

# 1

## Is there a God?

### Does God exist?

*The White Rabbit put on his spectacles. "Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?" he asked.*

*"Begin at the beginning," the King said gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."* Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll

Let's begin by trying to answer the question, "Does God exist?" If your immediate answer to that question is "No" then I hope I can at least change it to "Don't know". If it is "Don't know" I'll try to move it in the direction of "Yes". And if it is already "Yes", then read on to learn how better to answer those who question *why* you believe in God. Wherever you stand on this question, I'm convinced you are about to read things you've never thought of before!

In this short chapter I want to tackle briefly what I think are two arguments that people use *against* any belief in God's existence, namely the evils of religion and the problem of pain. Other arguments about how a God of love could have destroyed the world in a flood, or command Joshua and his army to destroy the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan, or possibly threaten eternal punishment in hell for those who reject him, are not arguments against the existence of God but against his perceived injustice. That is a different kind of question. I thought some of my schoolteachers were extremely unjust to me, but unfortunately that didn't stop them existing. Such arguments are not about God's existence but about his nature, so I won't address them here, but I will touch on them later.

### Religion

Like other human inventions religion can be a force for good or evil. People who believe it is mainly a force for evil tend to conclude that believing in God is evil and that therefore God does not exist. I'm not sure that this argument is logical. Nevertheless the fact remains that some people find religion an obstacle to belief in God, so I need to address this matter in case you are one of them.

It has been said that more people have been killed in the name of God than for any other reason. Certainly religion has been responsible for some wars, but the number of deaths that have actually been caused by religion is tiny compared with deaths from warfare in general. The *Encyclopedia of Wars* lists 1763 historical wars, of which only 123 or 7% have been identified as motivated primarily by religion.<sup>1</sup> Ancient wars, most mediaeval and Renaissance wars, the Napoleonic campaign, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the American Civil War, World War I, the Russian Revolution, World War II and the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam – none of these was religious in nature or cause. According to the Wikipedia article on 'Religious War' religious wars have accounted for less than 2% of all people killed in warfare. The statement that more people have been killed in the name of God than for any other reason is totally untrue.

It is true that religions have been responsible for some hideously barbaric practices, such as the burning of children as sacrifices to the god Moloch by the local inhabitants during the

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia of Wars, Facts on File*. A.Axelrod & C.Phillips, Richard Deem, November 2004.

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period of the Hebrews' conquest of Canaan, gruesome tortures during the Spanish Inquisition, and in recent years the terrorist bombings and atrocities committed by ISIS in the name of Allah.<sup>2</sup> Such practices certainly bring some religions or at least their devotees into question, but not the existence of God. If I were to start a religion based on worshipping Queen Elizabeth II and I taught my followers to kill everyone who wanted to abolish the monarchy that wouldn't mean that she suddenly ceased to exist. Similarly pointing to the evils engendered by some religions or their followers is not in fact an argument against the existence of the god that they worship. It is an argument against the truth and morality of some religious teachings, or the way that some religious leaders and their followers interpret those teachings.

In reality religion has been responsible for infinitely more good in the world than evil. In an extraordinary book entitled *An Atheist Defends Religion: Why Humanity Is Better Off with Religion Than Without It*, Bruce Sheiman produces countless arguments for the benefits of religious belief – whether or not God exists!<sup>3</sup>

Sheiman's arguments apply particularly to the benefits that the Christian faith has brought into the world. Strictly speaking Christianity is not a religion at all. Religions generally consist of rules and rituals invented by men to seek the favour of whatever notion of God their adherents may have. Basically Christianity is not about rules and rituals, neither is it of human invention. It's about a personal relationship with God, a God who initiated such a relationship by coming to the earth in the person of his Son, Jesus, to meet us where we are. Unlike other religions, Christianity is not an attempt to win God's favour by fulfilling rules and rituals. It is a grateful response to his love for us, which we express by living as he intended us to live with the help of his Holy Spirit. And this Christianity and this faith began changing society for the better from its very beginning.

Paul's statement, '*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*' (Galatians 3.28), was a direct challenge to first century society. Jews and non-Jews hated each other; the Roman Empire's 60 million slaves were regarded as living tools to be thrown out once they were too sick or too old to be useful; women had no rights at all, and girl babies were often left in the street to die or to be picked up for later use in someone's brothel. A man could divorce his wife for adultery, drunkenness, or merely for making copies of the household keys.<sup>4</sup> A divorce could be formally granted on the request of one spouse even if the other was not informed.<sup>5</sup>

As the Christian faith took hold of people's minds and hearts, Jesus Christ's respect for non-Jews, slaves, women, children, the sick and infirm and for marriage revolutionized the ancient world. Christians founded hospitals, schools and universities for men and women. In Great Britain many of the oldest and most famous hospitals, university colleges and schools are named after Christian saints because they were founded by Christians in the conscious service of Christ. The founding fathers of the USA were mainly practising Christians who wanted their national life to reflect Christian principles. If I understand correctly their decision to separate religion and state was primarily to prevent the state interfering with religious faith rather than vice versa. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Christians in

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/isis-release-chilling-video-english-7310064>;  
<https://www.zerocensorship.com/uncensored/isis/foreign-children-executing-kurdish-fighters-other-handgun-beheading-executions-syria-graphic-video-314801>. While most Muslims would denounce the activities of ISIS as being nothing to do with true Islam, the ISIS leaders themselves believe that they are acting in the name and will of Allah.

<sup>3</sup> *An Atheist Defends Religion: Why Humanity Is Better Off With Religion Than Without It*. B.Sheiman, Alpha Books, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> *The long good-bye*. B.Holland & L.Yerkes, Smithsonian 28, no. 12: 86, March 1998.

<sup>5</sup> *Divorce Roman Style: How easy and how Frequent was it?* S.Treggiari in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, Ed. B.Rawson, Oxford University Press, 1991.

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the British parliament led the fight against slavery, and even today Christian charities such as World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, Christian Aid and Caritas are among the world's leading aid and development agencies. I would argue that it is because British society and British values have been shaped by the Christian faith that even today Great Britain is the chosen destination of many refugees and economic migrants from North African and Arab countries.

Religions have occasionally been responsible for wars and other evils, and some still are today, but that is no reason at all not to believe in God!

### The problem of pain

A second major reason that some people don't believe in the existence of God, or at least in the existence of a loving God, is what C.S. Lewis called 'the problem of pain'. (Lewis is most famous for his children's stories about Narnia.)

Human suffering is often terrible but it is simplistic to blame it all on God. Natural disasters and diseases do cause suffering and death, and mental and physical handicaps can make life very difficult for the people concerned and their carers, but the vast majority of human suffering is caused by human beings. Warfare, violence, tyranny, corruption, terrorism, injustice, oppression, slavery, crime, starvation, homelessness, family breakdown, abuse of all kinds and many other evils are all caused by human beings. They are the result of man's selfishness, greed, laziness, dishonesty and cruelty, in other words what the Bible calls *sin*. Even the effects of natural disasters like earthquakes and floods would be greatly lessened if people made more of an effort to build safely and if wealthier countries helped poorer countries to do this. In January 2010 an earthquake in Haiti killed an estimated 230,000 people. Only two weeks later an earthquake *500 times more powerful* struck the coast of Chile affecting a similar number of people, yet the death toll amounted to only 525. Similarly many diseases are caused by malnutrition, contaminated water, gluttony, alcohol consumption, lack of medication, and sexual promiscuity, all with causes and solutions that are in our own hands. We cannot on one hand demand to be independent of God and on the other hand complain about the consequences.

Secondly, if it is hard to believe in the existence of a good and loving God because there is so much suffering in the world, it should be equally hard to believe in the existence of an evil and hateful God when there is so much love, kindness, goodness and beauty in the world. Would an evil God create a mother who risks her life to save her child, or allow the founder of an international IT organization to donate billions of dollars to eradicate disease, or produce volunteer aid workers who daily risk their lives to take supplies into towns under enemy attack and to attend the victims of cluster bombs even as they are falling? Sunshine and rain, earth and sky, trees and flowers, food and drink, above all our amazing minds and bodies – all these are blessings that God freely gives for our benefit or use every day. Put all these blessings and more into the scale pan of God's existence before you conclude that suffering tips the balance against belief in a good and loving creator.

Thirdly our view of suffering is completely distorted so long as we think that human life is limited to 80 years or so in our current bodies. If a baby's life were limited to nine months of an uncomfortable existence in its mother's womb it could rightly complain about the cruelty and meaninglessness of life. And if this present earthly life were not the essential preparation for an eternal life in a world that will be unbelievably better than anything we can imagine, then sickness, pain, mental and physical handicaps, and even death would indeed be hard to reconcile with the purposes of a loving creator. But if such sufferings are a necessary reality in a world that the Bible tells us has been damaged because of sin, and if nevertheless they are somehow intended to prepare us for something far better that is going to last for ever, then any defiant outcry against the idea of a God of love shrivels into a snivelling whimper.

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“Are we there yet?” is the universal cry of children who hate long, boring car journeys, but they know in their hearts that the journey will have been worthwhile when it ends at their holiday destination. Several of the New Testament writers urge us to adopt this same viewpoint when we suffer. Paul suffered far more than most of us will ever do, but he had no complaints. *‘I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us,’* he wrote. (Romans 8.18)

Having tried as best I can to deal with two major obstacles *against* belief in God, it is time now to consider evidence *for* his existence.

## 2

# The Evidence of Design

### Three kinds of evidence

The classical case *for* God's existence falls into three parts:<sup>6</sup>

- the evidence of design
- the resurrection of Jesus
- the personal experience of believers.

In this chapter I'll start with the evidence of design, both in the origin of the universe and in the origin of life. Inevitably it will be a bit sciency, but try to persevere for it's really, really important to understand why the universe and life as we know it can only be the result of intelligent design. That's the first step towards the truth that it was God who designed and made this amazing world. And why is that important? Because God created it for people like you, and then he made you so that he could love you and have you as his friend for ever! You are not a random collection of atoms but the child of a heavenly Father who wanted to have you in his family even before the world was made. Stay with me while I open your eyes!

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<sup>6</sup> For most Jews the second item is not the resurrection of Jesus but their existence as a nation, which can be explained only by God's miraculous dealings with them in their early history.