

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

“to understand and to know Me”

(See also theology files #109-111, #217, #401)

Key question

How do we know that God exists?

Key text

Jeremiah 9:23-24

“²³ Thus says the Lord, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the Lord.”

Introduction

1. John Shelby Spong the retired Episcopal Bishop of Newark and a leading spokesperson for liberal Christianity has said, “Traditional Christianity is pre-Darwinian fantasy and post-Darwinian nonsense.” He views the traditional view of a “rescuer God” as a narcissistic reflection of a distorted human image shaped by desperate hope, immature perspectives, and fear. He believes that the Biblical record expresses this ancient reflection as primitive people tried to explain their incomprehensible, un-propositional, existential, encounters with the spiritual side of life - their “religious experiences.” For this reason the Biblical record is of only marginal value in unpacking the big questions of life. In such a world, how are orthodox Christians to respond? Where does one start? How can one argue for the existence of the Biblical view of God?
2. The Bible assumes that God exists and therefore does not set out to prove or argue for God's existence.
3. Rational arguments for the existence of God cannot produce faith but they can support faith and in some sense, a heart of faith must be ratified by a sound mind. We cannot believe something we know to be impossible or nonexistent. We do not need to be able to understand or explain something before we believe it to be true but we do need to imagine it being possible and probable.
4. The question is often asked, “If Christianity is rational and true, why is it that most educated people don't believe it?” The answer is simple. They don't believe it for the very same reason that most *uneducated* don't believe it. They don't *want* to believe it. It's not a matter of brainpower, for there are outstanding Christians in every field of the arts and sciences. It is primarily a matter of will.

5. Then why do we bother with giving answers and evidence for the existence of God or any other area that is questioned? First, because the Bible tells us to be “ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet. 3:15). The reason for this is because people do have genuine doubts and questions and they deserve solid evidence.

A. **How can we talk about “Belief in God” (BIG)?**

1. **Common ground** – What constitutes a common language and set of experiences that all people can agree upon as a starting point to talk about BIG?
 - a. **Longings** – All people poses common longings:
 - to preserve their lives through mating and reproduction, physical security, etc.
 - to experience social, psychological, and physical peace and pleasure.
 - to relate successfully to others.
 - to worship something larger than themselves.
 - b. **Frustrations** – All people experience frustration, fear, disappointment and pain that is related to the inability to achieve and secure human longings.
 - c. **Basic logic** – There are laws of nature that force us to logical conclusions necessary for survival.
 - d. **Impulses** – All of us have impulses some of which can be easily explained (defensiveness), and some which cannot (moral convictions).
2. **Subjective factors** – While logic may play an important role in faith it is not the sole or primary factor in BIG.
 - a. The Christian Scripture and tradition account for this as they make reference to the Spirit of God at work in lives of people.
 - b. It is hard to measure the effect of moral factors that push or draw us to various beliefs and behaviors.
3. For further information on related topics of interest see theology files #109-111, #217, #401

B. **The classical arguments for the existence of God.**

1. **Cosmological argument** - There is need for a first cause of the cosmos.
 - a. **Any motion requires an original mover.**
 1. If you wish to provide an explanation of change, you have only two alternatives; either you must hypothesize (a) an infinite regression of change with no explanation of an original mover, which is an intellectual embarrassment, an offense to reason or (b) you must hypothesize some unchanging ground that lies prior to all the multiple changes we experience in ordinary life.
 2. Acts 17:28 “for in Him we live and move and exist”
 - b. **Effects point to an original cause.**
 1. If every event has a cause, and the universe is a system of causes and effects, it stand to reason that there must be an un-derived causal agent and necessary being that underlies and enables all these causes and effects.
 2. Ps.102:26 ‘Long ago thou didst lay the foundations of the earth, and the heavens were thy handiwork. They shall pass away, but thou endurest; like clothes they shall all grow old; thou shalt cast them off like a cloak, and they shall vanish; but thou art the same and thy years shall have no end.’

- c. **Contingency and interdependency suggest an independent starting point we call God.**
 - 1. Nothing is self-existent yet something must be in order for the web of interdependent life to exist.
 - 2. Like a daisy chain all of life seems to be a web that is interdependent. Where did this chain begin? Believers suggest that the answer is God.
 - 3. Acts 14:17 and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.
 - d. **Degrees of being or grades of perfection point to an ultimate and perfect Source.**
 - 1. The fact that degrees of value, merit, and goodness suggest that there is an ultimate perfect standard. Christians call this perfection "God."
 - 2. Deut.32:4 "He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he."
 - e. **The life force in nature points to the essence of life in God.**
 - 1. How are we to understand the origin and nature of life? What is its dynamic essence? Where does it come from? Christian confessions suggest that it points to an eternal living and life giving God.
 - 2. Job 12:10 "In whose hand is the life of every living thing. And the breath of all mankind."
2. **Teleological argument** - There is order and purpose in nature that speaks of intelligent design. The designer must be God.
- a. **Order in nature suggests that there is an orderer.**
 - 1. Order is everywhere observed.
 - 2. It is implausible that such order could have occurred by chance.
 - 3. The power of this argument is seen by taking seriously its opposite hypothesis, that there is no cause or order to anything.
 - b. **The fact that there seems to be purpose or design in nature suggests the existence of a designer.**
 - 1. The evolutionary hypothesis suggests that survival is the governing impulse in life. But where does this impulse come from? Why does it exist?
 - 2. Modern biochemistry has enabled us to observe the complex nature of the elements of life. Design in the DNA is hard to deny.
3. **Anthropological argument** - All people possess a rational and moral impulse that goes beyond the practical and immediate needs of man. The best explanation for this impulse is God's existence.
- a. **The appearance of mind in nature suggests an ultimate mind.**
 - 1. It is hard to imagine complex order without intelligence.
 - 2. The fact that the universe is intelligible and that humans can in part understand it is a powerful argument for the existence of a supreme intelligence.
 - b. **The existence of persons suggests a supreme person.**
 - 1. One cannot reasonably have human personality drop out of the blue in evolving history without hypothesizing a divine person that elicits and awakens human personality.
 - 2. The notion of self awareness suggests

- c. **The human idea of God suggests that God exists.**
 - 1. If humanity has the idea of God implanted in its very nature, then some sufficient reason must be hypothesized.
 - 2. What is the best explanation for this? Evolution or the facts that we are made in God's image and instinctively know there is something beyond us.
 - d. **The universal God consciousness among humans suggests that something exists beyond us.**
 - 1. The idea of a supreme force, being, principle, etc. seems to exist in all cultures and in all ages throughout history.
 - 2. People have been willing to die for this belief. It is possible to die for false beliefs, but it is difficult to think of any other idea in human history for which so many caring and intelligent persons have been willing to offer their very lives.
4. **Moral argument** - All people possess a moral conscience, sensitivity to beauty, and longing for justice.
- a. **Inspiration for moral good is best explained by God.**
 - 1. The universal moral sense within humans suggests a moral personality behind human nature.
 - 2. Even people who do not believe there is a god, have strong feelings about justice, courage, etc. The notion of a just and ideal society must originate in a cosmic moral mind.
 - 3. The evolutionary model struggles to explain the complex moral spiritual nature of humanity.
 - b. **The longing for justice is best explained by God.**
 - 1. In this life there is no justice or direct correlation between virtue and prosperity or happiness. For justice to win Kant reasoned that freedom, immortality, and God must exist.
 - 2. Rev.7:17 "God shall wipe every tear from their eyes."
 - 3. C.S. Lewis put it this way, "If I discover within myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."
 - c. **Society is better when people act as though God exists.**
 - 1. Believing in God makes people function better and feel better and makes lives more productive.
 - 2. Ps.33:12 "Blessed is the people whose God is the Lord, the people he chose for his inheritance."
 - d. **The phenomena of aesthetic beauty suggests the presence of an aesthetic source.**
 - 1. The presence of beauty and human ability to recognize that which seems to be of universal beauty (a sunset, etc.) suggest the presence of God.
 - 2. Ps.19:1-4 "The heavens tell out the glory of God, the vault of heaven reveals his handiwork. One day speaks to another, night with night shares its knowledge, and this without speech or language or sound of any voice. Their music goes out through all the earth, their words reach to the end of the world."
5. **Congruity argument** – That postulate which best explains the most distantly related facts is more probably true. The existence of God best explains all phenomena.
- a. If God in fact exists, then the virtually universal belief in divine reality is accounted for.

- b. If God exists, then the intellectual hunger task for a first cause of causes is satisfied without the embarrassment of an infinite regress of causes or unaccounted-for motions.
- c. If God exists, then our inveterate religious nature has an object.
- d. If God exists, then the uniformity of natural law finds adequate explanation.
- e. If God exists, then human moral awareness is vindicated from the charge of being an immense absurdity.

6. **Ontological argument** - The fact that we can imagine a supreme being requires that such a being exists. This argument is adopted from a Platonic framework, in which the ideal is more real than the physical. (This argument, in its 20th century form, appeals to the nearly universal sense of a supreme power.)

C. **The big question is what does the fact of the existence of God mean to us as human beings?**

1. First, the knowledge of the existence of God means that man is put here by **design**. It means that while all God's creatures have purpose, due to man's particular uniqueness among the creatures of God, man has special purpose and meaning. We are not merely the product of time plus chance or some impersonal force. We are each the result of a personal God who created us for Himself with meaning and purpose. But the details of this purpose are found only in the Bible, God's special revelation of Himself. Creation of course cannot and does not reveal this. Creation's primary role is to give man the evidence and basis for God-consciousness (Ps.19:1-6; Rom.1:18-20).
2. Second, the knowledge of God means **responsibility**. The fact that there is a supreme and perfect being, a divine sovereign who created us for His purposes, means that we are each responsible to Him for the way we live and for what we do with the life He has given us.
3. Third, the knowledge of God's existence means that we have the responsibility to **search** and seek to know God personally and intimately, to be thankful, and to worship Him accordingly (Rom. 1:18-23). The facts are, however, that man in his fallen state does not search for God, at least not on his own (Rom. 3:11). But in His grace, God constantly works to draw men to Himself (see John 1:9; 6:44; 7:17; 12:32; Acts 17:27-28; Rom.2:4; Jer.29:13; 2 Chron.15:2, 4).
4. Sadly, most people, even with the conviction that God exists, live like practical atheists, as though God does not exist or as though He is indifferent to man. One of the reasons for this is the principle found in two passages: the principle of God's patience and slowness to act against man's sin.
 - Psalm 50:21 "These things you have done, and I kept silence; You thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you, and state *the case* in order before your eyes."
 - Ecclesiastes 8:11-12 "11 Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. 12 Although a sinner does evil a hundred *times* and may lengthen his *life*, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly."
5. People think they are getting by or that God is just an old man sitting in the heavens who smiles on the indiscretions of His children. This can be illustrated by the hymns we so often sing. We sing hymns indicating our faith, but then live so differently.

D. **God knows why faith is thriving** by Dinesh D'Souza San Francisco Chronicle Sunday, October 22, 2006

"A group of leading atheists is puzzled by the continued existence and vitality of religion.

As biologist Richard Dawkins puts it in his new book "The God Delusion," faith is a form of irrationality, what he terms a "virus of the mind." Philosopher Daniel Dennett compares belief in God to belief in the Easter Bunny. Sam Harris, author of "The End of Faith" and now "Letter to a Christian Nation," professes amazement that hundreds of millions of people worldwide profess religious beliefs when there is no rational evidence for any of those beliefs. Biologist E.O. Wilson says there must be some evolutionary explanation for the universality and pervasiveness of religious belief.

Actually, there is. The Rev. Ron Carlson, a popular author and lecturer, sometimes presents his audience with two stories and asks them whether it matters which one is true.

In the secular account, "You are the descendant of a tiny cell of primordial protoplasm washed up on an empty beach 3 1/2 billion years ago. You are a mere grab bag of atomic particles, a conglomeration of genetic substance. You exist on a tiny planet in a minute solar system in an empty corner of a meaningless universe. You came from nothing and are going nowhere."

In the Christian view, by contrast, "You are the special creation of a good and all-powerful God. You are the climax of His creation. Not only is your kind unique, but you are unique among your kind. Your Creator loves you so much and so intensely desires your companionship and affection that He gave the life of His only son that you might spend eternity with him."

Now imagine two groups of people – let's call them the Secular Tribe and the Religious Tribe -- who subscribe to one of these two views. Which of the two is more likely to survive, prosper and multiply? The religious tribe is made up of people who have an animating sense of purpose. The secular tribe is made up of people who are not sure why they exist at all. The religious tribe is composed of individuals who view their every thought and action as consequential. The secular tribe is made up of matter that cannot explain why it is able to think at all.

Should evolutionists like Dennett, Dawkins, Harris and Wilson be surprised, then, to see that religious tribes are flourishing around the world? Across the globe, religious faith is thriving and religious people are having more children. By contrast, atheist conventions only draw a handful of embittered souls, and the atheist lifestyle seems to produce listless tribes that cannot even reproduce themselves.

Russia is one of the most atheist countries in the world, and there abortions outnumber live births 2 to 1. Russia's birth rate has fallen so low that the nation is now losing 700,000 people a year. Japan, perhaps the most secular country in Asia, is also on a kind of population diet: its 130 million people are expected to drop to around 100 million in the next few decades. And then there is Europe. The most secular continent on the globe is decadent in the literal sense that its population is rapidly shrinking. Lacking the strong Christian identity that produced its greatness, atheist Europe seems to be a civilization on its way out. We have met Nietzsche's "last man" and his name is Sven.

Traditionally, scholars have tried to give an economic explanation for these trends. The general idea is that population was a function of affluence. Sociologists noted that as people and countries became richer, they had fewer children. Presumably, primitive societies needed children to help in the fields, and more-prosperous societies no longer did. From this perspective, religion was explained as a phenomenon of poverty, insecurity and fear, and many pundits predicted that with the spread of modernity and prosperity, religion would fade away.

The economic explanation is now being questioned. It was never all that plausible anyway. Undoubtedly, poor people are more economically dependent on their children, but on the other hand, rich people can afford more children. Wealthy people in America today tend to have one child or none, but wealthy families in the past tended to have three or more children. The real difference is not merely in the level of income. The real difference is that in the past, children were valued as gifts from God, and now they are viewed by many people as instruments of self-gratification. The old principle was, "Be fruitful and multiply." The new one is, "Have as many children as enhance your lifestyle."

The prophets of the disappearance of religion seem to have proven themselves to be false prophets. Even though the world is becoming richer, religion seems to be getting stronger. The United States is the richest and most technologically advanced society in the world, and religion shows no signs of disappearing on these shores. China and India are growing in affluence, and the Chinese government is not exactly hospitable to religion, yet religious belief and practice continue to be strong in both countries. Europe's best chance to grow in the future seems to be to import more religious Muslims. While Islam spreads in Europe and elsewhere, Christianity is spreading even faster in Africa, Asia and South America. Remarkably, Christianity will soon become a non-Western religion with a minority presence among Europeans.

My conclusion is that it is not religion but atheism that requires a Darwinian explanation. It seems perplexing why nature would breed a group of people who see no purpose to life or the universe, indeed whose only moral drive seems to be sneering at their fellow human beings who do have a sense of purpose. Here is where the biological expertise of Dawkins and his friends could prove illuminating. Maybe they can turn their Darwinian lens on themselves and help us understand how atheism, like the human tailbone and the panda's thumb, somehow survived as an evolutionary leftover of our primitive past."

The Point

Even though the existence of God cannot be proven through reason the evidence for God's existence is an important support of a robust faith.

Response

Head

I am to understand that:

There are strong reasons for believing that God exists.

Heart

I am to believe that:

God's existence is embraced by faith that is made plausible by reason.

Hands

I am to behave by:

Giving a rational reason for the hope that is within me as I live a life that reflects sincere faith in the God of the Bible.

Pastoral advice

1. Be familiar with the basic arguments for the existence of God so that you can give an account of the hope that is in you.
2. Recognize that believing in God is as much a moral choice as an intellectual one.
3. Use the rational arguments for the existence of God to answer honest intellectual questions that people have. Don't think that these arguments will persuade a rebellious heart to believe.
4. Do not despise the mind or shun honest questions.