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A question – to which 42 might be the answer

This is a work in progress (which indeed might never be finished) and all comments are welcome.

To Believe or not to Believe, that is the Question

Why am I not a Christian?

(with apologies to Bertrand Russell)

and a Hindu and a Buddhist and a Muslim and?

In my experience some people seem to simply find within them a belief in some kind of divinity or a belief that there is a sacred purpose to the universe, others seem to move easily either to believe or not to believe that there is more to the universe than the physical. (I present an attempt to broadly categorise beliefs in the appendix). I think a minority spend much or all of their lives puzzling long and hard. I fall into this last category. My path has been rather meandering.

Some of the wisest words I've heard were from my father. When I was about 14 he said I should *"never accept an idea, regardless of the apparent authority of its proponent, without the most careful consideration"* and I have tried always to keep an open mind about everything. I ask those who somehow or other find themselves reading this who have come to the view that there is no divinity or sacredness to the universe, to suspend that view. I think most of those who have come to the view that there is a divinity will probably have a view as to the character of that divinity based on particular religious teachings. I think most of these will have to suspend that view to appreciate my ideas and I would be grateful if they could do so.

Where to start

21st century western well-educated people are likely to incline towards atheism, but it does seem to me that agnosticism is the natural starting point. With the development of modern science in the 18th century, gaps in understanding the world we live in were closed more and more rapidly and by the middle of the 20th century a growing number of people in the western world with a basic knowledge of science were coming to the view that we would eventually be able completely to explain how the universe came to be the way it is including how we came to be the way we are without reference to divinity or any kind of cosmic creative intelligence. While a significant proportion of people in countries like Australia now hold to this view, what appears to be a significant, and maybe increasing, number of scientists are expressing doubts that science will do this (Note 1). Rather they are saying that scientific knowledge is more and more suggesting purposiveness in natural phenomena. Interestingly more of these scientists seem to be physicists and their ilk rather than biologists. I shall return to this.

The effect of a little science seems to be that the gaps in understanding that people have filled with divinity have closed and squeezed God out. But the effect of having greater scientific knowledge for some seems to be that the universe is revealed as more and more mysterious.

The great physicist, Richard Feynman (the one who said *"anyone who thinks he understands quantum mechanics doesn't understand quantum mechanics"*) had this to say about the contest between science and religion:

"Western civilization, it seems to me, stands by two great heritages. One is the scientific spirit of adventure — the adventure into the unknown, an unknown which must be recognized as being unknown in order to be explored; the demand that the unanswerable mysteries of the universe remain unanswered; the attitude that all is uncertain; to summarise it — the humility of the intellect. The other great heritage is Christian ethics — the basis of action on love, the brotherhood of all men, the value of the individual — the humility of the spirit."

These two heritages are logically, thoroughly consistent. But logic is not all; one needs one's heart to follow an idea. If people are going back to religion, what are they going back to? Is the modern church a place to give comfort to a man who doubts God — more, one who disbelieves in God? Is the modern church a place to give comfort and encouragement to the value of such doubts? So far, have we not drawn strength and comfort to maintain the one or the other of these consistent heritages in a way which attacks the values of the other? Is this unavoidable? How can we draw inspiration to support these two pillars of western civilization so that they may stand together in full vigour, mutually unafraid? Is this not the central problem of our time?"

Thomas Huxley, the great biologist and defender of Darwin, wrote:

"When I reached intellectual maturity and began to ask myself whether I was an atheist, a theist, or a pantheist; a materialist or an idealist; Christian or a freethinker; I found that the more I learned and reflected, the less ready was the answer; until, at last, I came to the conclusion that I had neither art nor part with any of these denominations, except the last. The one thing in which most of these good people were agreed was the one thing in which I differed from them. They were quite sure they had attained a certain "gnosis,"—had, more or less successfully, solved the problem of existence; while I was quite sure I had not, and had a pretty strong conviction that the problem was insoluble.

So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of "agnostic." It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the "gnostic" of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant. To my great satisfaction the term took."

Huxley had defined the term as follows:

"Agnosticism is not a creed but a method, the essence of which lies in the vigorous application of a single principle. Positively, the principle may be expressed as in matters of intellect, follow your reason as far as it can take you without other considerations. And negatively, in matters of the intellect, do not pretend that matters are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable.

Huxley said that a *"scintilla of evidence"* in support of Christian dogma would shift him from his agnosticism. I am what is called an epistemological solipsist. That is, I cannot see how I can be sure of the existence of anything other than my own mind. I cannot see how one can know for certain other

than three kinds of things: one's own existence, one's experiences as experiences or qualia and ideas or concepts. To me all else is conjecture. (A "hard" solipsist, by the way, believes that there is nothing else.) However, our senses are provided with evidence, either directly or via instruments, supporting the existence of some things more than of others. For more than half a century I have looked for evidence of some kind of divinity either as revealed in my experience or in that of others. I have not found a scintilla.

What might be the evidence?

Billions of believers as evidence

Some count as evidence that billions now believe in a deity or deities and that multitudes before them so believed. The earliest writings show that at that time people were asking this question "Are the universe and life and thinking beings a series of accidents or are they meant to be?", and paintings, carvings and other evidence suggest it was asked long before writing was invented. Scientists have discovered evidence that people like we are today have been around for about two million years. Until fairly recently it seems most people have decided that the answer to this question is that the universe and all it contains represents some divine purpose.

Human beings seem to have a powerful drive to understand or make sense of things. Certainly an animal that understands what is going on around it is going to do better than an equivalent animal that does not. So finding out by observation and experimentation how things are happening so that opportunities can be taken and risks can be avoided is behaviour that we would expect to see more and more of in animals capable of it. Such behaviour demands at least a basic ability to form theories or ideas of explanations that can be tested. So it is not surprising that dreaming up ideas of explanations will happen even where observation and experimentation is not possible. In primitive cultures it seems that happenings that could not be explained by the action of an animal, that is something that was clearly capable of making something else happen, were often explained by theorising action by a spiritual being. For example, gravity might well have been explained by saying that the spirit of the earth made the rock thrown into the sky fall to the ground because it wanted it back. Because people had purposes, thinking that spirits had purposes and thus all things had purposes would have made pretty good sense. It seems to me that this kind of thinking led easily to the idea that life was pretty purposeless unless death was not the end of one's spirit.

Believing in many spirits or gods evolved into belief in one creator, a sustaining and personal god in the Abrahamic religions and, as far as I understand, one sustaining divine entity or ground of all being, Brahman, in the Hindu tradition. The very important distinction between belief in gods and a single god is well argued by John Lennox in his little book *"God and Stephen Hawking: Whose Design Is It Anyway?"* (Lennox 2011) replying to Stephen Hawking's and Leonard Mlodinow's *"The Grand Design"* (Hawking and Mlodinow 2010). Lennox convincingly argues that belief in a single divine creator and/or sustainer of the universe is not inconsistent with the view that, broadly speaking, the processes of the universe are amenable to scientific explanation. I think there are some important exceptions to which I will come later.

The belief of many of the billions of believers in a divinity is highly sophisticated (there are many great thinkers, now and in the past who impress me with their arguments) and not inconsistent with what science has revealed about the universe. However, I do not find that this can amount to the kind of evidence that Thomas Huxley would have wanted and nor thus the kind of evidence I want.

Personal experience as evidence

Many claim they know God from personal experience. On a few occasions I have experienced a strong sense of oneness with the world or all creation – a kind of dissolving of the boundaries between what I perceive as me and the rest of existence. Babies, we are pretty sure, see no such distinction. They have to learn what is me and what is not me, but perhaps their experience is truer. Philosopher Allan Watts put it this way *“this organism (the human being) is a continuous energy with everything else that’s going on. And if I am my foot, I am the sun.”*

Perhaps at special times we are able to rekindle the true experience of oneness. I tried to express something of this experience with this little poem.

The Voice, the Light

Mostly there’s a glimmer, a whisper
if you look, if you listen.
Sometimes the light burns bright, the voice thunders
and you know.

But mostly you forget.
You forget how brightly you’ve seen the light
how clearly you’ve heard the voice.
You even forget to remember.

But something in some quiet time
makes you look and listen again.
And you remember.

If only you simply saw in every picture
the all suffusing light.
If only you always heard the voice
that’s ever urging, consoling, caring.

I do think this experience of oneness is an expression of oneness with creation and sometimes I am persuaded that I am in touch with God. Yet, as powerful as these experiences have been I cannot dismiss the possibility of delusion perhaps driven by wishful thinking. So there is not the evidence I need here.

Scriptures as evidence

Some argue that scriptures provide evidence. The Judeo-Christian scriptures, it is argued, tell a story of the deity's interaction with humans over eons which is so remarkable in its consistency and which provides such a completely intellectually satisfying explanation of "life, the universe and everything" that it cannot be rejected. One problem I have with this is that the scriptures of other religions seem to me to provide very similar explanations also. I should say that in some respects I find them more satisfactory. What I do find in Judeo-Christian scripture, and more particularly the scriptures of the New Testament, are principles for human life that seem quite inspired such that to me they very well could be the principles to which a deity would want us to adhere.

However, I think there are several, maybe many, parts of the Bible, both New and Old Testaments, that are too much like myths and legends, for modern people to accept as the work of, or the outworking of the will of, a deity. This is partly because they are too much like the myths and legends of other traditions or cultures.

The virgin birth is not a story exclusive to Christianity. It is found in a number of other cultures for example: *"the divine Vishnu himself descended into the womb of Devaki and was born as her son, Vasudeva (i.e., Krishna)"* (Boslooper, 1962). Boslooper did note that although stories of miraculous births are common in other scriptures there is *"no precise analogy to the virgin birth in Matthew and Luke."* (See Note 2 for more on this)

I find the view that Boris Pasternak expresses through his character, Dr Zhivago, very appealing: *"It has always seemed to me that every conception is immaculate and that this dogma, concerning the Mother of God, expresses the idea of all motherhood." "The Mother of God is asked to 'pray zealously to her Son and her God,' and the words of the psalm are put into her mouth: 'My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed'. It is because of her child that she says this, He will magnify her ('For He that is mighty hath done to me great things'): He is her glory. Any woman could say it. For every one of them, God is in her child."* This seems to be congruent with my panendeist thinking which I shall come to discuss later.

I agree with John Shelby Spong's opinion that *"The Gospels are not without significant internal contradictions or embarrassing moral and intellectual concepts"*. The Virgin Birth story is hard to reconcile with the text about the lineage of Jesus. If it was an immaculate conception Joseph's lineage going back through the royalty of the Jewish people is irrelevant.

More importantly there is the idea that Jesus was wholly God and wholly human (monophysitism versus dyophysitism). I find the story that Jesus was tempted by the devil to be problematical. If Jesus were God incarnate it is quite illogical to think of his being tempted. The wholly God Jesus must be perfect and a perfect being cannot be tempted to do something imperfect or against her better judgement. (It is, though, a nice story about the corrupting effect of power – it suggests that Jesus/God is above that effect)

There seem to be suggestions in the scriptures that Jesus was not above sinning (he could have dealt differently with the money lenders in the temple) and the implication that he was constrained by the psychological limitations of the brain of Homo sapiens is tricky to make sense of.

As with the virgin birth story, there are many myths in many cultures of life-death-rebirth deities. To me the prominence of appeasement of deities by animal and human sacrifice in more primitive religions makes too difficult the acceptance of the story of an incarnate god being a sacrificial lamb for the good of humanity. The crucifixion of Jesus is one of the five key elements of Christian theology the others being his baptism, transfiguration, resurrection and ascension.

That the deity decided that in order to give her creatures redemption she would punish herself, I find beyond credibility. Also this is not logical as God cannot suffer death and knowing the pain is transitory it is not great suffering. Moreover, it is self-harming is it not? Indeed, it can be seen as suicide or filicide or both!

Perhaps a parent rather than punishing their errant child might punish themselves out of guilt for their failings in bringing up the child or so as to bring the child in line by making it feel guilty about the punishment the parent undergoes. To me such action is not rational. Showing the child the pain that its errancy has caused though is rational.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, I am not saying the virgin birth, the resurrection and ascension or indeed the various other miracles Christians believe God as Jesus performed did not happen. I cannot say that. As the Scottish philosopher David Hume conceded we cannot say that the laws which seem to consistently rule the workings of life the universe and everything cannot be broken. It is not irrational to believe they can and have been broken. But again as David Hume pointed out reports of miracles tend to be in times or circumstances where credulity seems likely to be high and where scientific testing has not been possible.

A god who causes the generation of conscious beings and then discriminates amongst them on the basis of whether or not they find themselves able to accept the idea that she became incarnate to redeem them, is a god of which I can conceive, but not a god I find I can comprehend. More than this, I cannot comprehend a god who would forgive a human the most heinous act against his fellow humans, but not forgive someone unable to make the leap of faith to belief in her.

Some will suggest that there being no eternal consequence to unbelief makes no sense. I recall the words of Paul 1 Corinthians 13:12 *"For now we see through a glass, darkly"* and, although I am being a little inconsistent, I am happy to leave eternity to eternity.

I agree with Spong that the *"Gospels are not inerrant works, divinely authored"*. They are not even eyewitness accounts unless the Acts of the Apostles or part thereof was written by one of the disciples and not Luke as is generally accepted. But while some people suggest that Jesus was an invention, on balance I think the evidence is persuasive that there was a person who did and said much of what the Gospels suggest and who was crucified. I think it is as persuasive as the evidence for a number of other historical persons. Though the writings about Socrates were contemporary, I think his reality, which few question, is scarcely less doubtful than the reality of Jesus (see Note 3).

I conclude that a person, who may or may not have been named Jesus, who was a leader of a group of dissidents, did live and did die on the cross around the time the writings suggest, but I think his life and teachings were more important than his death. I am not sure, though, that he would have had the impact on humanity that he did if he had run away and lived and taught for decades longer. However, I cannot find the scintilla of evidence that I want in the words of the Bible nor of any other scriptures I

have read or interpretations of which I have read. I cannot summarise my thinking on this better than do these words of David Hume: (anyone who) *"is moved by faith to assent"* (to apparent revelations in scriptures) *"is aware of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience."*

However, I do find that the Biblical texts contain much that is worthy of study and contemplation. I shall return to this. It is also very interesting that Genesis, as an allegory, accords quite well with the science of the origin of the universe and the stages of evolution of living things. And I note that the Eden story works quite well as representative of the emergence of reasoning in the animal kingdom and the development of the capacity to choose and thus to choose wrong.

If there is no evidence does understanding the way the universe is allow us to reason a Divinity?

"The only religion is a natural religion, whose temple is Nature, whose doctrine is Reason and whose priests are Honest Men."

"What is faith? Is it to believe that which is evident? No. It is perfectly evident to my mind that there exists a necessary, eternal, supreme, and intelligent being. This is no matter of faith, but of reason." – Voltaire

"I'll be honest about it. It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while. We must all pass through the garden of Gethsemane. If Christ played with doubt, so must we. If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if He burst from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" then surely we are also permitted doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation." – Yann Martel

Science, with its tool, mathematics, currently shows us a very bizarre universe or cosmos of universes. We might reasonably expect science to explain everything eventually, maybe even consciousness and how ideas in our head seem to be able to cause physical change, and perhaps allow us to make sense of infinity and space time with more than four dimensions. There are two things that it cannot explain:

1. that it can explain anything, and
2. that there exists anything to be explained

Now while I have found, like Huxley, not a scintilla of evidence that is testable by the method of science that there is a divine realm beyond the universe that we sense and measure, neither have I found a scintilla of evidence that this sensed and measured universe is all that exists. So agnosticism is an appealing position.

However, inducing from certain characteristics of this sensed and measured universe I do find reason to believe that there is divinity. No doubt followers of all faiths have sought to reason the existence of the divine. Several philosophers (e.g. Aquinas, Anselm, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant) have made out arguments for the Christian God. I am unimpressed with what seem to me to be little more than word games. I am

a little puzzled that, to my knowledge, they did not puzzle about what I consider to be the single most astounding thing about this universe; the self-awareness we experience and which it seems some other animals experience at least to some extent. Coupled with this is the puzzling ability I think we and some other animals have to be agents independent of prior causes. That is, we seem to be able, though perhaps rarely, to exercise absolute free will. There is of course much dispute about this amongst philosophers.

It seems to me that for many people this is something they just take for granted. But a universe in which self-awareness is not possible is conceivable – that is, one which is governed by ‘laws’ which do not permit it to emerge? We can conceive of a universe much less fruitful than the one we inhabit; one without the characteristics to produce stars, which thus would not have planets and not the chemistry for life and thus not consciousness that gives self-awareness. Of course the universe has to be the way it is otherwise we wouldn’t be here to see the way it is – my version of the Anthropic Principle.

I suggest that most if not all advanced scholars of science, not only those whose particular discipline is scientific cosmology, find themselves wondering about the way the universe is because the subject of their study is what it is because of the way the universe is.

But what is the way the universe is? What is it? Many have thought it to be both material (matter and energy) and immaterial (ideas, spirit). This is the dualist ontology. But, if reality is a duality, how can the thought in my head that I will hit the key for a question mark to finish this sentence actually result in my finger hitting that key? How do ideas move matter?

A monist materialist answers by saying that the concept of “idea” is a false concept: that what happens in our minds is simply a complex of material processes and our awareness of these processes is an epiphenomenon of matter. We would thus merely be observers of our actions not actors and Schopenhauer would have been right in saying “*Man can do what he wills but he cannot will what he wills*”. I do not think he was right and I think I will not determine in the years I have left that my decisions are the result of 1s and 0s of synapses in my brain and that all I am is a computer made of meat. Some experiments indicate that brain activity follows action. But it sure seems to me that I can freely make uninfluenced choices to take this or that action. But even if Schopenhauer was right, I find the fact that it seems that I have free will quite remarkable enough to marvel at the way the universe is.

On the other hand, maybe matter is a false concept. It does seem to remain elusive to science. It certainly seems evanescent in nature from experiments that suggest it exists as a wave–particle duality. Maybe what we perceive as matter is simply the result of forces ($E=mc^2$). My understanding of one current theory is that what we perceive as matter is the result of space/time forming tiny knots of itself. I find I can think of matter as no more than information. In the end then, if matter is a reality, perhaps it is not a different reality from ideas and thus ideas moving matter is not a problem. This is monist idealism and I think it is a simpler hypothesis than that of dualism or monist materialism. In my view if Occam’s razor could be wielded upon the three, monist idealism would be the survivor.

Baruch Spinoza’s way of looking at this, if I understand him correctly, is to say that there is a single reality, what he calls the ground of all being, which has two manifestations: the material and the ideal.

The philosopher David Chalmers makes an argument that the universe must be more than a physical (material) phenomenon using the following thought experiment:

1 According to physicalism, all that exists in our world (including consciousness) is physical.

2 Thus, if physicalism is true, a metaphysically possible world in which all physical facts are the same as those of the actual world must contain everything that exists in our actual world. In particular, conscious experience must exist in such a possible world.

3 In fact we can conceive of a world physically indistinguishable from our world but in which there is no consciousness (a zombie world). From this (so Chalmers argues) it follows that such a world is metaphysically possible.

4 Therefore, physicalism is false. (The conclusion follows from 2. and 3. by modus tollens.)

I think this can be interpreted to say that the universe is other than a physical phenomenon.

And what did the physicist John Archibald Wheeler mean when he coined the phrase “*it from bit*” and when he said “*every it – every particle, every field of force, even the space time continuum itself – derives its function, its meaning, its very existence from bits*”? (Quoted in Gleick, 2011) That statement seems to me to fit pretty neatly into a monist idealist world view and Sir James Jeans’ words “*the Universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine*” certainly do. And is it not intriguing that John’s gospel starts “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*”.

I have tried to put my thinking into poetry.

Hard Rock

The rock I stand on
is hard
I lean down and put my hand on
its hardness
Once there was
a nothingness
then the tiniest speck
of somethingness
burst into
the everythingness
until at last there was
thinkingness
so I can feel
this hardness

But this hardness is really an illusion
brought about by a grand collusion
the quite improbable action
of four forces of attraction
and one more of reaction

With steel hammer this rock I could shatter
but if a creature were I of dark matter
this rock I'd not even batter

So tell pray tell me
what's really real
I'm sure it can't be
just what I can feel

Those who nevertheless hold to the belief (it is a belief) that all that exists is physical might consider the following:

- We have already detected 20 other planets capable of facilitating life (Life facilitating planets LFPs) nearby in our galaxy.
- There are more than 200 billion stars in our galaxy with the potential for LFPs and there are about 170 billion galaxies in the universe.
- At least some of the many, which have had from millions to billions of Earth years of development more than has Earth, surely must now have beings which are not dependent on evolved limits of organic living systems.
- This means they surely have unlimited life spans. Immortal, we could think of them as gods within the universe.

If this is not so it seems to me that it is not so because the universe has been so contrived to prevent it which implies a contriver. (see Note 4)

Frank Tipler (2007) takes this kind of thinking into ideas that some say (Lawrence Krauss 2007) are crazy and completely at odds with both science and theology.

In what kind of deity should I believe?

So if reason takes me from agnosticism to belief, just what should I believe?

I find I cannot believe in a god that does not make sense even though I must concede that my capacity to make sense may be very limited in cosmic terms. I agree with Mikhail Bakunin who said: *"For, if God is, he is necessarily the eternal, supreme, absolute master"*. So for me, to make sense, a deity must be a god outside our space/time: omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. But I do not agree with Bakunin when he goes on to say *"if such a master exists, man is a slave; now, if he is a slave, neither justice, nor equality, nor fraternity, nor prosperity are possible for him."* I think it is only necessary for God's existence to be uncertain, ineffable, but perhaps not completely inscrutable for us to avoid slavery. On the question of this uncertainty, the lack of objective evidence for a deity, Søren Kierkegaard said *"If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe."* Without faith a god cannot be a god and uncertainty is necessary for faith.

I think Douglas Adams must have been impressed by Kierkegaard. *"The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy"* tells us about the *"Babel Fish"*. It is a *"small, leech-like, yellow fish"* and if one puts one into one's ear *"one can instantly understand anything said in any language"* in the universe. The Guide goes on to say:

"Now it is such a bizarrely improbable coincidence that anything so mind-bogglingly useful could evolve purely by chance that some thinkers have chosen to see it as a final and clinching proof of the non-existence of God. The argument goes something like this:

"I refuse to prove that I exist," says God, "for proof denies faith, and without faith I am nothing."

"But," says Man, "the Babel fish is a dead giveaway, isn't it? It could not have evolved by chance. It proves you exist, and so therefore, by your own arguments, you don't. QED."

"Oh dear," says God, "I hadn't thought of that," and promptly vanishes in a puff of logic.

"Oh, that was easy," says Man, and for an encore goes on to prove that black is white, and gets killed on the next zebra crossing."

As we have not yet come across the Babel Fish nor anything as improbable Kierkegaard's reasoning seems safe.

A deity must of course be perfect and therefore could only have created the best of all possible worlds; may not create imperfections. Many people find it hard to make sense of a God-created universe in which the smallpox virus or devastating earth quakes can kill countless humans. This is maybe the hardest question for many. "How could there be a god who lets such terrible things happen?"

William Blake's questioning poem comes to mind:

*Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did He smile His work to see?
Did He who made the lamb make thee?*

There can be no need to intervene in the best of all possible worlds. Nothing can happen in it that is not intended or "foreseen". ("Foreseen" is not of course the right word for a god who sees all time). It makes no sense for a god outside time, who sees all time, to intervene in her creation. There can be no need to intervene in a creation that, by definition, must be perfect. Intervention cannot improve on perfection. As I allowed earlier, an omnipotent god can do miracles, but in my thinking they make no sense. German philosopher Gottfried Leibnitz was the author of the *"best of all possible worlds"* idea. Famously, Voltaire attempted to ridicule this idea with his novella *Candide*. I have great respect for Voltaire's intellect, but I cannot quite see how he could make sense of his deist deity not being the creator of the best of all possible worlds.

Perhaps scriptures can help

Now although I have rejected scriptures as providing evidence of a deity I do think that they can help me to work out what a deity might be like. As I have decided that the universe is spiritual and thus we are spiritual creatures and thus spiritually integrated with the universe and furthermore that the deity, god, is a panendeist entity, I am willing to entertain the possibility that we can apprehend the will or even, in a sense, the “mind of God”. I am willing to believe that at least some of the scriptures of all the faiths are inspired by some measure of apprehension of this will.

How do I choose amongst the scriptures? I have what must be a very, very common if not universal problem. I am of the Judeo-Christian culture. I was brought up in the tradition of the Anglican Christian denomination. I have learnt something of other denominations and faiths through reading and talking with people of other Christian denominations and of other faiths and from participation in some of their ceremonies and services. Perhaps I have some chance of understanding the interpretations of the Christian scriptures of other protestant denominations, but much less chance of understanding the interpretations of Roman Catholicism or the Eastern Orthodox churches. I cannot really expect to come to grips with Jewish interpretations of scriptures and even less the interpretations of the Koran. I have even less hope with the non-Abrahamic faiths. So, for now, until I feel I have learnt enough of other scriptures, if I ever do, I am stuck with and shall stick to the Christian scriptures and their interpretation.

Can Christian theology as developed from its scriptures meet these requirements? I think it can and so can other theologies depending on interpretation of the scriptures.

Now although I have rejected the New Testament, along with the Old, as evidence of the existence of a deity, as I said previously, I think it is pretty good evidence that there was a real person we call Jesus. Also the evidence that Mohammed was a real person is clear. And although the first writings about Prince Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) date from about three centuries after he is thought to have lived, I am prepared to accept that the orally transmitted story is pretty good evidence of his reality, especially as he was apparently of some sort of royal lineage.

A deity outside time sees all time and knows that all these leaders are part of history – or perhaps we should say “His story”. They must all be part of the deity’s perfect plan and it follows that they are intended. Indeed, of course nothing can be unintended by an omnipotent god outside time. So it cannot be that God “looked down upon the earth” one day and said to “himself” something like “Things aren’t going too well for humans so I’d better incarnate and tell them how to behave”.

So this is it. I can see Jesus as being “sent” by God, if not to take away the sins of the world or to redeem us, but rather to help us apprehend the purpose or meaning of life, of each of our lives; to help us work out how to live our lives. In this sense we can see all leaders, great and not so great, as “sent”. While I respect other peoples’ belief that other teachers are closer to God’s will my belief is that Jesus was one who was as completely at one with or as one with God as it is possible for a human to be.

But I think we all can attain this oneness or at least get close to it. Philosopher Allan Watts said *“Jesus Christ knew he was God. So wake up and find out eventually who you really are. In our culture, of course, they’ll say you’re crazy and you’re blasphemous, and they’ll either put you in jail or in a nut house*

(which is pretty much the same thing). However, if you wake up in India and tell your friends and relations, 'My goodness, I've just discovered that I'm God,' they'll laugh and say, 'Oh, congratulations, at last you found out.' I cannot see how this way of thinking is really different from the idea of God the Holy Spirit.

Samuel Clements (Mark Twain) said *"He says naïvely, outspokenly and without suggestion of embarrassment 'I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God.' It is only another way of saying 'I, the Lord thy God, am a small God; fretful about small things'".* And I come to the view that, rather than God needing us to worship and praise him - indeed I cannot see that a god who must be greatest of all can be in need of anything - we need to think on how we might lessen the sorrow that even the greatest being of all must feel seeing suffering in his creation that he must not alleviate. I cannot now find the source, but I once noted these words of Nikos Kazantzakis *"Man have mercy on God"* and was inspired to write:

Watcher

We've come from far, far away
from long, long ago
a wondrous voyage.

We've grown
from unimaginable simplicity
to stupendous complexity
that can know the cosmos
and challenge its mystery.

And perhaps all the while
a watcher has watched
watched in joy, maybe to smile
at every step, big and small
and in deep anguish
at every stumble, every fall
wishing to help, but knowing this
creation must be left at risk.

Share the joy
but in quiet moments
share the anguish
and return the care.

So what is the meaning of life?

You might now say, dear reader, this is all very well, but does a belief in a non-intervening deity, one who cares for "her" creatures, but does not manipulate "her" creation to favour any or all of them, one who receives them into an eternal life indiscriminately, mean anything in terms of how one should live

one's life. In this sense is there any difference between a deist and an agnostic, an atheist? I suggest there is a difference. I do not think that any philosopher has been able to build an ethical system based on atheism. John Rawls comes close, but his group of society designers behind his "*veil of ignorance*" in his "*original position*" surely, in effect, involves the invocation of a kind of super natural intelligence.

If one believes, as I do, that one is, along with everything in the universe, part of the deity (the panendeistic view) then one is part of the "body of God". It makes sense to me that a part of a universal body must care about the well-being of the whole body; the well-being of the part is dependent on the well-being of the whole. Albert Schweitzer said "*Until he extends the circle of compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace.*" (Schweitzer 1923)

And Albert Einstein said

"A human being is a part of the whole, called by us "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security." Quoted in H Eves *Mathematical Circles Adieu* (Boston 1977).

I once attended a talk by the leader of a Muslim group in Cairo and was impressed by his metaphor that all of us are in the same boat and while some might be at the prow looking where it is going and some at the stern seeing where it has been and some at the side looking at where it might have been, it is carrying all of us inevitably toward full union with God. Sometime later, thinking about this, I penned this little poem:

They looked the same
two friends
walking along the beach
footprints in the sand
ten toes each
paces short
old legs don't swing so far.
Both,
with work crusty hands,
now waving words in the salty air
now pushing beads of ebony
looped in fingers
locked behind.
And for each bead a prayer unspoken.
But, just this not the same,
beads of different number
and for God of different name.

The Scottish comedian Billy Connolly has opined *"It seems to me that Islam and Christianity and Judaism all have the same god, and he's telling them all different things."*

I take a slightly different view. I think some people are not listening carefully and are hearing different things. What is needed is a whole lot more theological discussion, which I hugely enjoy, and a lot less being told what to believe. I very much appreciate a "preacher" who truly shares her ideas, opens them for a congregation's examination, and admits her own struggle to fully comprehend God's will and live her life accordingly. I am troubled by fervency. As I said in starting this essay I try to keep an open mind about all things. I cannot see that it is philosophically tenable to make up one's mind about anything and for me this must apply to theological questions. I think groups fervently holding a set of beliefs leads to the position of "If you don't agree with us you are wrong" and this leads to exclusivity, non-inclusiveness, division. Humanity must work much harder at narrowing not widening its divisions.

I do find services of group worship can be uncomfortable. As I have indicated, my idea of God is a God too big to need his creatures to worship her, indeed to do anything for her other than to try to apprehend her will. I find I can often do this best alone and recall Matthew reporting Jesus as saying:

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. " (Matthew 6.5)

I said earlier that I think Jesus (along with others) was "sent" to help us work out how to live our lives. I think Jean Paul Sartre was wrong when he said that uniquely in humans essence follows existence. I think a good few of our fellow creatures, like we, can create their own essence, but he was right that the freedom we have to create our essence is our paramount quality.

Jesus told us that unqualified love thus absolute forgiveness is the essence of god and this should be the essence we should attempt to create in ourselves. *"Forgive them for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23.34) was perhaps his last message. Forgiving when someone says sorry, when they know and accept they have wronged you, is not so hard, but he meant that we should forgive even when forgiveness is not sought, even when those who have wronged us do not see the wrong. We must accept John Watson's exhortation "Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle". We can never really know how hard the battle of life is for another.

NOTES

Note 1

John Lennox (Lennox 2011) lists the following scientists:

- Prof William Phillips – 1998, Physics Nobel Laureat
- Prof John Polkinghorne FRS, Quantum Physicist
- Sir John Houghton Head of the IGPC
- Francis Collins Director US National Institutes of Health

I would add Physicist/Philosopher Paul Davies because of various views he has expressed including:

“Whether the world is contrived so felicitously as to preserve the upper level that we might call the soul or mind, I don’t know. It seems too good to be true. On the other hand, I sometimes console myself with saying that it seems almost too good to be true that we’re here in the first place. The world is so marvellous and unexpected and incredibly contrived that I suppose you could even believe it would contrive to save souls.” Paul Davies in *“The Future of God”* by Samantha Trenoweth.

Note 2

The belief in Zoroastrianism is reported to be that *“The final saviour of the world, Saoshyant, will be born to a virgin impregnated by the seed of Zoroaster while bathing in a lake. Saoshyant will raise the dead – including those in both heaven and hell – for final judgment, returning the wicked to hell to be purged of bodily sin. Next, all will wade through a river of molten metal in which the righteous will not burn. Heavenly forces will ultimately triumph over evil, rendering it forever impotent. Saoshyant and Ahura Mazda will offer a bull as a final sacrifice for all time, and all men will become immortal. Mountains will again flatten and valleys will rise; heaven will descend to the moon, and the earth will rise to meet them both.”* From Cavendish, Richard; Ling, Trevor Oswald (1980), *Mythology: an Illustrated Encyclopedia*, Rizzoli, pp. 40–45, ISBN 0847802868 reproduced in Wikipedia.

The “Miraculous births” entry in Wikipedia lists a number of similar stories.

Note 3

I think it interesting that we rely on others for a record of the teachings of both and for the teachings of Buddha and Mohammed. Arguably the four most influential teachers of all time wrote nothing (to our knowledge). Maybe we could be no more sure of their teachings if the four had written as we cannot be sure of the meaning of languages and are less and less sure of meaning the more ancient the writing. Maybe these four knew this. It is conceivable to me that there would be greater argument over their written words than their reported words.

Note 4

See <http://www.space.com/26115-oldest-habitable-alien-planet-kapteyn-b.html>

"The newfound exoplanet candidate Kapteyn b, which lies a mere 13 light-years away, is about 11.5 billion years old, scientists say. That makes it 2.5 times older than Earth, and just 2 billion years or so younger than the universe itself, which burst into existence with the Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago.

"It does make you wonder what kind of life could have evolved on those planets over such a long time," study lead author Guillem Anglada-Escude, of Queen Mary University of London, said in a statement.

And there is the problem of the Fermi Paradox. The Wikipedia article (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fermi_paradox) on this paradox begins:

"The Fermi paradox (or Fermi's paradox) is the apparent contradiction between high estimates of the probability of the existence of extra-terrestrial civilization and humanity's lack of contact with, or evidence for, such civilisations.[1] The basic points of the argument, made by physicists Enrico Fermi and Michael H. Hart, are:

The Sun is a typical star, and relatively young. There are billions of stars in the galaxy that are billions of years older.

Almost surely, some of these stars will have Earth-like planets. Assuming the Earth is typical, some of these planets may develop intelligent life.

Some of these civilizations may develop interstellar travel, a technology Earth is investigating even now (such as the 100 Year Starship).

Even at the slow pace of currently envisioned interstellar travel, the galaxy can be completely colonized in a few tens of millions of years.

According to this line of thinking, the Earth should already have been colonised, or at least visited. But no convincing evidence of this exists. Furthermore, no confirmed signs of intelligence (see Empirical resolution attempts) elsewhere have yet been spotted in our galaxy or (to the extent it would be detectable) elsewhere in the observable universe. Hence Fermi's question, "Where is everybody?"

Several explanations for the absence on Earth of any colonisers from elsewhere have been advanced. I find none particularly convincing. I have not seen a suggestion that a cosmic intelligence is somehow the reason.

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Appendix

In broad terms, I think we can all be placed into one of the following categories of belief:

Category 1 - Metaphysical solipsists believe only their minds exist and that there is no real universe external to their minds. It could be argued that this is not a belief; that Descarte's *cogito ergo sum* is a statement of fact.

Category 2 - Belief for some of us stops at **epistemological solipsism**. Such people believe there is a real universe, but while they believe nothing more, they might allow that there is a possibility that there is more than a physical real universe. **Agnostic** can be a label for people in this category.

Category 3 A - Some of us hold the belief that nothing exists other than a physical universe and that it is a happenstance and as such can have no purpose or meaning. (There is an unfalsifiable theory that several physical universes exist or a multiverse exists.) **Atheist** is used as a label for people in this category, but **adeist** might be a better label. **Physicalism** and **materialist monism** and **naïve realism** are other labels in this category. In these views all existence is believed to be physical. **Naive realism** moreover says that our senses provide us with direct awareness of the world as it really is. In this category what we might call mind is believed to be an epiphenomenon of matter meaning that matter causes mental phenomena and that mental phenomena cannot be the cause of any physical phenomenon. This obviously has implications for the idea of free will.

Category 3 B - Some of us hold the belief that the universe is not a happenstance and has purpose or meaning. In my view this must involve the belief that there is some kind of existence other than that which is detectible by our senses directly or mechanically augmented and implies intent and that therefore there must be an intender or intenders with intelligence. **Deist** can be a label for people in this category.

Category 4 - Some of us more or less agree with the ideas in category 4, but believe beyond these that an intelligence or intelligences existing in addition to the apparent universe, has or have certain characteristics. There are quite a few variants including **monotheists**, **polytheists**, **pantheists** and **panentheists**.

Both category 3B and 4 believers might be either:

dualists, believing that two kinds of phenomena exist – the physical and the ideal or mind or spirit, or

idealist monists, believing that only the ideal or mind or spirit exists and that, as physicist, astronomer and mathematician James Jeans said, “the material universe is derivative from consciousness, not consciousness from the material universe”.