

A humanist discussion of... GOD

Do humanists care about God?

Most humanists find that the concept of God or gods simply doesn't strike a chord. The idea of God just isn't relevant in my daily life and the decisions I take. That's one reason why I like the description "humanist". I could call myself agnostic (I can't and won't know if there's a God) and say I live my life as an atheist (without God) - but that means I'm defining myself in religious people's terms.... in relation to God, a concept that has no relevance to me. But "humanist" is positive, and based on the reality of human life.

Most people begin definitions of Humanism by saying that it's about being non-religious. True, but why start with a negative? A short statement that I use goes, "Humanism is an approach to life based on reason and our common humanity, recognising that moral values are properly founded on human nature and experience alone".

Humanists respect your personal beliefs, whether in God or any other concept. Your belief is a matter for you. We also respect the views of people who say they have had a religious experience: that experience is for them, and is private.

What we are concerned about, however, is the use people make of their beliefs. Sometimes the idea of God (or gods) has been used to justify the irrational or inhumane actions of governments or religions. This is when humanists start talking about human rights, and the whole concept of freedom.

Of course, there's a difficult question here. We support freedom of belief, and tolerance is one of our values. But how much do we tolerate? When do we blow the whistle? When it comes to beliefs, we are tolerant of everything except intolerance and indoctrination without consent.

The origin of gods

Throughout recorded human history many people have used the idea of "God" or "gods" to explain to themselves the workings of the natural world around them. They've also used devils, demons, spirits, elves and fairies.

It's not really surprising that people invented powerful spirits to explain why the sun rose and set, why rain fell, or the tide moved. A lot of these ideas, especially sun-worship, have influenced modern religions such as Christianity (for example, the symbol of Sol Invictus, the Roman Sun-God, becoming the halo over Christian Saints at the order of Constantine, when

he moved the holy day from Sabbath to SUNday, and the birth of Jesus to 25 December, to coincide with the festival of the re-birth of the sun).

Science steps in

As our knowledge of the world and the universe increased, many people's view of "God" began to change. Most religious leaders had to keep changing their explanations of fundamental subjects such as the origin of humans or the movement of the planets. Of course, some "fundamental" leaders have stuck firmly to ideas of creation, or the Earth being the centre of all things.

God today

These days religious beliefs are becoming more personal and private. Fewer people believe that religious books are literally true - that Moses parted the Red Sea, that Jesus turned water into wine, that Ganesh existed with an elephant's head. Many young people are interested in the so-called "New Age" spiritualities... and choose their own combination of ideas from the many theories and movements available. These days, people's beliefs are more likely to change with time, and are less likely to be the same as their family's beliefs. It is good that people are questioning beliefs and coming to their own conclusions, whether they are religious or not.

What do we mean by God?

The word God means different things to different people. Christians may think of a loving Father. Hindus and Sikhs think of a universal spirit. Some believe God is a sort of force that set things going. Some think God can and will intervene in our lives if we pray, meditate or sacrifice. Very different and powerful religions have been built up, each with a different idea of God that they think is the correct idea of God.

Some say that there is a common denominator: a single God about whom the various religions have different beliefs. But that does not seem to be the case in practice. If people believe different things about God - some say he is a person, and male; others say that God is a cosmic force and sexless; some say God is loving and good, while others do not; some say God is purely celestial, while others think God is human or superhuman.... then the God they believe in is not the same God, and their beliefs will contradict each other.

We cannot discuss whether or not God exists until we are all clear about what is meant by "God". Some of the most common arguments for the existence of God, indicating what sort of God we're talking about, are indicated below. Some of these arguments are very old, but they are still used. Some are relevant to all religions' concepts of God or gods, but

many have arisen as part of Christian theology.

Argument 1 - The Argument from Design

"Surely the regular movement of the planets and the arrangement of the cosmos must be the work of an intelligent designer?"

This argument is usually called "The Argument from Design". It comes from ancient Greece, especially Aristotle, but was taken over by Christian thinkers such as St Thomas Aquinas, and Catholics have been taught it ever since.

This argument has big problems. Firstly, there isn't much order in the universe, but an increasing tendency towards chaos. The universe is also expanding, rather than keeping to a particular design.

Secondly, this argument assumes that order has to be designed, and can't just occur naturally. But the way things happen to be will give them some characteristic features, which may appear as order.

Very often, patterns follow from the nature of the thing in question. We know that a spider doesn't have a planning intelligence - the pattern of its web has arisen through millions of years of evolution by natural selection. A shaken jar of soil and water settles to a highly ordered pattern with larger particles at the bottom, then finer particles, then liquid - and no designer is involved at all.

The Christian Church took on this argument to justify the Christian God... but Aristotle was talking about a very different and abstract sort of god - a god that inspires movement in material things simply by existing. Ironically, followers of Aristotle's kind of god have often been condemned as secret atheists by Christian leaders.

Argument 2 - The Ontological Argument

"If you are able to think of a perfect Being you must believe in his existence, because if he didn't exist he wouldn't be perfect."

This argument is usually called "The Ontological Proof". Ontology is the study of the philosophy of being. This argument is similar to saying: because something is, it is. We have to be on the look out for arguments that go round and round in circles... and actually prove nothing. Words such as "ontological" can make something sound profound - beware! To be honest, I just don't see how these extreme philosophical arguments can tie up with reality.

This argument comes from St Anselm in the 11th century. St Thomas

Aquinas rejected it... so not even all the Saints were in agreement. Later, Descartes revived it, and it has been taught ever since.

It's the sort of argument that will convince those who desperately want to be convinced. If we think about UFOs in these terms: if you can think of a perfect UFO, then it must exist, because if it didn't exist it wouldn't be perfect.

Another version of the argument says, "Because God is perfect he must have all possible attributes." Presumably then God is bad as well as good, visible and invisible... full of contradictions. But existence is not even an attribute in philosophical terms. If we wish we can say "God has everything", but we still have to ask "Does God exist?"

Argument 3 - The 'First Cause' Argument

"Everything that happens has a cause. But something must have happened in the first place to start the chain of causation moving. This 'First Cause' is what we call God."

This argument is usually called "The First Cause". God created everything and started it moving; created the ancestors of all living species... (In 1996 this was suddenly updated by the Catholic Church to incorporate evolution).

So, do we need a First Cause? And if so, how do we know it was God? Logically, if you argue that every cause has a cause, you must face the question: what caused the First Cause? In other words, who or what made God? The Christian response is that God created the chain of causation when he created the universe. God did not need a cause, since causes are something he created.

But if God didn't need a cause, perhaps the universe didn't need one either. If God had pre-existed for an infinite time before he created the universe, what was it that caused him to change his mind and create it?

If the pre-existing God was perfect without being a creator, why did he decide to become a creator?

Even if we did decide to say there was a First Cause, what reason would there be for thinking that this was some kind of God, rather than a great explosion, or cosmic matter or energy? What evidence is there that such a First Cause would have carried on eternally and still be in existence today?

The fact that science hasn't explained everything about the origin of the universe is not a reason for assuming a First Cause and calling it God.

Argument 4 - The Moral Argument

"Because morality exists, there must be God."

This argument is usually called "The Moral Argument". The philosopher Kant demonstrated that the previous three arguments weren't valid, but cautiously supported this one. He said that our moral nature makes it necessary for us to believe in God - he carefully avoided saying that morality means that God exists.

Modern research looks at "evolutionary psychology" and is getting closer to a full account of how our values and moral systems arose from the evolution of human nature.

Argument 5 - Argument from Belief

"God exists because people believe in him."

By the same token, God doesn't exist because people don't believe in him. Everyone has their own "reality", and where groups of people share their belief about what is real, then it gathers more force. From a theological viewpoint, however, it makes little sense to look at the existence of God merely as a matter of opinion, as this argument does.

Sometimes the argument stresses the number of people who believe in God (whatever the sort of God or gods they believe in). It's about consensus of opinion, and it's a weak argument.

Enough people have believed in Santa Claus during their childhood, but it didn't have any bearing on his existence. Years ago, almost everyone believed the earth was flat and at the centre of the universe... but this didn't make it true!

If there is evidence, we can say it is a widely-held rational belief - such as believing in icebergs... I've never seen one, but I've read reports of them from people I trust, seen them on television, know what they are made of, and have seen similar lumps of ice in drinks. What evidence is there for God? If there were evidence, would believers need these arguments?

Argument 6 - The Personal Argument

"But I've had a religious experience."

This argument is usually called "The Personal Argument". Many research projects have examined religious experiences. So far there is no

scientifically verifiable evidence that such experiences reveal consistent evidence about God.

These revelations about God are often mutually exclusive - they cannot all be right, though each person is convinced that their personal experience has shown them the true path.

Argument 7 - The 'purpose' Argument

"Without God there's no purpose to life."

As it stands, saying that without God there's no purpose or meaning to life is neither evidence nor proof. There is also plenty of evidence of intelligent beings (people) giving meaning and purpose to their lives without help from the supernatural.

Argument 8 - God's Test Argument

"God won't let us discover proof of his existence, because he wants us to have faith."

Based on an argument from the philosopher Kant, this seems to be only an opinion or a clever way with words. Like many other arguments, it isn't evidence and it isn't proof. You could also say that faith would be even more important if we proved that God didn't exist.

Argument 9 - God as 'force'

"God is a force beyond time and space, creating the underlying rationality of the universe."

You will find that many scientists who study the universe are agnostic, atheist or humanist. But there are some who believe in God. Their view is very different from the God of religions' scriptures, and is often abstract.

Again, I would not see this as any sort of proof. Of course there are many things that we don't yet know. But where the religious physicists put the word "God", humanists are happy to leave a question mark.

The more abstract the concept of God - "beyond time and space" - "cannot be described in terms that humans would understand" - the less it can be said to be a proof of God's existence.

STOP! Just look at the suffering in the world...

Apart from the lack of evidence for God, the strongest argument against the existence of God is the whole question of evil and suffering.

Many religious people have times when they seriously doubt their faith in God.

When they consider horrific events like the murder of the children at Dunblane, they find it difficult to believe in a God who is all-loving and all-powerful.

Perhaps God is either not good, or not powerful? But that would go against the teaching of most religions. And if God is cruel, why should people worship? Do they want a cruel God to bring about more cruelty?

Perhaps God simply doesn't intervene in human lives? This is like the belief of "Deists", who think that God never reveals himself to us, and so won't intervene to stop bad events. In this case, there is little point in prayer or worship.

Perhaps God doesn't care about us? Once again, why worship? Why pray? This is a debate that could go on for pages. I'll leave my contribution here: now, over to you.

Robert Ashby, former BHA executive director

Some quotes....

"I'm an atheist, and that's it. I believe there's nothing we can know except that we should be kind to each other and do what we can for other people."

Katherine Hepburn

"Beliefs are what divide people. Doubt unites them."

Sir Peter Ustinov

"It is not hardness of heart or evil passions that drive certain individuals to atheism, but rather a scrupulous intellectual honesty."

Steve Allen

"It seems to me that God is a convenient invention of the human mind."

Isaac Asimov

"It was the experience of mystery, even if mixed with fear, that engendered religion."

Albert Einstein

"Each religion necessarily contradicts every other religion, and probably contradicts itself. Religions, like languages, are necessary rivals. What religion a man shall have is a historical accident, quite as much as what language he shall speak."

George Santayana

"Where it is a duty to worship the sun, it is pretty sure to be a crime to examine the laws of heat."

John Morley

"Truth, in matters of religion, is simply the opinion that has survived."

Oscar Wilde

"I have had some trouble in regarding evil as having been intended by infinite Goodness"

Robert Ingersoll

Recommended books

Julian Baggini *Atheism, a Very Short Introduction*

Nicholas Everitt *The Non-Existence of God: An Introduction*

Richard Norman *On Humanism*
