

## Is belief in God a delusion?

It's a shame we are stuck with very limiting, yes-or-no moot of 'Is God a Delusion?' and this adversarial format, which drags what should be a meaningful dialogue into a he-said, she-said squabble that will achieve little beyond widening the gaps between people. And I suppose that the people who thought this topic up just assumed the atheist would agree and declare that belief in God is indeed a delusion. Well, I'm sorry to disappoint, but that's not the case. The great atheist thinker Charles Bradlaugh said: 'The atheist does not say "There is no God," but he says: "I know not what you mean by God; I am without idea of God; the word "God" is to me a sound conveying no clear or distinct affirmation.' <sup>1</sup> In other words, the atheist has no reliable evidence that one person's notion of God is any more sound than the next person's. What Bradlaugh understood, and what so much scholarship has since confirmed, is that god is a human invention.

Rather than talk about god as a delusion, I prefer to use Lloyd Geering's idea that belief in God is a barrier. New Zealand's most influential theologian has outlined a series of barriers that must be overcome before Christianity can hope to avoid what he has called the spiritual schizophrenia of living in a world with a set of beliefs derived from two millennia ago, when the world was a very different, and more primitive, place. <sup>2</sup> The barriers Geering mentions are:

1. The 'false veil of sanctity and authority which has grown up round the Bible';
2. Christianity's 'claim to be the absolute and final truth';
3. Persisting with discredited claims about the divinity of Jesus;
4. Failing to understand the nature of religious language, in particular the tendency to read scripture literally. <sup>3</sup>

And the last barrier he speaks of is the traditional understanding of God as an objective being sitting up there in the sky somewhere. God, Geering says, in an expressive term, not a descriptive one. <sup>4</sup> Such an important point, that. What I shall be arguing tonight is that belief in the sort of God-idea approved by Dr Craig acts as a barrier to making progress *as a religious person*.

It should be apparent that belief in God can act as a barrier. In religious extremism and terrorism, we see belief in God providing a justification for hatred. And in environmental matters, belief in God can, and often does, act as a barrier to the sort of ecological awareness upon which the survival of our planet depends. This is because of the damaging anthropocentric conceit that religious belief encourages. In Dr Craig's words: 'In the absence of God it is difficult to see any reason to think that human beings are special.' <sup>5</sup> But maybe this presumption of being special is part of the problem. Another American Christian, Andrew Sandlin, not a religious extremist, writes:

The creation of humanity was God's crowning achievement... The animals, despite possessing, in some cases, high degrees of sensation and intelligence, were not designed for this unique, everlasting communion with God. 6

Who the hell, as a species, do we think we are? Let's have a reality check here. We share with thousands of other species a hunk of rock, third one out, from one undistinguished sun in one ordinary section of one galaxy in, for all we know, one universe among others. We now understand that the universe is anywhere around 15 billion years old and is home to a countless number of stars, somewhere in the billions. In the history of this universe, human beings have occupied less than 0.00001 percent of it. In other words, for 99.9999 percent of the universe's history, human life did not exist. If humanity is God's crowning glory, why the need for so much time to elapse before putting the icing on the cake, during which time 99 percent of all species that ever existed were allowed to become extinct? Answers to these questions from the framework of Christian apologetics make no sense at all. I am simply not prepared to accord to myself, or to the species of which I am a part, the lofty place in the universe that Christian apologetics requires of me.

And Dr Craig's favoured cosmological argument is no more than another sop to our conceit as a species, and one which falls at the very first hurdle. Just because things *within* the universe may have a cause, it doesn't follow that the universe itself must have a cause. I quote an article in the soon-to-be published *Encyclopedia of Time*: The 'standard interpretation of quantum physics maintains that the commonsense belief in universal causality must be abandoned. The occurrence of events at the microphysical level is unpredictable, uncaused, and indeterministic in character.' 7 His first premise, then, is at the very least, contested. Neither can this argument offer any assurance that the god spoken of is the Christian God.

The single most valuable lesson atheism can teach us is the moral one of not wrapping ourselves up in our self-declared importance and magnificence. Atheism reminds us of our complete and total irrelevance to the cosmos. Facing the consequences of this irrelevance is what Spinoza had in mind when he spoke of *sub specie aeternitatis*, or under the aspect of eternity. Under the aspect of an eternity that has no plan for us, does not care whether we get a carpark, a boob-job, a promotion, or even true love or world peace, we can look at ourselves and others around us in a true spirit of humility. And, with courage, we can make a life for ourselves and our loved ones, and create our own meaning and our own purpose.

And let us not suppose that this is a minority view, at odds with the religious majority of the world. When we examine the major belief systems around the world, we learn that belief in God is often not seen as being of central importance. The Asian traditions, which are philosophical ways of living as much as they are religions, are more concerned with the elevation of the mind, with living in harmony with nature and with each other. At best, notions of God are seen as one way among others this ideal can be realised. For most, notions of God are irrelevant or, as I argue, a barrier to the elevation of the mind and living in harmony with nature. We should all know by

now that believing something is no guarantee to behaving accordingly. Think of Graham Capill, former leader of the Christian Heritage Party, now serving nine years for sexual exploitation of children.

Dr Craig talks of objective moral values derived from God and yet civilised people should reel in horror at some of the moral examples the Bible offers us. Lot offered up his virgin daughters to the men outside his house that they might 'do ye to them as is good in your eyes' (Gen 19:8). The daughters escaped on this occasion, only to sleep with their drunken father. (Gen 19:31-6) The story reappears in the nineteenth chapter of Judges, where a father offers up his virgin daughter and his concubine to the lusty men at his door. They took the concubine and 'abused her all the night until the morning; and when the day began to spring, they let her go.' (Judges 19:25) The girl arrived home where she died of her ordeal. Moses ordered the massacre of all the Midianites except those virgin girls who were kept alive as concubines for the victorious Israelites. (Number 31:18) And of course Joshua was sufficiently in God's good books that the sun held still so as to facilitate a greater slaughter of the Amorites (Joshua 10:10-12). Are these examples of objective moral values?

At this point some of you might be saying: "Yes, but most of what you quoted is from the Old Testament. What's that got to do with Jesus?" Well, as you should know, Jesus himself says in Matthew 5:17 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.'

Now Dr Craig asks you to believe that the god, whose abilities at creating things he has tried to wow us with this evening, is the same god as revealed in such primitive and repulsive ways in the Bible. If Craig's God is capable of such cosmic fine tuning, could he not also have improved the moral and intellectual quality of his own book?

And Dr Craig is keen to make traditional truth claims about Jesus, ignoring a century and a half's scholarship on the subject. As one prominent Christian theologian put it: 'So far as history is concerned...we may freely say that the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine.'<sup>8</sup> As Christopher Rowland wrote in a book published by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 'As far as one can ascertain, Jesus did not envisage a religious system independent of Judaism.'<sup>9</sup> And the Catholic historian Jaroslav Pelikan wrote: 'To the Christian disciples of the first century the conception of Jesus as a rabbi was self-evident, to the Christian disciples of the second century it was embarrassing, to the Christian disciples of the third century and beyond it was obscure.'<sup>10</sup> Christians have slowly buried the dark secret that the so-called founder of their religion in fact had no intention to leave or to harm the Jewish faith he was born into. So to appeal to the gospels as evidence for truth claims about a resurrected Jesus is like using the story of the three little pigs as a manual for running a dairy farm.

The Bible was written by human beings, with human agendas and failings, so to use it, as Dr Craig does, to contrive the existence of a creator-god, in full working order at the beginning of time, overseeing the creation of fifteen billion stars is absurd. Dr

Craig's cosmic creator notion of God is a later development in Jewish religious thought, and runs counter to the story left in his own scripture. His view of God, then, acts as a barrier to a full understanding of the historical wealth of the Hebrew Bible.

Neither should we assume that Dr Craig's style of rationally-proved god is uniquely representative of Christian opinion. Many leading theologians over the past century have accepted that God is not something that can be proved rationally. Hans Küng admitted that, 'in so far as they seek to prove something, the proofs of God are meaningless.'<sup>11</sup> Albert Schweitzer, who's been described as the twentieth-century's greatest Christian, was also clear that the only plausible God was an unknowable God, to be experienced as 'mysterious Will within myself.'<sup>12</sup> This insight was built upon his understanding the 'hopelessness of the attempt to find the meaning of life within the meaning of the universe...'<sup>13</sup> The British theologian Don Cupitt is even more explicit when he says: 'I still pray and love God, even though I fully acknowledge that no God actually exists.'<sup>14</sup>

Closer to home, this is what Dean Richard Randerson had in mind last year when he declared himself agnostic as to the proofs of god. 'To seek proof of the existence of God in scientific terms is a category mistake', he wrote. He went on: 'Much of the language of the Bible is to be read in categories of poetry and image, not as a scientific textbook.'<sup>15</sup> These Christian thinkers recognise the bankruptcy of the creator god account Dr Craig is urging on us tonight. What Dr Craig needs to demonstrate is why he alone is right where all these Christian thinkers are wrong.

So, not only is Dr Craig's formal, thoroughly proved God a barrier to more humane versions of the god-idea, some prominent theologians are now taking the next step of appreciating that belief in God is a barrier to true morality. Keith Ward asked whether one must believe in God in order to be truly moral: 'To think that would be to get the whole thing upside down. Believing in God *is* undertaking these practices. If God bothers you, forget God, and think of adopting a way of self-formation which sees human life in the light of values that are of eternal worth.'<sup>16</sup> And Richard Holloway has written that the use of God in moral debate 'is so problematic as to be almost worthless.' It is better, he argues, to 'leave God out of the moral debate and find good human reasons for supporting the system or approach we advocate.'<sup>17</sup>

It's clear, then, that many reputable Christian scholars either agree that belief in god is not something that can be proved, or that the proof of God is unimportant or even detrimental in determining one's relationship to the God-idea. In this context, Dr Craig's labyrinth of proofs seems irrelevant. Rather than proving God, his rational edifice functions more as a gallows upon which nobler and more humane ideas of God die a slow death.

Let us also remember that this is not a simple contest between the atheist and the theist. Dr Craig is a 99.9 percent atheist. He denies the existence of every single god ever conceived, except one. The god he believes in appears on page 341 of my *Encyclopedia of Gods*.<sup>18</sup> He's a hard-core atheist right up to page 340, and then until

the end of the book. But on page 341 he completely changes his mind and provides the deluge of argumentation he has given us tonight. And Dr Craig has no way of showing, beyond merely asserting it, that the god which appears on page 341 is the same as his creator god. Could it not just as easily be one of the other gods?

And it should also be said that belief in God can act as a barrier to effective dialogue between people of different beliefs. Instead of looking at what divides us, as this moot does, wouldn't it be better to look more at what we have in common? Rather than putting barriers up, we should be taking them down. We should be working together to alleviate the sufferings of millions of fellow human beings. Of infinitely more moral relevance to our contemporary situation than the New Testament are the Millennium Development Goals, outlined by the United Nations, which are dedicated to alleviating the suffering in this world. As of 2005, someone died of starvation every 3.6 seconds; 115 million children received no education of any sort; two thirds of the world's illiterate were women; a woman died in pregnancy or childbirth every minute.

In the face of this catalogue of suffering, all Dr Craig can do is split philosophical hairs about whether the level of suffering is gratuitous. I quote Dr Craig: '*We are not in a good position to assess with confidence the probability that God lacks morally sufficient reasons for permitting the suffering of the world.*'<sup>19</sup> In other words, a death from starvation every 3.6 seconds doesn't count against God because we can't be sure there isn't a morally sufficient reason for permitting this to happen! That sort of complacency should disgust any morally aware person.

Dr Craig's God is too busy to worry about the world's suffering, which we can't be sure is gratuitous. His God seems more worked up about what homosexuals do in the privacy of their own home, or that we believe the world is only 6000 years old, or that we promise to abstain from sex before marriage, or, worse still, that God is an American, and is right behind President Bush's bloodletting in Iraq. I don't think there has ever been a time in the history of the Christian religion when its God has been portrayed in such mean-spirited and trivial terms. If that is the god I am supposed to worship, then I remain proud to call myself an atheist. Is God a delusion? No more than many other human-generated ideas, but Dr Craig's version of the idea, I have argued, acts as a barrier to broader, nobler renditions of this human idea. Albert Schweitzer seems closer to the mark when he said: 'Only an infinitely small part of infinite Being comes within my range. The rest of it passes me by, like distant ships to which I make signals they do not understand.'<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

1. Bradlaugh, Charles, 'A Plea for Atheism', in *Humanity's Gain from Unbelief*, London: Watts & Co, 1929.
2. Geering, Lloyd, *God in the New World*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1968, p 39.
3. Geering, Lloyd, *Crisis in the Christian Way*, Wellington: St Andrew's Trust, 1994, pp 32-37.
4. *ibid*, p 39.
5. Craig, William Lane, 'Theistic Critiques of Atheism' in Martin, Michael (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p 82.
6. Sandlin, Andrew, 'Global Ecology and Godly Stewardship', *Free Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 3, April/May

- 2008, p 30.
7. Bradley, Raymond D, 'Cosmological Arguments' in Birx, H James (ed), *Encyclopedia of Time*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, forthcoming.
  8. Smith, Ronald Gregor, *Secular Christianity*, London: Collins, 1966, p 103.
  9. Rowland, Christopher, *Christian Origins*, London: SPCK, 1987, p 153.
  10. Pelikan, Jaroslav, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, p 17.
  11. Küng, Hans, *Does God Exist?* New York: Vintage, 1981 [1978], p 534.
  12. Schweitzer, Albert, *Civilisation and Ethics*, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1946 [1923], p xviii.
  13. *ibid*, p 204.
  14. Cupitt, Don, *After God: The Future of Religion*, London: Phoenix Books, 1998, p 85.
  15. Richard Randerson, 'Common Ground where Faiths Meet', *NZ Herald*, Jan 8 2007, A.
  16. Ward, Keith, *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2002, pp 210-11
  17. Holloway, Richard, *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out of Ethics*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000 [1999], p 20.
  18. Jordan, Michael (ed) *The Encyclopedia of Gods*, London: Kyle Cathie, 1994 [1992], p 341.
  19. Craig in Martin, *op.cit.*, p 73.
  20. Schweitzer, *op.cit.*, p 238.

## Closing Statement

If I may indulge in a metaphor, Dr Craig has constructed a resplendent golden palace in the tidal lagoon of our ignorance. I am not a cosmologist, and am not going to make Dr Craig's mistake of building resplendent palaces on shifting sands. Four hundred years ago it was quite uncontroversial to believe the earth was the centre of the universe. Those few who did contest the claim were forced to recant or were burned at the stake. And Dr Craig's creator god idea would have seemed plausible four hundred years ago, but not any longer. The successive knowledge revolutions unleashed by Copernicus and Galileo in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Charles Darwin in the nineteenth century, and by genetics today has rendered Dr Craig's god idea redundant and the ecological crisis we currently face renders it dangerous. And this was what the twentieth century theologians recognised, even if Dr Craig has not. Each attempt by Christian conservatives to try and anchor a god-idea on something supposedly objective inevitably slips away on a new tide of learning. Trapped in a pre-modern world-view, Dr Craig's god-idea can only deepen the spiritual schizophrenia that modern Christianity is suffering from. His god-idea is already past its used-by date and acts as a barrier to wiser, more humble notions of god that the great theologians of the twentieth century explored.

Against this, the atheist is content to live in a state of imperfect knowledge and does not presume to deserve a full explanation, and certainly not one that panders to one's anthropocentric conceit as fully as Dr Craig's god-idea does. Atheism, by contrast, is the condition of being without an idea of god that isn't just someone's assertion. The word a-theism means being without theism, and I remain without a notion of theism that I find compelling. On the basis of cosmic humility I propose we proceed to learn about how the universe actually works and to find our purpose and meaning under its vast canopy. This is what I call humanism.

The real conversation we should be having, rather than these sterile tussles about whether something essentially unknowable exists or not, is to how best we can alleviate suffering in this world, here and now. And how best we can exercise a responsible stewardship of the planet for future generations. As the Christian theologian John Shelby Spong put it, 'I believe it will be impossible to save our world from human destruction unless we abandon that traditional understanding of God.' (Spong, *Sins of Scripture*, pp 59-60) Whether we like it or not, that is our responsibility, and ours alone.