

WHY DO WE BELIEVE IN GOD?

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The other week I was making a visit to Blackwell's bookshop in Oxford. And I was taken aback to find a display of about 7 new books all arguing that God did not exist. Richard Dawkins "The God Delusion". Christopher Hitchens "God is not great". Michael Martin "The impossibility of God." I can't remember so many atheist books coming out in such a short period of time.

What that says to me is from a time when religion seemed irrelevant now it is back at the centre of the stage. Our new Prime Minister is a son of the manse. In America Christians of varying types have become deeply involved in politics. The relationship between Christianity and Islam has become vitally important and religious extremists have set off bombs on the London underground. One way or the other God is back on the agenda. Which is why Richard Dawkins and the rest are so urgently seeking to prove that God does not exist.

If you want another piece of evidence that times are changing - what is the fastest growing examination subject in schools? Religious education. And in particular the fastest growing A level subject is religion and philosophy. On the plane out to Ghana I was sitting next to Livy Chappell, one of our senior class. And at one point we discussed the ontological proof for the existence of God. A few years ago before this A level became popular I don't believe that would ever have happened. But now many young people are looking seriously at the arguments for the existence of God. What a challenge and what an opportunity for our junior churches. Today God is back on the agenda.

So the question is if we are challenged - why we believe in God? Well let me give you my answer. Of all the philosophers of modern times one of the greatest was Immanuel Kant. And Kant once said this: "Two things fill my mind with wonder the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me". Let me start with those.

Firstly the starry heavens above. The sheer amazing wonder and beauty of the world. Says the Psalmist "The Heavens are telling the glory of God. The firmament proclaims God's handiwork." Says Gerald Manley Hopkins "The world is charged with the grandeur of God". The creation, in all its mystery and majesty, in all its fearful power and intricate beauty, tells us something of the creator. If you want the evidence for god look around.

No one saw this clearly than Francis of Assisi. A few days I was in Assisi and I thought of St Francis writing love poems to the God of creation.

Be praised, then, my Lord God
In and through your creatures
Through noble brother sun
Through sister moon
In brother wind be praised, my Lord
And in the air.
Be praised my Lord, through sister water

And brother fire
Through our dear mother earth.

Even now standing outside the Basilica looking down on a vast expanse of fields and distant hills you could share some of Francis's wonder.

When I talk of the wonder of nature what comes to mind for you? For me it's Pulpit Hill in Oban the first time I saw the Hebrides. Lake Bled in Slovenia, for me the loveliest of the Alpine Lakes. The wide waters of the Volta River. The thunder of Niagara Falls. Or coming closer to home the exhilaration of walking up Leith Hill. There is a beauty to the world that makes you think there is more to life than simply chance.

This is an amazing universe. Touched with beauty. Governed by scientific laws of amazing elegance. Containing within it the wonder of life. And all this so easily might not have been. This universe began with a great explosion which sent matter hurtling into space from which planets formed and then on those planets life. If the rate of expansion one second after the big bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million it would have re-collapsed before life could begin. On the other hand if the rate of expansion had been greater by one part in a million it would have expanded too rapidly for stars and planets to form. It seems this universe is fine-tuned for life.

Either all this happened by purpose or else by the most amazing chance. One scientist says "The more I examine the universe the more evidence I find that the universe in some sense must have known we were coming". "The Heavens are telling the glory of God." "Ever since the creation of the world" says Paul "his eternal power has been seen in the things he has made". "For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies, father unto thee we raise, this our sacrifice of Praise".

Why do I believe in God? Firstly the starry heavens above. Secondly the moral law within. One of the features of human life is that we have a fundamental sense of right and wrong. Some years ago in a Mexican part of Southern California a Mexican mother died, leaving a family of eight children. The oldest girl not yet 17 was a tiny thing and on her frail shoulders fell the burden of caring for her family. The neighbours watched her, taking up the task with courage. She kept the children clean, well fed, and in school. One day a friend complimented her on her achievement and she replied "I can't take any credit for something I have to do". "But my dear" said the friend "You don't have to. You can get out of it. The girl paused for a moment and said "Yes, that's true. But what about the have to that's inside of me?"

Of course sometimes we behave appallingly even to those we supposedly love. But there is in people a basic sense of right and wrong. And sometimes we go against our interests because we believe it is right to do so.

How do we account for this? Richard Dawkins would tell us it is a chance by product of evolution. Well certainly it helps the species if mothers care for their young but what makes us sometimes willing to sacrifice ourselves for those we hardly know. Does evolution explain Mother Theresa? Or William Wilberforce? Or the cross of Christ? There is something in this universe beside physical matter. There is something that means that no-*lie* can live for ever, or as Shakespeare says

“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will”.

Firstly the starry heavens above, secondly the moral law within. Now let me add a third. The experience of the holy. Let me give you a challenge. Can anyone give me a single time in human history or a single place anywhere in the world where there has been no sense of the sacred or the holy? There is no such place or time. When missionaries went to Africa or Asia they never found it necessary to invent a new word for God – always they could take that which was already used. Whenever there have been people there has been some experience of the holy, the sacred, some experience of God.

Where is this experience universal – because God is universal. Richard Dawkins says the experience of God is rather like a computer virus. It’s got in the system and now it replicates itself passing on from generation to generation. In which case you might imagine some society somewhere would be free of it.

You know the story of Helen Keller who was deaf and dumb. At that time there was a famous minister in Boston called Phillips Brooks. He was the author of the hymn “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” So they sent Phillips Brooks to Helen Keller to explain God. How do you explain God to someone who is deaf and dumb? But when eventually he tried that she had known the experience she had never until then known the name. She had no concept of a name. But in her darkness and isolation, she knew she was not alone. Someone was with her. She felt God's love. And when she received the gift of language and heard about God, she already knew.

This is one of the most secular societies in the world. Nothing encourages us to believe in God and maybe sometimes you’re even thought strange if you do. But in opinion polls 40% say not simply that they believe in God but that they have moments when God has been real. 30% of people, for example, have experienced God in the beauty of nature. God is real. God can be known.

Of course at the end of the day for some of us this is very personal. For some of us these experiences we talk of are part of our lives. In our lives there have been moments when like Helen Keller we have found ourselves not alone. In our lives there have been moments of trial when we have found a strength. In our lives moments when the beauties of nature have brought us close to nature's God. Why do we believe in God? Because how can we make sense of our lives otherwise.

“The heavens declare the glory of God”

I lift my head high
To catch the glory.

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