

**The God Question:
Historical, Contemporary, and Philosophical Perspectives**

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When I was a child, my elders told me never to talk about money, sex, or religion in public. “It can only get you into trouble” they told me. Obviously I didn’t heed my elders’ warning because here I stand, about to talk about religion and God. I’ll save sex and politics for another time.

Before I start it is important that you know who I am, so you can judge how much “faith”, every pun intended, to put in my comments.

I am an Iowa farm boy who grew up experiencing nature first hand, a recovering Catholic who survived 16 years in parochial schools, a research scientist trained to be a professional skeptic, a psychologist and marriage and family therapist who has heard about every belief system imaginable, an Emeritus Professor who has taught philosophy of science for 30 years, a distance runner (too much oxygen to the brain), a benevolent hedonist, and a damn poor golfer.

Sooo, with my pedigree exposed, here it goes!

One overall disclaimer, I have stolen heavily from a range of sources that are referenced at the end of a printed version of this talk. You can find it on the Fairhope UU website.

How did the concept of God develop over the ages?

Let’s begin by examining the early development of our species:

The beginnings of religion may have preceded the first member of our species -- Homo Sapiens. Neanderthals reverently buried their dead, with a ritual that seems to show that they anticipated life after death.

Many scientists believe that our ancestors went through a number of changes in their transition from pre-human to fully human.

At some point, humans:

- Attained a fully developed self-consciousness. “I exist separate from my environment”
- Developed a moral sense. Some attitudes and behaviors are better than others.
- Developed a spirit of community. I must get along with other people.
- Developed methods of precise communication. Digital communication or words with relatively precise meanings. This allowed for language and abstract concepts such as “God”.
- Became aware of the finite nature of their life span, and of their own impending death. This led to a desire to find a meaning for existence and the emergence of religion.
- Developed an enlarged brain that facilitated abstract thinking but made childbirth difficult.

According to most paleontologists and anthropologists, fully developed humans with these abilities and knowledge emerged, perhaps fifty thousand to one hundred thousand years ago. However, many North Americans believe in creation science, based on Genesis. They believe that the world and its animal species were created by God, fully formed, between 4000 and 8000 years BCE. Interestingly, the fossil record supports the paleontologists, not the creation science beliefs.

Supporters of both the theory of evolution and of creation science share the belief that humans went through at least three developmental stages :

- 1. The development of a moral sense.
- 2. An awareness of their personal death.
- 3. Painful and hazardous childbirth.

Becoming fully human occurred when our ancestors became self-aware. Self-consciousness was a remarkable development. All earlier animals lacked this ability. They "*had no conscious awareness of who they were or what they were doing...when the time came to die, they did so without anticipatory fear or grief.*" But our distant ancestors

suffered great anxiety, because they felt helpless, insignificant, and insecure in the face of natural forces and their own finite lifespan. People do not like chronic anxiety. Some coping mechanism had to be developed. That coping mechanism was religion.

Animism appears to be the first religion that emerged. Many theologians and anthropologists think that our first fully human ancestors developed primitive concepts of God in order to lessen their anxiety about the future. Animism is typically found in hunter-gatherer societies.

Having developed self-consciousness, early humans may have assumed that the rest of the world was equally self-conscious. They began to believe that the rocks, mountains, rivers, sun, moon, trees, land animals, birds, all contained vital powers, each animated by a spirit. *"Those animating spirits might be benevolent or demonic, but in either case they were assumed to be personal, to have selfhood, to be in charge of their particular area of life, to be capable of responding to human need and to be in possession of supernatural power(J.S. Spong)."* Village chiefs, shamans and native healers played leadership roles in this religion. Human anxiety dissipated somewhat as our distant ancestors felt more in control of nature. Religion gave them assurance, confidence, and peace of mind. Among later-developing religions, there is a near consensus that our Animists' ancestors created their God, spirits, and myths; God did not reveal himself to the tribes. **God was made in the image and likeness of man.**

Fertility religions:

When hunting and gathering was replaced by agriculture and the raising of domesticated animals, a major change occurred in religious life. Fertility of the crops, animals, and tribe became of paramount importance. Fertility was seen as clearly feminine in nature; only female humans and other female animals can produce offspring. Religion tended to be centered on a matriarchal Goddess: the Earth Mother, Great Goddess or Great Mother.

Gaia. Women were held in high esteem in many early societies because they could recreate themselves, but men could not.

In Europe, archeologists have found remains of an "*old European*" culture. Many scientists believe that this society worshipped a female fertility goddess, sometimes with a male consort. This culture lasted for tens of thousands of years. They generally lived in peace and had few defensive fortifications. Males and females were treated equally, at least during burial rituals.

It is important to note that fertility based religions held women in high regard. Women were sacred vessels of reproductive powers.

Let's turn next to Monotheism, polytheism (many gods), henotheism (gods that take turns being in control) and other assorted "isms":

A few thousand years BCE, Indo-Europeans invaded Europe from the east. They brought with them some of the "*refinements*" of modern civilization: the horse, war, belief in male Gods, exploitation of nature, and knowledge of the male role in procreation. Goddess worship was gradually combined with worship of male Gods. The rain was seen as a male entity, falling on and fertilizing Mother Earth. The sun was also viewed as a source of male energy, encouraging the crops to grow. The moon, with its soft, gentle light, was seen to be feminine.

A variety of Pagan polytheistic religions featuring Gods and Goddesses developed among the Greeks, Romans, and Celts. Belief in monotheism -- a single male deity also emerged. Belief in a universal monotheism began.

"The theistic god in these various traditions was:

- *Always other, always external to the self who was defining the God-figure, (God exists independent of us, is transient rather than immanent*
- *Always supernatural, and,*
- *At least in the West, usually personal in the sense that individuals could know and communicate with this deity.*

The theistic God was also presumed to be the explanation for that which was beyond rational understanding, a being capable of miraculous power who therefore needed to be supplicated, praised, obeyed and pleased. (J.S. Spong)."

There is a near consensus among followers of the main monotheistic and henotheistic religions on many factors. Some are:

- They view their own religious texts as true and inspired by God; the texts of other religions are seen as partly or wholly false; that is, they arose from people's imagination.
- They see their own view of God as true; he was the creator of mankind and the rest of the universe. They see the Gods of other religions as false; those Gods were created by humans.

The role of God has been shrinking in more recent times:

Five hundred years ago, supernatural beings played a major role in the world. For example:

- The earth was the center of the universe. Angels pushed the stars, planets and moon across the sky.
- God controlled the weather and the changing of the seasons. He sometimes set aside natural laws and created miracles.
- Demons caused damaging hail, mental illnesses, and physical disease -- often in punishment for sin.

But then science grew from infancy and started to explain the causes of many phenomenon. It is the opinion of some theologians that (and I'm quoting now) "*The theistic God first became the gap-filler, explaining things that humans could not.*" With the advent of science these gaps started to fill up. "*God no longer has any work to do.*" "*The theistic god is becoming irrelevant with no real purpose. Theistic power has become impotent...Theism is dying.*" Likewise Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed the death of the theistic God in the 19th century.

In support of the observation that God is losing influence, polls regularly show that church attendance in the U.S. and Canada is about 40%. These same polls show that that attendance is dropping. However, people tend to lie to pollsters. When an actual headcount is taken, only about 20% of American adults and 10% of Canadian adults regularly attend a church, mosque, synagogue, temple or other religious service.

Can God survive in a postmodern, post-Darwinian world?

Atheism and Agnosticism are possible choices for people who have abandoned belief in a theistic God. Figures on the number of adherents are hard to pin down. Somewhere between 7 to 13% of adults in the U.S. doubt the existence or no longer have a belief in God. Many people tell pollsters what they think is a socially acceptable response, so the actual number of atheists and agnostics may be higher. Given the low church attendance of most Americans, they behave as if they have little or no belief.

One theologian, Bishop J. S. Spong argues that there is another response to the loss in belief in a theistic God. He suggests that belief in a "non-theistic" God can be held if God is described in the following way:

- Love is God.
- God is in each individual.
- God *"is a symbol of that which is immortal, invisible, timeless."*
- *"God is Being -- the reality underlying everything that is."*

But Spong also suggests that a number of historical Christian beliefs and practices must be dropped or redefined. These include:

- God as a being -- supernatural or otherwise.
- The virgin birth.
- The incarnation.
- The atonement.
- The "fall" of Adam and Eve
- Original sin.
- The miracles of Jesus.
- The resurrection of Jesus.
- The ascension of Jesus to Heaven.
- The Trinity.
- Prayer.

Spong admits that Christianity might not be able to make the transition from a theistic to a non-theistic God. Christianity might be destroyed by the changes required.

To conclude the first part of my talk, let me make these observations:

Many mental health professionals and historical anthropologists believe that all religions were originally created by humans in order to alleviate their chronic anxiety. Their angst was created by their feelings of helplessness in a dangerous universe, their lack of control of the environment, and the knowledge of their own impending deaths.

Further, most people believe that:

- ¶ Their own God(s) and/or Goddess(es) are real, but the deities of other religions are false.
- ¶ Their own religious texts were inspired by their God. They alone know the true attributes of God. God revealed to them alone his expectations for his followers. God gave them alone the correct behavior and moral codes to be followed. The religious texts of other religions are works of fiction, written by humans, and partly or fully in error.

This leads me to an observation. The chances of a given person belonging to God's "true" religious institution is rather small. Most people are quite certain that their faith tradition is the one that is God's. Sadly, many find it quite difficult to extend equal human rights to members of other religions. A few are quite capable of denying human rights to, and even killing, those who they consider to be infidels in order to further their own religion's goals.

Given the large number of religions, in the thousands, and assuming that only one religion is the true religion, your chances of believing in the correct faith are vanishingly small.

References:

1. J.S. Spong, *"A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying & How a New Faith is Being Born,"* HarperSanFrancisco, (2001), Pages 37 & 38. [Read reviews or order this book safely from Amazon.com online book store](#)
2. David Barrett et al, *"World Christian Encyclopedia: A comparative survey of churches and religions - AD 30 to 2200,"* Oxford University Press, (2001). [Read reviews or order this book.](#)
3. The American Atheists home page is at <http://www.atheists.org/>
4. *"Canada: A Nation of Believers,"* Ipsos-Reid, at: <http://www.angusreid.com/media/>
5. Adherents.com has collected results from a number of surveys at: http://www.adherents.com/Na_12.html

Arguments for and Against the Existence of God

Reference: Wharburton, Nigel (1992) Philosophy: The Basics (3rd. Edition), Routledge, New York. Summary by Harvey Joanning, Ph.D.

I. The Design or Teleological Argument

A complicated instrument such as a clock is be designed by someone. Like wise, everything in the natural world is suited to its function and gives evidence of having been designed. The Designer is God. The complexity and efficiency of natural objects such as the eye are evidence that God must have designed them. This is an argument from effect (apparent design) to cause (a designer) based on similarity between two things, nature and man-made devices. Because everything in nature appears designed there must be a designer just like a clock is designed. Such “arguments from analogy” rely on the principle that if two things are similar in some respects they will very likely be similar in others.

Criticisms Design Argument

The analogy is weak rather than strong, therefore the “proof” of God’s existence is weak. Also Darwin’s Theory of Evolution in biology and Self-Organizing High Energy Systems in physics explains the same effects without any mention of God as their cause. Therefore the Design argument is not conclusive.

The Design Argument completely fails to support monotheism, does not demonstrate that the Designer is all-powerful, all knowing, or all good. It does not explain the presence of evil in the world.

II. The Anthropic Principle

The chance of the world turning out to be conducive to human survival was so tiny that we can conclude that the world is the work of a divine architect.

God must have controlled the physical conditions of our universe, and fine-tuned them to allow just our kind of life form to evolve.

Criticisms of the Anthropic Principle

It is a mistake to assume that when something happens which is unlikely, that there must be an explanation of it other than that it arose naturally. Our presence in this part of the universe can be adequately explained without recourse to supernatural causes. This criticism is sometimes referred to as the principle of very large numbers, or in this case, a very large number of occurrences. Given sufficient time, Stochastic Process, the combination of random occurrences and the narrowing effect of the physical and biological context of the world could produce living creatures and human beings without a god intervening. Again, the notion of Self Organizing High Energy Systems can produce very complex, living organizing. Enough energy applied to the physical world, over time will produce living systems like us.

III. The First Cause or Cosmological Argument

Everything has been caused by something else prior to it: nothing has just sprung into existence without a cause. Because we know that the universe exists, we can safely assume that a whole series of causes and effects led to the universe being as it is. If we follow this series back we will find an original cause, the very first cause or the “Prime Mover”. The first cause is God.

Criticisms of the First Cause Argument

What caused God? Physicists argue that the universe needs no cause to explain its existence therefore God is not needed. The universe in effect becomes its own first cause. Also the first cause argument presents no proof that God is all-knowing or all-good, although such a being might be very powerful.

IV. The Ontological Argument

God is the most perfect being imaginable, or as St. Anselm (1033-1109) stated, God is “that being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” A perfect being would not be perfect if it did not exist. Consequently, God exists just as it follows from the definition of a triangle that the sum of its interior angles will be 180 degrees.

Criticisms of the Ontological Argument

Such an argument would allow us to define all kinds of things into existence. Such a concept is absurd.

Existence is not a property but rather a precondition. One must prove that God exists before arguing that God has properties such as perfection, omnipotence, or great power.

V. The Problem of Evil.

If God is benevolent as most Christians argue, why does evil exist in the world?

The Artistic Analogy answer: overall harmony requires discords, which are subsequently resolved. Such an argument is difficult to believe because suffering for aesthetic purposes sounds sadistic, hardly what we would expect from an all-good God.

The Free Will Defense.

God gave humans the ability to choose for themselves what to do. If we did not have free will we would be automatons with no choices of our own. If God did not allow humans to commit evil, we would not have free will.

Critics point out that humans could have been designed so that they believed they had free will even though they didn't; they could have had the illusion of free will with all the benefits that follow from thinking that they are free, but with none of the drawbacks.

Another criticism is that free will is an illusion. Some psychologists argue that all behaviors are determined by prior behavior and experience; in effect we have no free will.

A third argument is that God could have designed us to have free will yet not have allowed evil to exist.

Fourthly, God could intervene at anytime as some argue He does (miracles), so does free will really exist?

Fifth, the Free Will Defense does not explain “natural evil”; for example, earthquakes, diseases, and severe weather. Some argue that so-called “natural evil” is simply a necessary part of the organization of nature and not evil at all.