

The God We're NOT Debating: Confessions of a Different Kind of Theist

 Monday, September 28, 2009 at 9:53am | |

[This is for a discussion some of us are having later in the week at “Living the Questions.” If you don’t want to wade through all of this, here are the different sections:

**Opening Statement**

**What about “the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language,” that Richard Dawkins denies?**

**Is such a God credible in a world that depends heavily on the methods and theories of the natural sciences?**

**That’s a bit abstract. Is this still the God I believe in?**

**But where’s the evidence?**

**What do I want people to do with this?**

Here goes:]

**Opening Statement**

I keep reading the “new atheists,” people like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. I continue to find that the God they don’t believe in is not the God that I believe in. They don’t like it when people like me say that. They continue to insist that people like me don’t really believe in God, that we’re using the word “God” to mean something else, something much less than God, like just an expression of awe and reverence toward a basically uncaring universe, or else a philosophical abstraction that appeals only to a select few.

Well, sorry, but I think the God I believe in is just as “God-like” as God could be. I believe in a God who encompasses and indwells all things, who cares deeply about you and me *as* you and me, who constantly calls us into love and still loves us in spite of our failure to respond wholeheartedly, and who saves us from futility and oblivion. God does all this for us because God does all this for every creature.

This is not a vindictive God, but this is most definitely a God whose unconditional love stands in opposition to our failures to love unconditionally. God won’t give up on us, but God will not stop insistently luring us away from our own self-centered ways. God is relentless about that, and we may not like it. God may be infinitely loving and relentlessly alluring, but that does not make God “nice” or “convenient.”

I do not know of a concept of God that could be more “religiously” satisfying than that. I’ve heard it preached for decades and have preached it myself, and people are definitely moved by it. It may not produce mega-churches, but it enlivens many faith communities. This is much more than a philosophical abstraction.

There may be all kinds of reasons for viewing God this way, but for me the main reason arises out of the Christian practice of seeing the shape of God’s very life enacted in the life, death and risen life of Jesus of Nazareth—a God who rules the world through enduring its worst and yet refusing to be driven away, returning again and again to embrace and indwell all things and to call them into love. This is a God whose perfected power may look weak, but only to those who define power as total control (as many Christians have done and still do). It culminates in the early Christian affirmation, “God is love, and those who dwell in love dwell in God, and God dwells in them” (1 John 4:16b). Furthermore, like love, this God is not simply personal but *interpersonal*, as ancient trinitarian creeds struggled to say (with mixed results).

Some would call my version of God “pan-*en*-theistic” (*not* “pantheistic”—God is not simply “all things” or “the all”; God is greater than all other things, yet indwells them all, just as they indwell God). There are all sorts of panentheists, some ancient, many contemporary, so I don’t mind the label, even when I’m not sure if any particular type fits me. Labels aside, this is clearly not the all-controlling, petulant, “invisible superman” of popular theism, nor is it the currently uninvolved clock-maker of deism, nor is it modern pantheism’s expression of awe and reverence for a universe that doesn’t look especially caring.

And there is one other thing it is not—it is not a watered-down concept of God. As best I can tell, it comes closer to Anselm’s “that than which no greater can be conceived” than any other concept I’ve explored. It preaches. (I’ve been preaching it, and hearing it preached, for over 30 years.) If we’re going to debate God’s existence, why can’t we debate the existence of this God? That hardly ever happens, and, frankly, I’m baffled.

**What about “the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language,” that Richard Dawkins denies?**

That God is a caricature of the God I believe in, who encompasses and indwells all things and draws them relentlessly into love. And that Bible is a caricature of the Bible I read and the critical methods I’ve been taught (by observant Christians!) to help me read it. But the God I believe in does seem to be what the writers of the Bible, the priests, mullahs and rabbis were trying to portray in ordinary language of their times and worldviews (which were at least as conflicted as ours). They were, I believe, speaking in grossly anthropomorphic terms about their own awareness of a presence too elusive to describe in everyday terms. Many of them did admit that the language they used was far from adequate.

They were convinced that what they did mattered, what happened to them mattered, that sometimes wonderfully good things happened, and that other times dreadfully bad things happened. And they related all of this to a universally responsive presence which, it at least seemed, was summoning them to speak and act.

They believed that this presence, God, cared for them constantly and responded to them constantly, refusing to let them create God in their own conflicted images. And yes, in working through all that, they often made God look like an immature, sometimes abusive, monarch or parent or spouse. It’s dangerous to quote them out of context, and disheartening that anybody would want to!

But that does not mean that they were not responding to something utterly real and active, nor does it mean that people who still talk that way today are not responding to something utterly real. It just means that people often do a disastrous job of articulating what’s really happening, though of course that’s my view, and evaluation, of why so many still prefer to talk of God in that way.

**Is such a God credible in a world that depends heavily on the methods and theories of the natural sciences?**

I believe so. In fact, this concept fits remarkably well with many views of the universe that have been inspired by a variety of current scientific theories. These views, like belief in God, go beyond what could be tested by experimental methods. They’re invitations to view *all* of reality, somewhat figuratively, in terms of some *part* of reality. As such, they can never be proved or disproved decisively, but there are still observations, experiences, facts, and accepted theories that can count for or against them.

For example, the natural sciences have, I think, made it more difficult, more of a “stretch,” to view the universe as simply a result of miniscule, inert particles bumping into each other like billiard balls. “Subatomic particles” are not particles, and they don’t interact like particles either.

They have also made it more difficult to view the universe as a machine that runs only in predetermined patterns like a clock. Machines, after all, are human artifacts. The universe is not.

True, the natural sciences have also made it increasingly difficult to imagine how there might be any disembodied “stuff” like minds or spirits or souls that could exist independently of bodies. But I don’t have a problem with that, since even the Bible never fully bought into that view of things. “Soul” may simply be a heuristic term for lives that are always embodied in some way or other.

In any case, for the time being, at least, the natural sciences have made it relatively easy to view the universe as a vast network of centers of activity which follow predictable patterns without being fully predetermined—from subatomic “particles” (again, they’re not really particles any more) to complex molecules to cells to organisms to animals to people to … well, who knows what else? Some of these centers of activity (like you and me) are more inclusive than others, and more responsive too.

If that view of the universe is credible, then it is no great stretch of the imagination to consider that there may well be a universally responsive presiding center of activity. Some have even argued that viewing the universe this way requires us to presume that such a center of activity exists. It’s a reasonable argument, but not an airtight one. Others have argued that presuming the existence of such a center of activity would make it easier to make sense of the fact that, despite there being so many other centers of activity, with all their unpredictability, we don’t have utter chaos. That too seems a reasonable argument, without being airtight.

Note: The existence of considerable chaos, conflict and unpredictability is only to be expected in a universe with innumerable centers of activity. It does not count against a universally responsive presiding center of activity. It would count against a universally controlling center of activity (which is one popular idea of God), but that is not what we are considering here. The famous “problem of evil” arises only for people who equate power with control, and thus greater power with greater control. But what if perfect power is *not* perfect control?

**That’s a bit abstract. Is this still the God I believe in?**

Maybe not yet. When I say God cares for me deeply, that’s saying a great deal more than “a universally responsive presiding center of activity responds to me.” But this is starting to sound a great deal like the God I believe in. It responds to and presides over me and all that I do as a lesser center of activity who also responds to and presides over still lesser centers of activity (like the cells that make up my body). That’s not the same as caring deeply about me or loving me or saving me from oblivion. BUT it’s consistent with all that.

And it’s more than just consistent. It provides a framework for me to take more seriously those moments in my life when I sense that I am never alone, that I am loved beyond the love of friends or family or self, that what happens to me, or to you, or even to an electron, matters immeasurably in the whole scheme of things, that there is an intimate presence in my life that I didn’t produce. I don’t have to rule these moments out in advance, as Freud or Dawkins might, as pitiable illusions. And it is because of moments like these (call them moments of revelation) that I can use more concrete imagery when talking about a universally responsive presiding center of activity.

It also helps me to take more seriously the conviction that I and many scientists and philosophers share that our efforts to understand the world and ourselves are more than just incidental byproducts of unthinking, self-replicating mechanisms (like Dawkins’s memes, maybe?). I don’t have to explain the quest for understanding away as a pitiable illusion either. (Freud and Dawkins don’t do that, but I’m not sure how they manage to avoid it.)

Frankly, I do not know of a more intellectually satisfying way to look at things than this one. The fact that it’s also emotionally, ethically and religiously satisfying is all the more reason to keep living by it.

**But where’s the evidence?**

I think I’ve already addressed that, but I know somebody is still going to say that my believing in this God is just as unwarranted as believing in flying saucers or the Loch Ness monster (or the Flying Spaghetti Monster). Why can’t we go out and observe God in God’s native habitat?

But God isn’t the sort of thing you can go out and observe. In fact, God isn’t the sort of thing you need to go out and observe. A *universally* responsive presiding center of activity would already be here, waiting, if you will, to be noticed. We’re already in God’s native habitat.

I do however say “noticed,” not “observed.” Strictly speaking, you just can’t observe something that is both all-encompassing and all-pervading. It’s both too vast and too intimate to be observed—both at once. To observe something, you have to get some distance from it. If God exists, we won’t be able to get that kind of distance. It’s like trying to observe myself. I can notice myself when I’m observing something else. I can be aware of myself, but strictly speaking, I can’t observe myself. The same applies to God, who, according to Augustine and many contemplative folk, is nearer to me than I am to myself.

Admittedly, God is not as noticeable as we are to ourselves, but that’s partly because, unlike you or me, God’s intimacy is as boundless as God’s vastness. And it’s already tricky enough just keeping track of ourselves! (Try doing it the next time you’re in a heated argument.) If we don’t notice God, that may simply be because we’re not paying enough attention to what’s happening around and in and through us. Or maybe we’ve already bought into a view of reality that encourages us to discount certain features of our experience—like people who can’t admit how much their feelings and concerns shape their thinking and observations.

I believe, in other words, that we can “find” God, not by going out and looking, but by paying more attention to what is already happening right here and at least considering whether there might be noticeable aspects of what’s happening that would be less puzzling if we saw them as responses to a universally responsive presiding center of activity. We *begin* to know God in the only way such a reality can be known—not by observation, not by logical inference, not by “blind faith,” but by reflective participation in an inescapable reality. And that knowledge is never more than a beginning.

In a way, asking “Does God exist” is like asking “Do subjects exist.” By “subjects” I mean whatever it is about you and me that makes us more than just objects. I mean whatever it is about you and me that makes it crucial to keep distinguishing between what we observe and who does the observing, even when we try to observe ourselves. I mean that “I” statements and “you” statements can never be replaced by “it” statements, not just because it would be inconvenient, but because we’d be missing something real (even if it is, as I suspect, inseparable from some sort of embodiment—a subject is not the same as a disembodied soul or spirit). If any part of what we observe exists, can observers be any less real, or any less crucial to giving a full account of reality?

If you ask me “Where’s the evidence for subjects?” I can’t point to observations or experiments. Deciding whether subjects exist is a matter of deciding how we are going to view the lives we are already living. We already have more “data” for this than we will ever be able to absorb. This is a question of how to view all of reality in a way that does not discount the reality and integrity of the viewer. We begin to know subjects by reflective participation in an inescapable reality.

Similarly, if you ask me about evidence for God, I can only point to the lives we are already living and how we view them. And all I can say is that a panentheistic view of our lives so far has allowed me to honor and integrate far more aspects of my life than any other view. That conclusion can be challenged very easily. Just try reading some current Buddhist philosophers. But the only pertinent challenges would be, like Buddhist philosophy, on the whole-scale terms of how we view the lives we are already living. It’s never a matter of isolated observations. It’s ongoing, reflective participation. And it’s always a beginning, not a final solution.

**What do I want people to do with this?**

Mainly this: if we’re going to debate God’s existence, could we at least debate the existence of this one? None of the “new atheists” I’ve read deal with this concept of God—nor do they deal with the kinds of reasons that would be relevant to deciding whether this sort of God really exists. There’s plenty of room for debate, if they would just make room for it. I suspect they avoid it because it’s easier to make other concepts of God look stupid or irrelevant.

I’m not looking for quick agreements here. Obviously, I would be delighted if people decided that they could fully embrace this kind of theism. When it comes to how we view our lives, and their contexts, in their full concreteness and entirety, who doesn’t want more company?

But this is such a self-involving subject that I don’t expect that much unanimity. So I think I would be just as delighted if people first saw this as an occasion to consider that there may be other, more inclusive ways to honor and integrate all the aspects of our lives as we take note of them. I mainly want people to be as honest as they can be about *everything* they are undergoing. I am more concerned about that than I am about the conclusions they are drawing at any point in their lives.

That’s partly because of what I already believe about God, of course. Without claiming infallible inspiration, I’m brash enough to say that God is likewise more concerned about our honesty and integrity than anything else, and that God is honored even when some of us still wonder if such a God exists. God wants us to grow into love, but we can’t do that without honesty and integrity. We would still be responding affirmatively to God’s promptings, even if we could not in good conscience say that we are.

So keep paying attention to every aspect of your life. Be as honest as you can about all of it. If God is there to be delighted, God will be delighted. And so will I.

**AH**

I don't get it. Father Allen is an awesome guy, and I'll never say he's not an intelligent or thoughtful sort. I'm just not sure what he's bending himself over backwards and twisting himself into logical knots to *accomplish.* It seems like the answer to the question of, "If you're right and nobody believes in a God that we can pretty much prove doesn't exist, what now?" is to redefine his terms and start all over again.

"Oh, well, that's not my God. My God doesn't do things or make claims that could be disproven by observing his/her/its hypothetical effect on material reality. My God just loves me."

What does he do when you need more than love? Sometimes, in some places, some people need more than love. They need help. They need something or someone who loves them to be *effectual* about it. What then?

I just don't get it. I keep coming back to this. I'd love to get back on board with this whole theism thing, but if these are the best arguments around... they're gonna have to do better than:
\* changing the definition of God to one that is more insistently difficult to disprove, but also more completely empty of significance or distinctiveness
\* claiming that science *can't* observe God, even as theists try to placate and convert skeptics, and even as theists leap on every scientific study that *does* feel supportive (see how excited people who don't believe science knows everything will get about studies about the "power of prayer")

I just don't get it. It's not that I have this huge disgust for theists and that I think they should all cut out of their lives something which is clearly still included for a reason. It's that I wish they would stop acting like that reason has anything to do with "proof" as the experimenting world understands it, you know?

**Charles Allen**

I'm glad that you think I'm still undeniably awesome.

I don't think my definition of God is very new or very original. I find plenty of precedents for it in the Bible and in many pre-modern writers. I think what passes for "theism" in popular terms also had ancient precedents (though it's mostly a 17th/18th Century invention). But I'm not just reinventing the idea: It's always had a complex and diverse history.

I don't say that God doesn't do anything except love me. I believe that God constantly presents new opportunities for me and others to live into deeper community than we've realized up to now. I don't believe God ever controls the outcome, but that doesn't mean that God isn't doing something immensely needful.

True, a lot of people would stop believing in God if they realized that God isn't going to do magic tricks for them, but if that's why they believe, I'd just as soon they stopped.

I am, by the way, very skeptical about studies that claim to prove the efficacy of prayer. Even if they did prove that praying can affect certain outcomes, that could still be due to natural forces that don't fit any current theories.

You may find this concept completely empty of significance or distinctiveness. I don't know how to respond to that, except to say that countless people from ancient times to the present have found it to be immeasurably important.

Anyway, that's my two-cents worth. Your response may be a familiar one, but it's still thought-provoking, and I'm glad that you find the topic engaging enough to comment on.

PS--The Philosophy/Religion Dept. is not sponsoring the Thursday meeting. It's one of ours (Grace Unlimited's)

**AH**

Thanks for the clarification on the sponsors.

"I believe that God constantly presents new opportunities for me and others to live into deeper community than we've realized up to now." How? What activity is this that's happening, and how is it different from "interventionist" ideas of God?

It's not that I find the idea of a "more loving than deism says but not actually active" God to be devoid of meaning or emotional importance to the people who include it in their lives. I just think that God lacks significance and distinctiveness, and here's why.

If God doesn't do anything but feel affection from some removed or even immanent location, there's still not really any reason to let that affect decisions in the material. Functionally, he's not there except emotionally. I love the Iranian protesters and I care about what happens to them, but my approval doesn't and shouldn't affect their decisions. That's the significance.

Distinctiveness comes in finding the character of God. If everything that makes the Judeo-Christian God who he is can be pared away to make him more defensible, then do those qualities really matter? Can the goalposts be shifted infinitely, or is there a line beyond which they can be shifted no further, some quality that must remain part of the definition?

**Charles Allen**

The "interventionist" idea, as I understand it, is that God, who exists somewhere else, is only involved in the world sometimes, and usually to do a special favor for somebody.

I'm working in colloquial terms from the process theism model, where God is always in interaction with everything else, not just sometimes, but all the time. In the process model, God is prompting the Iranians to to find more just and peaceable options for moving forward, and prompting us to find appropriate ways to get involved ourselves. That's much more than feeling affection from a distance. But it's not a magical solution that relieves people from taking responsibility for the impasses they've developed.

I don't know if you're familiar with process theism. Here's a link:[http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-theism/#DivPowProEvi](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-theism/%22%20%5Cl%20%22DivPowProEvi%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

**DB**

It seems the position of the New Atheists is to target the most broadly shared conception a god - sort of the Old-Man-in-the-Sky version, the version which seems to cause the most havoc and discord in the modern world. However, when you get right down to it, most atheists are non-cognitivists with respect to the "form" of a god, that is, any defining characteristics. Dawkins said theology is not a proper subject, for this reason of slippery definitions. Now, I find process theology to be more aesthetically pleasing in general, but I see no reason to accept that conception either. If a god is in everything, then it is both 'love' as well as 'hate' and 'evil'. Politically, the teleology of the New Atheists movement might have its origins in opposing the rise of religious neo-conservatism. Many on the Left felt the country was hijacked for 8 years by religion. I don't like the fact that it has left so much polarization in its wake.

**Charles Allen**

What Dawkins says of theology is what most natural scientists would say of philosophy in general. The definitions do often get slippery, and even analytic philosophers avoid this mostly by adopting conventions which cannot themselves be justified in analytic terms.

Process theism does not say that God is neutrally "in" everything. It says that God is working noncoercively in everything, bringing about deeper degrees of community, encouraging love as opposed to hate. Whether anybody can justify saying anything like that about God is of course another matter, and it partly depends, not just on this or that argument or experience, but upon a whole framework in terms of which everyday experience is interpreted.

**BP**

Charles, my friend. I resonate withall of this. I came upon Terry Eagleton's book, Faith, Reason and Revelation. He is a literary critic. Used to be a Marxist. Not really a Christian, I don't think. But he makes a similar argument, not necessarily from a place of faith. I've only read a bit of it, but it was a surprise to find this "friend." And glad to be tagged in this note.

**BA**

Since by assumption, observation, experimentation, and intention, scientists are solid materialists, how can they have any serious credibility in opining or evaluating the reality of God and spirituality as believers conceive of these persons and matters? Doesn't it seem reasonable that the metaphysical or non-material dimension of creation does not nor cannot exist for scientists because the laws of science forbid the acknowledgement of the laws that support the divine and spiritual side of reality?

**DB**

CA: Can you distinguish "neutral" from "noncoercive"? If it is noncoercive, how can it "encourage" or "oppose" anything? I'm just trying to understand here - you know I like to question things. How is this not a psychological projection onto the world, as opposed to a real qualia of the world itself? If only believers have access to this truth about a god, isn't this evidence for psychological projection?

**DB**

BA: Quite right, with qualification. Science (not scientists) assumes a stance of methodological naturalism - meaning, the appropriate realm of study is matter in motion under universal natural laws. Scientists are people, and can believe whatever they want. Science assumes naturalism in order to derive universal laws, which would be disrupted by miracles, interventions, and manipulations by things outside of nature.
If you think miracles and interventions occur, this sort of precludes scientific thinking about regular universal natural laws. And there are many religious scientists now and thoughout the history of science as well: Boyle, Newton, Faraday and our present NIH director Francis Collins....

**Charles Allen**

DB, "neutral" means, in this context, having no influence whatsoever, and in the same context, noncoercive encouragement (or opposition) means having some influence, but without fully determining the outcome. One of the axioms of process thought, you may recall, is that no activity can be fully determined by anything else, not even God (if there be one). But all activities are influenced to varying degrees by others.

Can you clarify what you mean by psychological projection? Process thinkers often like to say that the influence of one activity on another is "persuasive," rather than coercive, which does sound like psychological projection. But here persuasion is more of a metaphor for influencing a relatively original activity. Is that what you're getting at?

**DB**

Scientists, as people, have as much credibility as anyone else by dint of their shared humanity to answer metaphysical questions, which by definition means 'above nature". This pertains to things like our collective desires, ethics and our notion of the Good. The nonmaterial dimension of reality includes the world of ideas, which we all share as humans.
I am unaware of any immaterial laws that might be manifest in our ethics, our notions of the Good which changes over time, or our desires which may depend on our culture. So, my answer is that basically, scientists are human too and religious people, who I respect, are equally qualified as anybody else to offer their ideas.

**Charles Allen**

DB, well-stated, especially about how scientists as humans deserve as much voice as anybody (and more of a voice than some).

I'm intrigued that you are content to say that the appropriate realm of study for science is "matter in motion." I've been toying with writing an essay entitled "The Matter Delusion," because what physicists study nowadays bears very little resemblance to those microscopic billiard balls of 17th century physics, when the phrase, "matter in motion," first came into vogue. So why do we still call it "matter"?

Here's a quote from Brian Greene's "The Fabric of the Cosmos":

"Throughout this book we have periodically alluded to the ultramicroscopic constituents of spacetime, but ... we've yet to say anything about what these constituents might actually be. And for good reason. We really have no idea what they are." (pp. 485-486)

But we have a very good idea what they are not. They are not the inert particles of Hobbesian materialism.

That's why some philosophers have stopped defending materialism and have opted to call themselves "physicalists." But that only shifts the problem, because if you ask them what counts as physical their answers tend to boil down to "what physicists currently study.”

And yet that unexamined phrase, "matter in motion," keeps cropping up as if we all know what it means.

**BA**

I agree that scientists along with all other humans have credibility to speak their mind and their point of view based on shared humanity. What I wonder about is the rigidity of science or scientific thinking that allows many in that domain to make judgments about the validity of the non-scientific view of the world based on their application of values of science past and current. Of course, we see ample evidence in the other camp, too. Religious believers of whatever sort are all to willing to use their own rigidity of perception to downplay or ignore the truth of the material world and its history for their own ends.

Material, materialist, materialistic, and materialism are generalizations about the traditional normative principles of science even though contemporary physics has lots of evidence of the validity of the virtual and visible absence of material throughout the universe. Of course, saying physical is what "physicists currently study" doesn't advance the understanding of this linguistic and semantic dilemma either.

**DB**

BA: I can tell you aren't completely satisfied with my answer.
(Btw, I've been a nonreligious person since birth, even before I learned about science, religion or philosophy.) I suppose now I would say something more like applying Occam's razor, or in Sagan's words, "extraordinary clams require extraordinary evidence", that motivates my view as a metaphysical naturalist. Maybe you could elaborate on why using scientific thinking or reason disqualifies somebody from making judgments about the validity of the nonscientific view of the world. Buddhists are nontheists, yet they do not get a bad rap for being nonbelievers in a god. Is it because they have an ethical system? Or rituals? Or take the many gods of Hinduism. Do all these variable human intuitions (religions) correspond with reality? Is there all at once no god, one god, and many gods? What qualifies human intuition and intensity of feeling above reasons and justification?

**DB**

CA: Yeah, "matter in motion" is antiquated, isn't it? Well...it's better than "science is what scientists do". Better yet: Science: the study of the natural world. Re: psychological projection. I suppose metaphysical intuition might be better: there is an effort to find a way to fit a noncontradictory definition of a god into the world without having any compelling reason for thinking that is the particular way it is. For example, how can you distinguish between a determined event and an influenced event? What I meant was that we can project an a priori idea on the world without any means of knowing if it is true or false. I suppose I'm looking for some way to falsify the idea in order to know that it can't be false.
I am a failed theist: I want to be able to prove it true, but I have never found a cogent reason to believe it is so.

**AH**

"I am a failed theist: I want to be able to prove it true, but I have never found a cogent reason to believe it is so."

Seconded, to all of that.

**BA**

DB: You make excellent points. I have no objection to scientific thinking making judgments about the validity of nonscientific worldviews; but so far that approach only ends up denying the nonscientific worldview. It seems like one cannot get there from that starting point. I like your questions; they are ones that I am asking, too.

**Charles Allen**

First of all, thanks for the first-rate questions from you "failed theists." As I said at the end of my essay, I'm not trying to convert you to anything except paying attention to our already-interpreted experience in all its dimensions. You're already doing that. And your questions ARE provocative for me, as they should be at this level of sweeping ideas.

Second, I want to reiterate that we're not talking about specific pieces of "evidence" that would decisively settle our differences. The differences are really about entire worldviews--some in which something rather extraordinary figures prominently (God, the Tao, Sunyata), and others in which certain "ultramicroconstituents" (matter, strings, branes) do all the important work. There are theistic worldviews, nontheistic but religious worldviews (which affirm a sacred dimension but do not use personal analogies to speak of it), and naturalistic worldviews.

None of these can be decided by a crucial experiment or bits of evidence (though all those items play a role). We're talking about the very framework with which we interpret the everyday world.

I'm opting for a framework which isn't just about God. It's also about honoring our experience of freedom without explaining it away as an illusion. It's about honoring the seeming fact that what we count as "experience" seems to come to us in a variety of dimensions--in wholes and not just in parts. And it's about honoring our craving to ask the big, metaphysical questions even when they can't be asked or answered by a few observations or experiments. If we have differences over what freedom is, what experience is, and what metaphysics is (and whether any of these have any reality), then it follows almost automatically that we're not going to agree about what (or whether) God is.

I want to remind everybody of one of my closing statements on "where's the evidence." I'm afraid that's all that can be said. It doesn't settle anything, but as far as my theology goes, we don't have to settle this. People worry about such differences more than God ever does. Here's what I said:

"... if you ask me about evidence for God, I can only point to the lives we are already living and how we view them. And all I can say is that a panentheistic view of our lives so far has allowed me to honor and integrate far more aspects of my life than any other view. That conclusion can be challenged very easily. Just try reading some current Buddhist philosophers. But the only pertinent challenges would be, like Buddhist philosophy, on the whole-scale terms of how we view the lives we are already living. It’s never a matter of isolated observations. It’s ongoing, reflective participation. And it’s always a beginning, not a final solution."

**DD**

Well let's assume for a moment that your concept of God is the correct one. Do you have any concept of what this God would want from us?

Have you ever wondered why atheists like Dawkins and Harris don't just laugh at religious fundamentalism but abhore it? It's because the God of the Bible, the Torah and the Koran is a revelatory God -- one who gives orders and makes moral pronouncements. This is a God with a real personality, and I am not fond of it. To say that you believe in some other type of God is all fine and good, but what does it mean in your everyday life? How does it guide your moral compass? Was the prophet Samuel delusional when he heard the revelation from God that King Saul should wipe out the Amalekite women, children, infants and animals? Was he speaking metaphorically? Did he believe in the wrong kind of God?

I guess what I don't hear you doing is criticizing the religious fundamentalists for their Bronze Age thinking.

**Charles Allen**

Well, DD, this is just one essay, and I assume most fundamentalists would have stopped reading when I started talking about the Bible.

When I teach courses on the Bible, or on theology, I get plenty of complaints from the Bronze Age fundamentalists who are in the class. In fact, I've used that very passage to make them squirm. Usually I start out by asking them if they believe genocide is an atrocity. They say it is, and then I point out that they've just convicted the God described in 1 Samuel of that very atrocity. And I suggest that maybe it's time they rethought what kind of literature the Bible really is. And then, of course, many of them drop the class. But a few stay and start rethinking things.

Still, my goal is not just to ridicule them and then consign them to outer darkness, as I have often seen you do. It's to get them to see that, deep down, they really don't even want to believe in a God who would act so vindictive.

As for what God would have us do, I have to ask if you bothered to read what I wrote. I covered that in the opening section. God insists that we love one another as God loves us. Another way of restating it is Jesus' version of the Great Commandment: love God with yourself and your neighbor as yourself. (He wasn't very original there. Other rabbis said much the same thing.) The Golden Rule is another way of saying that--treat others as you would want to be treated. The rest, as Rabbi Hillel said, is commentary.

It's a known fact that people can arrive at that principle without believing in God or consulting any sacred books. Theists, liberal or fundamentalist, don't have any privileged information here. On the other hand, after seeing how readily we twist even the Golden Rule (or the Categorical Imperative) to find ways to be hateful, I find it at least hopeful to consider the possibility that there may be forces at work beyond me, or my country or my culture, that will continue to lure us back into a better way. I don't insist that you call that God, but I've already explained why I would do that. (I don't expect you to be impressed with my reasons either.)

**DD**

Believe me, I read what you wrote, Charles. You say that "God insists that we love one another," but how do you know what God insists on?

I see you just trying to have it both ways here...on the one hand stepping away from the unpleasant "revelations" and latching on to the pleasant ones. But it begs the question how you even get to the pleasant revelations if you believe in a deity that is so different from the revelatory God of the Bible who made pronouncements of genocide. As hard as it is for me to believe that a traditionally theistic God would come to earth in human form and make moral pronouncements, it's even harder for me to believe that a panentheistic God would become incarnate. (Was that correct grammar?)

It sounds like you're worshipping a God of your own design...not that there's anything wrong with that. The further you get away from Christianity, the smarter you sound.

**DD**

"I believe in a God who encompasses and indwells all things, who cares deeply about you and me as you and me, who constantly calls us into love and still loves us in spite of our failure to respond wholeheartedly, and who saves us from futility and oblivion."

Well, in that sense I am envious of you. But I look at the tsunamis and earthquakes of the world and I hardly think God is saving us from futility and oblivion. If anything, he has set up conditions in which futility and oblivion are inevitable.

Do you believe your God created the universe?

**Charles Allen**

DD, it would take a book to answer all of those questions. Of course, lots of such books have been written, and I believe you've read some of them and remain unimpressed.

We do live in a world in which nobody seems to be in control. And I'm not sure I want anybody to be in control, not even God. It sounds wonderful until you think it through, and then you wind up with things like double predestination and people trying to come up with atrocious reasons for why God would "let" a tsunami happen. But as I argued, if how Jesus lived embodies how God lives, then we're not talking about anybody being in control, and we don't have to come up with a "purpose" for tsunamis.

Do I believe God created the universe? I believe that the universe came to be and still comes into being in response to God's prompting. But prompting is not controlling or even designing. So in that sense I believe God created the universe. That probably sounds too vacuous to you, but I'm OK with it.

How do I "know" any of this? Well, I don't take blind leaps of faith, but I do take the risk of following what seem to be my best hunches. That's what everybody does.

I'm glad you think that I'm so original as to have invented this concept of God just to suit me. It would take another essay, perhaps a book, to document how unoriginal these ideas are. I stand in a long line of theologians over many centuries. This is an innovation only to people who don't follow the history of ideas, which, of course, is most Americans (Henry Ford: "History is bunk"). For a crash course, try reading Tillich's "A History of Christian Thought." It's now available online: <http://www.religion-online.org/showbook.asp?title=2310>

**DD**

I don't think you understand me when you say "I'm glad you think that I'm so original as to have invented this concept of God just to suit me." I am well aware that this concept of panentheism is not original to you, but what I mean is that it enables you and anyone else who latches on to panentheism to be subjective and come up with a God that they like.

Unlike with traditional theism in which we have a magic book full of revelations, there is no litmus test in panentheism as to whose concept of God bears the closest resemblance to reality. At least you admit that this all comes down to hunches.

One of the reasons that we have not been debating the type of God that you're talking about is that it does not really form an hypothesis the way that traditional theism does. Dawkins narrowly defined what it means to have a supernatural God so that he had an hypothesis to test. But like one of those gel toys that slips through your hands whenever you try to grab it, the panentheist simply responds that "I don't believe in that kind of God anyway."

**Charles Allen**

Hi DD,
I think my short answer to your last post is that I am guilty as charged. I do, however, think there's place in the world for gel toys, rubber bands, suspenders, and other elastic stuff. It's never going to be as popular as the kick-ass God many of us grew up with, but I'm OK with that. And, like you, I'd like to see that concept of God wither away, as long as something worse doesn't replace it. Those of us who are left may not be able to offer anything alluring enough to attract the attention of the White House or Wall Street, but I think that's for the best. If you want to dismiss all of us as deluded flakes, I'll deal with it, though I'll remain unconvinced.

**Daniel Dougan**

The defendant pleads guilty, and the state rests.

**BW**

Here, here Daniel!

**Charles Allen**

Keep in mind that I only plead guilty to one charge--that my concept of God is a bit like a gel toy. I don't think it's any more squishy than the concept of matter, which people apparently get to redefine to suit their theory du jour without ever getting called on it.

Also, I should have pointed out that Daniel is mistaken to say that traditional theism regarded God as an hypothesis. People never framed the question of God in those terms before the 18th Century.

Although I do it too, it's actually misleading to speak of traditional theism in the singular. No matter how far back you go, there have always been a variety of theisms. And panentheism, gel-like though it may be, is as ancient a form of theism as any other. Anybody who doubts this should check out Charles Hartshorne's "Philosophers Speak of God."

**BW**

Hey Charles I will give you a concept to ponder on. Worry about your life you have on this Earth because there is only one way out and that way usually is ugly and if you were alive to watch you're own death, it would be quite embarrassing. So twist you're concept of "GOD" into whatever gel toy you want, but keep in mind some of us enjoy knowing that love is all that matters and I have never nor will I ever see "GOD" of any kind in a light that you have twisted and discombobulated into you're own version of a higher power.

FAIL.....that is all I say. Try again, go back to the drawing board.

**Charles Allen**

BW, if you're going to comment here, you should at least "friend" me.

I don't need to go back. I already agree that the point of living is to love and to be loved here and now. Everything else takes a back seat to that, including my favorite ideas about God and your favorite ideas about ... well ...whatever they're about.

**DD**

"Also, I should have pointed out that Daniel is mistaken to say that traditional theism regarded God as an hypothesis. People never framed the question of God in those terms before the 18th Century."

I think you misunderstand, Charles. I did not say that traditional theism regarded God as an hypothesis. This is what I wrote:

"One of the reasons that we have not been debating the type of God that you're talking about is that it does not really form an hypothesis the way that traditional theism does."

I did not mean to suggest that traditional theists did this on purpose (or that they even realized they had done it). It's more like an unintended consequence of their worldview that it is falsifiable.

**Charles Allen**

A grammatical/logical point: If you say that, "it [my theism] does not really form an hypothesis the way that traditional theism does," then you have grammatically and logically committed yourself to the sentence, "Traditional theism really does form an hypothesis." Maybe you did not INTEND to say that, but you did say it. Sorry, that's my inner logic professor looking pedantic, but I do think it's important in philosophical conversations to pay careful attention to how we use logic and grammar.

Anyway, what you're now saying is that traditional theists thought of God in a way that, after the rise of modern science, can only be treated as an hypothesis we could verify experimentally, observationally, etc.

I'm sure you're right about many traditional theists, as well as many contemporary ones. On a popular level, people have had and still have very naive concepts of God, just as they have had and still have very naive concepts of matter.

But I'm talking about the people who actually had as good an education as one could have in their time and place. It's quite clear that, at least much of the time, Paul, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Aquinas, etc., thought of God in terms that could not possibly be mistaken, then or now, for an hypothesis of that sort.

That's one of the reasons I suggested we talk about traditional theisms (plural).

You and I agree, I think, that popular theism has proved itself to be a dangerous mindset--increasingly so in our day an age. For you, the solution is to replace all forms of theism with some form of naturalism. For me, the solution is to replace popular theism with a kind of theism that's closer to what the most informed traditional and contemporary Christian thinkers meant by "God." (Some of us, of course, want to abandon the term "theism" too. I have not done that, but I see their point.)

I think we're both in for a lot of frustration. Most people don't want to be that reflective. They just want somebody to take care of them, whether it's their stock broker, their doctor, the Pentagon or their minister. God forbid that we should have to question what the caretakers do!

**DD**

"You and I agree, I think, that popular theism has proved itself to be a dangerous mindset--increasingly so in our day an age. For you, the solution is to replace all forms of theism with some form of naturalism. For me, the solution is to replace popular theism with a kind of theism that's closer to what the most informed traditional and contemporary Christian thinkers meant by 'God.' (Some of us, of course, want to abandon the term 'theism' too. I have not done that, but I see their point.)"

Well, it's not that I PREFER naturalism as much as I TRUST naturalism. Since we're on the topic of logic here, I'd like to raise the notion of a valid argument vs. a cogent argument. I'm sure that you understand this very well, Charles, but for the benefit of everyone else reading this, I shall illustrate with two syllogisms.

First, an argument that is merely valid:

Premise #1: Cleveland is entirely within the boundaries of Ohio.
Premise #2: I am sitting in Cleveland.
Conclusion: I am sitting within the boundaries of Ohio.

The conclusion follows from the premises, but only one of the premises is actually true, and the conclusion is also false. Now let's compare that with a cogent argument:

Premise #1: The ZIP code 46239 is entirely within the boundaries of Indiana.
Premise #2: I am sitting in the ZIP code 46239.
Conclusion: I am sitting within the boundaries of Indiana.

The logic is the same, but the difference is that both premises are actually true.

So, I may very well concede that you (Charles) make some valid arguments in favor of your understanding of God, but I am not convinced that your arguments are cogent. So do you have anything to demonstrate that your viewpoint bears any resemblance to reality?

Perhaps this quote will hone in on exactly what I mean when I speak of evidence and truth...not that God can be observed per se but that God, if he/she/it existed, would have left an unmistakable mark on the universe that we could detect.

"A universe with a god would be a completely different kind of universe from one without, and it would be a scientific difference." -- Richard Dawkins

**Charles Allen**

Hi DD,

I suspect that few if any others are following this any more, so I'll reply to the thread this time, but (unless I hear an overwhelming chorus of objections) from now on I suggest we just start messaging each other if there's more to say.

The distinction between valid and sound (or cogent) arguments is always worth remembering, but it's of use only when people can agree about BOTH the meaning and the truth of the premises. We seem to disagree about both, so the distinction is not going to help us.

I am trying to make a case for whether a Christian like me can use the word "God" to refer to the most inclusive setting of our existence. Most naturalists I know are willing to grant that there is a most inclusive setting, so I don't usually have to argue for its existence. I just have to make a case for how to speak of it. That is what I've tried to do.

I'm like a materialist who wants to make a case for continuing to use the word “matter” after we've abandoned the crude picture of colliding billiard balls. I don't have to be convinced that there are "ultramicroconstituents" of our everyday world, but I'm entitled to ask why we call them matter when they clearly are not anything like colliding billiard balls or "building blocks" or anything else that the original materialists thought they were. I am, by the way, OK with continuing to use the word "matter," because I don't insist that a word has to mean exactly what it used to mean (or may still mean to the uninformed). I wish others would cut me that kind of slack.

As far as Dawkins's statement goes, it's a very odd one. I think it's false, and perhaps meaningless.

David Hume refuted it centuries ago, except back then people were using it to argue FOR God's existence.

The universe is not like a watch you find in the desert. We can't compare theistic universes with nontheistic ones, because our universe is not something we can step back from to compare with others. The statement is an example of metaphysics, and a poor one at that. It is not a "scientific" statement, at least as Dawkins describes science.

If the statement has any meaning at all, I disagree. Think of Wittgenstein's famous duck/rabbit drawing. (Here it is: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duck-Rabbit\_illusion.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ADuck-Rabbit_illusion.jpg)). People who see this as a duck are not looking at a different picture from those who see it as a rabbit. The same goes for how we speak of the most inclusive setting of our existence. Most naturalists (I won't say all) speak of that setting in less-than-personal terms. I and other panentheists speak of it in more-than-personal terms. Both of us are doing something that cannot gain any further support from experiments or observations. We can still give reasons for and against speaking in one way rather than another, but we will probably never agree on which of us has the better reasons.

I can live with that. I'm wondering if you can.