

## **The Pope or Prof. Dawkins – Who’s got it right?** **by Les Higgins**



The Pope’s visit to the UK has proven contentious for a number of different reasons – some ancient, some more recent, some philosophical, some political. The one I want to focus on here is the “God question”.

Listening to and reading the media, the Pope’s visit has brought to the fore two opposing but equally minority perspectives – devout religiosity and devout humanism. The vast majority, as in so many other “important” questions in the UK, feels no particular compulsion to side one way or the other. This is a typical media-fired issue.

Setting that aside, this issue “Does God exist?” seems to run and run. Why is this? Could it be, as both sides seem to suggest, that the other side is, at best, simply mistaken and not able to see the evidence before their eyes, or, at worst, part of some Machiavellian plot to undercut the other? Does any one side have more “evidence” than the other? Is an objective answer to the question even possible?

I heard an interview on Radio 4 involving a Catholic nun and a leader of the Humanist movement in Scotland. Everything was going fine. They each stated their rational case and actually found a lot of common ground for agreement about human rights, etc. Suddenly, everything went pear-shaped when the Humanist stated that “Of course, the only reason why anyone follows any religion is because they were taught it as a child”.



This was a bridge too far for the nun, who had “found” her own faith after being inspired by a speech by Pope John Paul II some years earlier. Yes, she had been brought up as a Catholic but she had rejected it. Only later in life had she made the “free will choice” to become a nun.

What has this got to do with whether or not God exists? Well, before we can begin to look properly at that question, we have to get over our human tendency to exaggerate the position of our opposition in order to try to pre-empt victory in the argument. This is exactly where the conversation in the radio interview went awry – the Humanist was acting in a very human fashion but was not displaying the full gamut of human abilities to listen and reason. Once he’d gone off the track, the nun followed – in very human, but perhaps not very Christian (as in forgiving) fashion.

There was almost nothing in the conversation that was to do with the question about God. It’s true that the nun did say that, “Well, they crucified Our Lord, so some opposition is just what we have come to expect” but that was about the measure of it.



And then there’s Professor Dawkins, who recently jumped back into the frame as a result of the pronouncement by Professor Hawking that “There is no need to invoke God to light the blue touch paper of the Universe”.



I read an exchange between Professor Dawkins and the religious correspondent of a national newspaper. At every point raised by the correspondent, which tended to include the word “meaning”, Dawkins responded with, “Why should you assume there must be a meaning?” I think what struck me most (and here I should declare that I sit strongly neither one side of the fence nor the other) was that Dawkins was completely unable to respond to the (implied) question, “Why should I NOT assume that there must be a meaning?” This is the weak link in Dawkins’ argument.

Consider the following.

1. Religious belief amongst a great many people in secularist societies is described by adherents as based on their personal experience of the world. To the Dawkins-style scientific mind, this can NEVER be described as objective evidence.
2. Kurt Gödel PROVED that there were things that “cannot be known”. (Admittedly, he was speaking about the realm of mathematics – but this is the MOST logically consistent of all the sciences and underpins MOST scientific theories). To the (perhaps) Papal religious mind, this demonstrates conclusively that science can never “disprove” the existence of God.



Interestingly, this is an historically recent argument in Europe. In Medieval times, the Church and science (then known as “natural philosophy”) got along quite famously. Through scholarly teachings, such as by Thomas Aquinas, it was accepted that there may be differences between Scripture and observation in the real world. Where this occurred, observation was accepted as “fact” and the Scriptural description was accepted as metaphorical or allegorical – something that referred to the “meaning” of the fact.



This divide - where natural philosophy was free to observe and calculate, while God, through the Church, provided meaning and interpretation to events - ended with “The Enlightenment”, when scholarly works were systematically proscribed and destroyed at Universities across Europe. (It fascinates me that William of Ockham, the originator of one of science’s most often quoted heuristics, Occam’s razor, had his work proscribed at Oxford during the Enlightenment).

So where are we? To ask who is right and who is wrong is, I believe, simply the wrong question to focus on. Much more relevant would be a question like “WHY would someone believe one way or the other – or even care at all?” or “WHY would someone feel it NECESSARY to try to convince another person to change their view on the matter?”

Actually, this second question is probably the more significant, since it gets to the root cause of the debate and, of course, I shall look at it from the perspective of values. Why, to a Settler, Prospector or Pioneer, is it necessary to convince another person to change their view on the question “Does God exist?”?

The Settler outlook, coming from the strong desire for safety, security and belonging, is likely to be the perceived threat from “the other”. The opponent represents a threat to “my tribe”. This works from whichever side of the argument you come.

The Prospector outlook, coming from the need for the esteem of others and/or the need to develop self esteem, can best be understood as a threat to “my identity”. Being “wrong” never sits well with a Prospector, and is generally only tolerable when the accusation comes from another Prospector with a suitable, face saving “right” alternative.

The Pioneer outlook, coming from a fundamentally ethical perspective, is perhaps the most complex. It could just be “devil’s advocacy” – a game Pioneers love to play for fun. It could be from a basis of a highly rationalised ethical stance – rather like the “greenies” who choke on the idea of commercial organisations doing genuinely green things as a means to make a profit. (They should, of course, be doing them because it’s right, worthy, sustainable, ....).

So, the answer is somewhere in the range group survival, through personal affront to ethical worthiness. Or perhaps it’s just a fun thing to do!

It should be clear by now that there is a lot of dead wood in the way long before it becomes possible to debate the God question. In Medieval Europe, there was time and a methodology (scholarship) to work through this to some extent. In our modern world – especially the world of modern media – neither of the above exists. Our media thrive on the conflict and have very little invested in the resolution.



There are those who would argue, as did Pascal, that “Even though the existence of God cannot be determined through reason, a person should wager as though God exists, because living life accordingly has everything to gain, and nothing to lose”.

Dawkins famously challenged that with the idea that, contrary to Pascal’s assumption of what God regarded as “good behaviour”, God might reward honest attempted reasoning and punish blind or feigned faith. Ironically, this argument “against” God rests on the assumption that their “might” be a God – just as Pascal had said but suggesting a different outcome.



Terry Pratchett, in *Hogfather*, tells the story of a philosopher who propounds a version of Pascal’s argument, only to find, when he dies, he is surrounded by gods with big sticks and one says “We’re going to show you what we think of Mr Clever Dick in these parts”.

As mentioned earlier, being strongly one side of the debate or the other is a minority sport but we probably all have a slight leaning towards one side or the other. I know which way I swing on this one. How about you?