the rules that govern the effects of gravity. Why should two objects having mass tend to move towards each other? We can see that they do, and in such a dependable way that we can predict the orbits of comets hundreds of years ahead as they bounce from the influence of one planet to another: Without gravity there would be no ocean tides, hot liquids would not descend as they cool, and boats would not float. But was it just chance that matter acts in this way? Or was there a logical mind that planned it all and set it in motion?

The existence of our kind of life on earth depends on some very precise conditions. The earth rotates every twenty four hours as it orbits annually around the sun. That prevents the temperature rising so high on one side, or cold on the other, that life would be impossible. The atmosphere comprises a band of gases including a trace of carbon dioxide (0.03%), essential to the life of plants, and oxygen (21%), vital for animals. It has a thickness perfectly sufficient to burn up meteorites and to filter out harmful ultraviolet rays. The existence of water is an absolute prerequisite for the chemical reactions



that enable life. Yet ours is the only planet known to have huge reserves of liquid water. And water is one of the most unusual compounds. Unlike other liquids, as water cools its density increases until at 4°C it reaches maximum density. On further cooling its density decreases until at 0°C it freezes. This is why ice floats. Thus the coldest water in winter is to be found not at the bottom of a river, lake or sea, but at the top. This makes it possible for fish to survive without freezing to death. Of course, the

evolutionist will argue that it was because conditions on earth were such as they are, that our kind of life managed to evolve. But this carries the corollary that other planets ought to have other kinds of life which evolved to suit their own conditions. After years of searching, no such traces have ever been found. Our planet appears to be unique.

The Bible speaks of God as the Creator balancing the proportions of water and land as He set about making our globe suitable for life. Here is the prophet Isaiah:

"Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?" (Isaiah 40:12-14)

It is interesting to note the reference here to the Spirit of God, that vital energy which the Bible says He used to make the world and with which He keeps in touch with His creation (see Genesis 1:2). Here is God speaking to Job:

"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements - surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors, and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed?'" (Job 38:4-11)

Of course, if your world view prevents you from accepting a supernatural Creator, you will dismiss these statements as fanciful. But they have a certain logic (effects demand a cause), and they fit the situation we discover here on earth.

2. Bible prophecy

The Bible is a unique book. There are other ancient writings, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh from Sumeria, dated to 1800 BC; or the Koran, a record of Mohammed's oral teaching compiled by his followers around AD 632. But neither of these compares in style and power with the Bible. The Gilgamesh Epic, for example, tells of a flood that swept away mankind from which one man escaped with the animals in a boat. But in the story Gilgamesh wants to be immortal. He is told there is a plant under the sea which he must obtain, so he ties stones to his feet so that he can walk under the water. He retrieves the plant, but then loses it to a serpent. The epic has some vague links with the Bible account, but its lurid and exaggerated details do not match the incisive first-hand style of Genesis. This would suggest the Genesis account is the original one, and the Sumerian record a later, corrupted version of the truth. Similarly, the story of the life of Moses in the Koran is dressed up with wild additions to the Biblical record. Moses takes home brands from the burning bush, for example, so that his family can keep themselves warm. The Bible account is precise and consistent, as we would expect if its author, as distinct from its writers, guided the process from generation to generation.

There is one simple point about the Bible which proves that only someone outside our world could have written it: that is Bible prophecy.

Humans are unable to foretell the future. They can unearth the past. They can keep us up to date with amazing speed with what is happening now. But no one has ever managed to predict accurately what will happen in years to come. That is where the Bible is different. God, the author, challenges us by saying what will happen, even many centuries ahead. Let's look at one or two examples.

Take a few minutes to scan through Psalm 22. This is attributed by its heading to David, a poet and king of Israel who lived around 1000 BC. In the psalm he describes in dramatic poetry the feelings of a dying man. This unfortunate person is being executed, and as he dies he is surrounded by enemies who mock him. But look at the details. Here is verse 16:

"For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet."

Crucifixion was one of the cruellest punishments devised by man. Iron nails were driven through hands and feet into a wooden cross or stake, and the victim was suspended until he died from exhaustion. But crucifixion was a Roman form of execution, invented many hundreds of years after the time of David. How could the psalmist know that Jesus, his descendant, would die in this gruesome way? Now see verse 18:

"they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."

We know from history that the squad of four soldiers in charge of a Roman execution was entitled to the clothes of the victims as a perquisite of the task. The account of the crucifixion of Jesus in John 19:23, 24 shows that in his case he had a rare, hand woven tunic that was too valuable to tear into four strips. So the soldiers gambled for it, and the winner took the whole garment home. But how could David possibly have known this would happen, unless he was inspired by a God who can tell and control the future?

Then there is the history of the Jews, God's special people. The Old Testament records that they were given a privileged place in God's plans, with the opportunity to have a unique relationship with Him. But they fell from grace, and worshipped idols. Deaf to the entreaties of their prophets, they

were eventually driven from their land to wander among the nations. However, in the dark day of their dispersion, God promised solemnly that one day they would return to their own land. Here are the words of Jeremiah:

"Fear not, O Jacob my servant, declares the LORD, nor be dismayed, O Israel; for behold, I will save you from far away, and your offspring from the land of their captivity ... For I am with you to save you, declares the LORD; I will make a full end of all the nations among whom / scattered you, but of you I will not make a full end. I will discipline you in just measure, and I will by no means leave you unpunished." (Jeremiah 30:10,11)

Who were the nations that scattered Israel? First there were the Assyrians, who deported all the northern tribes around 600 BC. The Babylonians took the last of the southern kingdom into captivity in 586 BC. Some of them returned in the time of Cyrus the Persian, but this remnant was finally dispersed by the Romans in the first century AD. After that the Jewish people wandered the world, driven from country to country, for nearly two thousand years. But, amazingly, in the twentieth century they began to return to the land of their forefathers. In 1948 the Jewish flag with its Star of David joined the flags of the United Nations. So Jeremiah was absolutely right. Where are the Assyrians today? What has happened to Babylon? Where is the Roman Empire? They have all disappeared into the shadows of history. But the Jewish nation survives, alive and vibrant in its ancient homeland, with its unique culture and traditions.

Only a God who pulls the strings of history could make predictions like the crucifixion of Jesus and the return of the Jews. This suggests there is a God out there, in whose words we can trust.

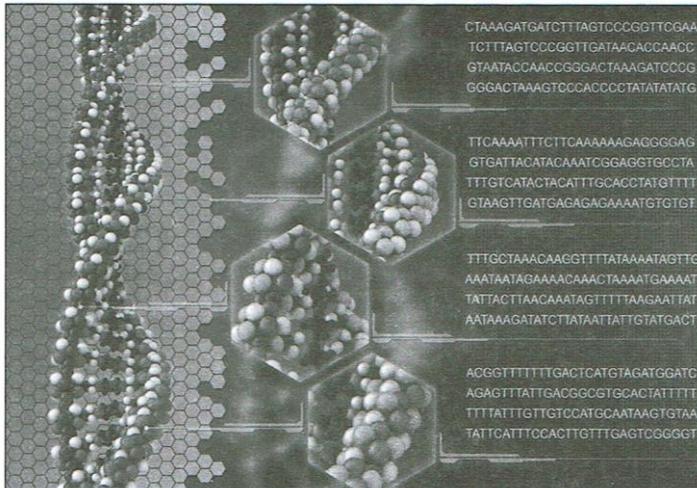
3. Probability and life

Atheists (people who deny the existence of God) assume that life on earth developed by an evolutionary process. They claim that random collisions and reactions between molecules which were already present in the earth's early atmosphere produced amino acids, the organic building blocks of life. Somehow, from these primitive molecules, life began and after that it was a process of natural selection (the influence of competition and the environment) moulding the development from single-celled organisms into the animals and plants we have today.

The majority (not all) of scientists accept this explanation and it is taught in our schools. However, unlike most scientific theories, it is not possible to put it to the test. Scientific knowledge advances when a connection between facts is postulated by research, and this hypothesis is then subjected to experiment by other scientists to see if the relationship holds good for them, too. When a strong and consistent link has been demonstrated, the theory is advanced to a law. But in the case of the formation of life, it is impossible to reproduce the original conditions, because by definition life began long before there were human observers. Any suggested relationships must be at best a guess that cannot be proved.

There is an important point here. Increasing knowledge of the workings of even the simplest forms of life on earth shows that what was once assumed to be nothing but living jelly or 'protoplasm' is actually highly complex and organised. Living cells have many interdependent parts. They operate like miniature factories, with specialised 'machines' devoted to manufacturing the huge number of molecules essential to life. They absorb and store the raw materials, remove the waste products, and replicate the whole assembly before it dies out. They manufacture a range of twenty amino acids, molecules built up from atoms of nitrogen, carbon, hydrogen and oxygen, which each have an individual shape. Some are joined together in specific patterns to make proteins, the 'flesh' of living creatures. Others are assembled into enzymes, the keys which can interlock with other molecules to

facilitate or inhibit chemical reactions. Controlling the whole process is the amazing double helix structure of DNA, the genetic code or map unique to each individual. Now, this is where we come across a great difficulty with evolutionary theory.



It is generally accepted that changes to the genes that control living cells can arise only by mutations. These are modifications to the arrangement of the molecules in the double helix of DNA. Mutations are increased by ultraviolet light or radiation, and are generally harmful. However, evolutionists claim that some are beneficial and are used to add new characteristics (although these can only be passed on to future generations when the mutations occur in the reproductive cells). The point is that mutations are purely random in

occurrence. Any changes to the genome (the DNA code for an individual) are essentially rare and unpredictable.

There is a whole branch of maths that analyses the incidence of rare events like this, and estimates how often they are likely to occur. This is important to make provision for events such as storms and floods. Probability is often expressed in gambling terms. For example, there is a one in six chance a die will land with the number six upwards.

So, take a relatively simple but essential molecule in our body such as an antibody. Antibodies attack or neutralise the effects of disease organisms or foreign proteins in the blood. They are very specific, so an antibody to one disease will not protect you against another. A simple antibody will have up to 200 amino acids assembled in a very particular order. Dr Francis Crick, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, estimated that the chance of the twenty available amino acids assembling themselves by chance into the correct order to make an antibody would be around one in 10^{260} , that is 1 with 260 zeroes after it. That is an infinitesimally low chance of the event happening. And the odds of assembling by chance a chain of 1,000 sub-units in the correct order to make a modest strand of DNA (the template that encodes the structure and functions of a cell) has been calculated at one in 10^{600} .

Richard Dawkins himself has said that the chance of life arising spontaneously on another planet would be one in a billion (109). He argues that because there are millions of planets in the solar system, life was bound to have started up on some planet, somewhere, sometime. However he admits that the likelihood of a complete eukaryotic cell (one with a nucleus) arising is much less than this. And he has said that the development of consciousness would add a further layer of improbability. But, wonderfully, a human being enshrines all three characteristics at the same time. Probability theory says that to estimate the chances of three rare events occurring at the same time, we need to multiply their separate probabilities together. So, taking a modest one in 109 probability in all three cases, to develop a living creature with cells and consciousness would involve a probability of one in $109 \times 109 \times 109$. The time for this would take more than the highest estimates for the age of the universe. Of course the evolutionist says, 'Well, we are here, so the improbable must have happened!' But that is not logical. It is a circular argument. It is much more likely that a supremely intelligent and powerful designer created us - which is what the Bible says!

4. The design argument

Let's take a different line of argument. Consider for a moment the Black Mamba. This is an African snake which obtains its food by injecting a deadly, paralyzing poison through hollow, curved fangs into the bloodstream of its victim. Once it has ceased to struggle, the snake engulfs the whole body into its flexible throat. Setting aside how the snake came by its highly complex toxin, we need to consider how it developed the hollow fangs down which the poison flows from a gland high in its skull into the flesh of its prey. If evolution is true, we have to assume that originally the teeth were



solid, but became hollow over a long period, say millions of years. How exactly does a solid tooth become hollow? I asked an atheist recently how he explained this. 'Oh!' he said, 'at some point a snake was hatched that had a small depression in one side of its tooth. In later generations this became a groove, and eventually the groove closed over to make a tube.' This might sound plausible, until you consider the basic tenet of evolutionary theory that

changes that are of no immediate service to the individual are eliminated. A hollow somewhere on the tooth would add nothing to its usefulness. Only if in the same snake there were several hollows in a line would there be a slight added efficiency. And those hollows would need to be in a line pointing downhill. A line running round the circumference of the tooth would be useless. The probability of an individual snake experiencing a whole series of such drastic mutations to the structure of its tooth simultaneously would seem vanishingly small. And then it only ends up with a groove. How did the groove close over to make a tube? Until that time most of the venom would be wasted, since it would not penetrate the flesh. Even then, the snake would still only possess one fang with a tube. But it has two fangs, each of which needs to be hollow.

What we are saying is that when you get down to the detail of what is needed for evolution to work, it becomes much simpler to assume that a God out there designed a working snake complete with poison and fangs, which He then set down as a predator in the great pyramid of life. We could multiply this example with a thousand others: the tear drain in the human eye - a minute tube that runs through the thickness of the eyelid; the migration of the New Zealand cuckoo across open ocean to the tiny islands of Vanuatu; the clotting of blood - essential for us to survive the smallest cut and yet remaining liquid while passing through the capillaries of our arteries - the whole of nature has mechanisms and structures that cry out 'design'! Such brilliant inventions do not, in our experience, arise out of random events such as chance mutations in our reproductive cells.

5. Morality and the instinct to worship

Our last line of argument addresses the existence of moral qualities in the human population. Where did love, and truth, and striving for freedom come from? Why are we angry at oppression and cruelty? A purposeless, amoral universe does not develop such attributes. If evolution is true, only the fittest survive, and they do not waste time and energy supporting the weak or blind or mentally handicapped in the way that we do. Why do we tend to agree that some aspects of the natural world like flowers and sunsets are full of beauty? Why, unlike our pets, do we have a bad conscience when we do something we know is wrong? And why do so many people seek to worship God?

The evolutionist says that love is a mechanical thing, based on a mix of three hormones. But that is sexual and maternal love, which we share with animals. How do you explain the sacrificial love of Christianity, which involves giving up time, money and even life itself to help those less fortunate than ourselves, just to make them happy? The evolutionist allows that at times it may be more 'efficient' for one member of the population to die if it saves or protects the majority, as when a bee stings a bear attacking the colony and dies in the process. But what about caring for your enemy's ox or donkey, and helping him lift it out of a ditch (a specific commandment of the Law of Moses - see Exodus 23:4, 5)? Or a man dying to save his enemy (see Romans 5:6-8)? It is also a fact that many of our caring charities and organisations have a Christian basis. How many humanist charities are there?

People who believe in the God of the Bible perceive these moral qualities of love, truth and beauty as derived from God Himself, the God of love. They see Western society, as it gradually abandons belief in God, slowly sinking into a selfish world where violence, lies and adultery become the norm. The Apostle Paul has this comment about his first century world:

"And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who practise such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practise them." (Romans 1:28-32)

There are many parallels here with the twenty-first century, which brings us neatly to our final subject - what happens if we deny the existence of God?

Life without God

Atheists see life without God as freedom to do whatever they want. 'Stop worrying and enjoy yourself', they say. Well, even if there is a God, you will still have freedom to do whatever you wish, within the laws of the country. The God of the Bible does not force Himself upon you. You may have read through this booklet and smiled, and dismissed us as foolish because you are still convinced there is no God. In that case you will continue to live the kind of life you choose, for as long as health or chance permit. Then, inevitably, you will depart for ever into the darkness of the grave.

But actually this would be a tragedy. The God of the Bible is interested in the people He made. He wants to have you as His friend. In turning your back on Him, you are passing up the opportunity to know the most wonderful being in the universe. This is what He promises people who put their trust in Him:

"It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed." (Deuteronomy 31:8)

Have you ever been afraid? Have you ever had friends who have forsaken you? The God of the Bible has all the power in the world at His disposal, and He will never let you down. You will never see Him in this life, but you will soon become aware that He is with you.

The Psalmist has a helpful phrase:

"Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!"
(Psalm 34:8)

What he is saying is that God challenges us to try Him out. We can argue endlessly about His existence, but there is really only one way to find out - to start walking life with Him. It is like learning to swim. We can watch others swimming, we can attend lectures in physics that prove the water is able to bear us up, but until we let go of the side and push off into the pool, we shall never be convinced. And once we have launched ourselves, we shall find swimming is a pleasure. So it is with faith in God. You will be really happy in the company of people who will love you and help you through the crises of life. And you will find, as the Apostle Paul writes:

"Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38,39)

What of the reward we read about in Hebrews 11, the chapter about faith? How does God reward those who seek Him? As we have seen, He can give us confidence and help in this life. True Christianity brings joy, not misery. The bus adverts were wrong. But the principal reward for believers lies in the future. Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom of God. This is a theme that runs all through the Bible. The kingdom is a time when Jesus himself will return to the earth to teach all nations how to live God's way. If you have put your trust in God, and followed His advice laid out in the Bible, He will reward you with eternal life in that future world. Faithful men and women from past ages will be raised from the grave to help Jesus bring peace and justice to this earth. But that is another subject and another booklet!

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