Religion

The origin of divine evidence

I know, and have always known that there isn't a God in the same way I know there are no real Borg. The Borg are a fictional race of cybernetic creatures featured in Star Trek. They 'assimilate' people from other races, making them Borg; a wonderful creation of science fiction villainy. You will be able to find Borg costumes for sale, countless pictures and references to Borg on the internet, and there is an entire subculture who knows everything about them and the Borg form a small part of these peoples' collective consciousness. I cannot prove, however, that the Borg do not exist in reality. In order to do so, I would have to search everywhere the Borg might exist simultaneously, which is beyond the ability of the human race. Although I cannot prove that the Borg do not exist, I know they do not because I understand the concept they represent, and more specifically its origin. I know that the concept of the Borg was invented by science fiction writers for inclusion in Star Trek: The Next Generation. I know that any photographs you see of Borg are photographs of human beings in costumes; either actors or Star Trek fans. I know that the 'evidence' for the existence of Borg in reality cannot originate from real Borg, but from deliberately created fiction.

To give another example; in medieval times, narwhal tusks were sometimes believed to be the horns of the mythical unicorn. No-one would now consider the presence of narwhal tusks to be evidence of the existence of unicorns because we understand what they are. This 'evidence' for unicorns can be discounted because we know its origin is from another source.

Why is this significant? The existence of the Borg in reality, and also of God, is what is known as a spatially unrestricted existential dilemma. Another example of this is the question 'Do purple cows exist?' A purple cow could exist anywhere in the universe in order to answer this question in the affirmative, but I would never be able to disprove it unless I could search the entirety of space simultaneously and find no purple cows. The existence of God is a similarly tricky problem from a philosophical perspective, since it is very hard to prove or disprove. All we can do is evaluate evidence. This does not mean that we simply don't know; just that we cannot prove or disprove the hypothesis from a logical perspective. If there is no evidence for a phenomenon, one would have no reason to believe in it. To do so would simply be irrational. The evidence for the existence of God is the presence of the concept of a deity in our collective consciousness. That is to say, the only reason people believe in God is because of the existence of religion, in the form of ancient texts and traditions passed to us from prehistory. As with the Borg, although I cannot prove that God does not exist, I know he does not because I understand the concept it represents, and more specifically its origin. I know that the 'evidence' for the existence of God in reality does not originate from a real God, but from mythology.

Anyone who has studied mythology quickly sees how it evolves. Mythologies of the world have repeating themes – features that are common to many mythologies. These tell us about the nature of the human condition, and about the environment that prehistoric man inhabited. The details around these common features vary greatly, and can be seen to inherit from other mythologies. One can see, for example, how ancient Egyptian mythology inherited features from previous and contemporary religions. One can see how ancient Egyptian mythology passed on features to Greco-Roman mythology. One can see how ancient Egyptian and Greco-Roman mythology passed on features to Christianity. One can see how one religion can lead to many offshoots – each adapting separately. Christianity seems to have been particularly good at assimilating features from other religions and incorporating them into itself. The Bible did not come to us in its perfect, finished, divine and English form direct from God; it came to us filtered through numerous cultures, countless millennia, and originating in the mind of primitive man. It tells us nothing about the origin of the universe, the origin of life, the origin of humanity, and much less about what kind of meat we should or shouldn't eat on a Friday. It does tell us about the nature of mythology, and so the nature of the mind. The contents of religious belief should not be seen as a catalogue of truth (metaphorical or otherwise) but as a mirror of human nature. Religion should be understood in terms of the mythology from which it stems.

Could mythology not contain a kernel of truth, however? Is it not true that just because a story comes to us as a myth does not guarantee it is not the result of some event that actually happened? Certainly – myths of a great flood, for example, present in almost all cultures (although not that of ancient Egypt, since the annual flooding of the Nile river was essential for the survival of that civilisation, and hence flooding was not seen as a bad thing) may well find its origin in flooding resulting from the thaw at the end of the last Ice Age. This is not evidence of the divine simply because it is interpreted as such in the religious myths. As we see the construction of a myth; how it is built up and embellished over time; we see which features have been added on, and indeed which features may have resulted from real world (and certainly not divine) events. By tracing back towards the theoretical kernel of truth and stripping away the features of religion one by one, we are left with little more than the notion of divine creation – the idea that the universe was made by something greater than ourselves. These religious myths contain no relics, and they do not point to events that inspire the idea of divine creation, only the idea itself.

The easiest way for man to make sense of things is to anthropomorphise. It makes sense, then, that this approach has been taken to make sense of the origin of the universe. Obviously the universe exists, and from mankind's knowledge of himself, it is clear that he did not create it. Therefore, certainly the existence of the universe is the result of something greater than mankind. In the absence of contrary evidence, it seems rational to early man that the universe must have been 'created' by a sentient man-like creature, but something more than man – the divine.

In his book, <u>The Intentional Stance</u> (The MIT Press, 1990), Daniel C. Dennett discusses his theory of intentionality; an approach to the philosophy of mind. As I understand it, the intentional stance is the analysis and interpretation of actions and events assuming a rational cognitive system with intentions. It occurs to me that just as 'mind' is the intentional stance applied to the self, 'God' is the intentional stance applied to the universe.

It is easy for man to understand the universe in human terms – assuming that there are decisions being made according to the intentions of some greater being.

Once you understand the origin of religion and the origin of belief in God, you should understand that it is not something to be followed and taken literally; just like once you know the origin of the concept of The Borg, you do not have to toss and turn at night worrying that you may be assimilated in your sleep.

Reply to the Archdeacon of York

I read an article by The Venerable Leslie Stanbridge, Archdeacon Emeritus of York in a parish magazine whilst on holiday in 2009. It indicated that a) many Christian thinkers accept that Genesis cannot be literally true, b) Christians can "celebrate Darwin and his theories about evolution", c) the question of *why* humans developed from less advanced forms of life is beyond the scope of science to answer, science being restricted to the *how*, d) we can turn to Genesis to answer the *why* as a "different sort of truth" – that of poetry and story.

Although I was unsurprised by this stance, I still found it infuriating. Why is it assumed that science cannot answer 'why?' questions? The point of the theory of evolution is that the 'how' contains the 'why'. By asking 'why?' in the face of the 'how' in this case, you assert intelligent design, thereby revealing a misunderstanding of the theory of evolution.

Evolution does not need a 'why'. It does not need to be guided – to have an end purpose leading to the 'how'. Evolution occurs in the absence of a purpose – those things better equipped to survive will do so; it is as simple as that – they do not need more of a purpose than existence. 'Why' implies some reason – that evolution was set in motion as the result of a conscious action to fulfil a goal. Instead, it is something that happens of its own accord – careless of the consequences and the 'big picture' – like a ball on a hill will roll down, the 'how' and the 'why' are one and the same – gravity in this case.

There is no justification in claiming science has no domain in 'big picture' questions. Why is it that at some point we must abandon reason in favour of poetry when it comes to existential questions? For that we have philosophy – a branch of reason closely allied to science and fully capable of addressing 'the big questions' without resorting to mythology to provide answers. Why is it assumed that religion has any authority to provide answers to philosophical questions without the scientific rigour that provides the authority for truly philosophical arguments?

I think that admitting that Genesis is not literally true should make people realise that nothing can be gained from the Bible where truth, morality and 'spiritual guidance' are concerned. Once you admit that you are *interpreting* the Bible, you should realise that this is not the word of God, but your own opinions and ideals you are reading – you take from it what you want. There is nothing wrong with that unless you assign those ideals a divine provenance – to assert that these are justified, immutable, unquestionable, ultimate truths. That is vanity and in the mind-set of a theist, blasphemy.

I think the mistake is to cling to these ideals, to cling to the importance of the Bible as if it were the word of God whilst simultaneously admitting it to be a work of poetry and metaphor alone. God does not tell you what parts are literally true, and so it is no more or less than a work of fiction. It is a double standard to regard the Bible or any religious text as having any more significance to our understanding of reality than any other book, whilst at the same time reserving the right to use the useful trick of claiming metaphorical truth for any section that becomes an embarrassment to the believer. There is no commitment to it as a divine text – at some point you must commit and say "Yes, that bit it is literally true and that is what I believe." If you pick and choose what is metaphor and what is reality from a religious text, what justification do you have for belief in God? Isn't an omnipresent, omnipotent, benevolent creator entity a prime candidate for interpretation as metaphor?

The benefits of religion

Religion remains one of the few guiding principles of human society. I find this frustrating as it seems to me that we should have grown out of such primitive thoughts at this stage in our development as a race. A large portion of the human race still talks to an imaginary man in the sky, asking him to make the crops grow this year. Why is this the case? If religion is such a primitive thing, why is it still so popular? What am I missing?

The first answer is that the very nature of religion is self-sustaining. It has developed as part of culture, rather than independent of it. In many cultures, you could not remove religion from the way of life without destroying the way of life itself. The people of that culture would never question the religious aspects of their way of life because it is simply part of how they live and have always lived. Just because something has always been the case, however, does not necessarily make it a good thing or a thing that cannot be abandoned. Religion tends to react to any opposition with distain and even hatred. Questioning the religion is discouraged and will often lead to the same distain and hatred. Religion is taught to children from a very early age, and if you grow up being told something on a daily basis then it is very hard to shake the conviction that it is the one and only way. At the core of religion is faith; the belief in an hypothesis in the absence of evidence. Everything about religion is designed to protect it from opposition; to protect it from rational thought.

The second reason that religion is still so popular is that it does have some very appealing features. Religion provides a community of like-minded, supportive individuals. Wherever you go (if you subscribe to one the major religions) you will find a ready-made group of potential friends, and a place to meet and talk; the supportive social structure that mankind, as a social animal, requires for peace of mind and happiness. Religion appears to provide answers to questions that drive us all; it can provide meaning and a sense of purpose to the universe. It can make people feel part of something bigger than themselves. Aren't these things valuable enough to justify and sustain the presence of religion in our world? Can you guess my answer?

Firstly, although a community of supportive friends is a vital aspect of human life, I do not think it needs to be attached to a system of belief. You may just as well find a community of like-minded individuals. People may be brought together in a similar fashion by anything

from shared enthusiasm for a particular sport to shared love of a television programme. Secondly, it seems to me that religion appears to provide quick and easy solutions to some very complex issues, but without sufficient justification for these solutions.

Atheism and reason

I have some bad news for you; you are going to die. I can't tell you when or how, but I can pretty much guarantee that it won't be much fun. Furthermore, everyone you know and love is also going to die. If you have children, they are going to die. If your children have children, *they* are going to die. In fact, the entire line of your descendants is going to die. I have some worse news for you; you will be forgotten. You and everything you accomplish will be forgotten. No matter how hard you try to leave your mark, eventually every trace of your existence will be eradicated from the planet. Everything fades; even rocks grow old.

This much is without question. It is part of the human condition, and these are facts we all have to deal with. We have to live with these facts, day after day, and cope with them as best we know how. No matter how unpleasant it is, no matter how much we put it off, some day we will have to address our own mortality. If we are going to die anyway, if everything is going to be forgotten, what is the point? Why do anything? You may like to think that there is an obvious answer to this, something you may have overlooked, but there is not. You have to address these questions and answer them for yourself. One way to address these issues is to ignore them. It is not a great solution, but it works for some. Another way is to deny the issue; pretend that you are not going to die, or pretend that there is some overall guiding principle that gives meaning to our lives and our deaths. This is called religion.

I would like to clarify atheism; there seems to be a misconception among some that atheism is a lack of belief. People confuse atheists with agnostics or nihilists. There is a big difference between the belief in the absence of something, and the absence of belief. I have a very strong belief. I believe that the universe was not created by a sentient being. This is the crux of all religion. Everything else is just window-dressing. I believe that there is no judge watching us from the sky. I believe that there is no life after death. I believe that there is no overall guiding principle to the universe that led to the existence of mankind, and that there is no intrinsic meaning or purpose to life. Furthermore, I believe that religion is not only wrong, it is ignorant, in opposition to reason, cowardly, and dangerous.

What is the origin of the universe, the origin of life on Earth, the meaning of life? These are questions that demand answers of all of us. I think that deep down we all have a desire to answer these questions to feel at ease with our lives. As important as these questions are, as vital as the answers may be to our lives, if we do not know the answers, we cannot simply make them up. This is what I believe religion is for; it is to plug the holes in our knowledge of the human condition. I have heard religious people say "I just can't imagine living in a world without God". It is a hard thing to live with uncertainty, but it is unavoidable. Life is complicated, and you cannot solve every problem, you cannot know the answer to every question. Imagining that there is no intrinsic purpose to your life is a very frightening thought, but simply denying it is not a satisfactory solution. It is unhealthy to avoid a

problem by denying it. It is not a reasonable solution to deny an unpleasant fact. You should not feel pleased that you deny an unpleasant fact; this is a bad thing, not a good thing.

People use conceptual shortcuts when they lack the intellectual resources to address or resolve an issue. This renders them immune to logical argument, as any reasoning is bypassed by the shortcut. We must learn to deal with uncertainty and gaps in our knowledge without using such sloppy workarounds. Simply because a problem is hard to solve does not make it insoluble. Simply because we do not know the answer to a question does not mean the answer does not exist; neither should we insert an answer without justification.

I see this as an increasing trend, especially in an age when we know more and more about our world and should be relying on reason and logic. I see people using knee-jerk reactions, emotional overreaction, and religious zeal in place of really thinking, and any 'reasoning' is simply to justify their shortcuts. Reason becomes less of a useful tool in the face of this stubbornness. I see the decline of reason in the modern world. I see the rise of ignorance, the deification of the trivial, religious and emotional brainlessness, and the return of man to a primitive state.

Certainly, the facts as I outlined them are scary, they are difficult to face. That does not mean you should not face them, neither does it mean you cannot face them. My belief is that these facts are a part of our humanity, and as such should be embraced, understood, examined, thought about, but never denied. This takes courage, it takes intellect and it takes resilience. If there is no intrinsic meaning to life, you have to find a reason to live for yourself. If there is no obvious role or path set out for you, you have to find one for yourself. This seems to me to be the first step in understanding ourselves, and yet the world is still in the stifling stranglehold of this shortcut-past-thought that we call religion.

When followers of a religion use the term 'faith', they mean belief in the absence of evidence. They believe that they do not need evidence to justify what they feel in their hearts. The implication is that this is a good thing – real strength of belief despite contrary evidence, like the avoidance of temptation. Faith here is not the same as trusting someone you know and love, which would be an admirable quality. A person of faith is proud of the fact that they do not require proof of God's existence or love to believe in it. This is fair enough, as there are many things one can accept without proof. What is required, however, is evidence. Acceptance of an hypothesis without evidence is not bold, trusting, loving, or intelligent, it is irrational. Indeed, the very lack of evidence seems to be a motivating factor in many peoples' faith. The very fact that the hypothesis is unsupported makes them feel better about their belief because they believe it is somehow virtuous. It is as if not only do they believe the hypothesis *despite* the lack of evidence, they believe the hypothesis *because* of a lack of evidence. In this sense, faith is the opposite of reason, and once you abandon rational thought, you are capable of any act, no matter how degraded or abhorrent. If religion is a force against reason, so "religious tolerance" is an acceptance, even a promotion of this.

Religious opinion and religious tolerance

A clear distinction needs to be drawn between whether you agree with a person's religious principles and whether you accept them and the person's right to hold them; between religious opinion and religious tolerance. A lot of people take disagreement of religious opinion to be religious intolerance, or an insult to their beliefs. In fact, a refusal to accept this type of disagreement is itself religious intolerance. Problems occur when religious beliefs *contain* religious intolerance (where a religion holds that other religions are false, and are actively in opposition to the first religion).

Take the wearing of traditional Islamic attire by Muslim women, for example. Many Muslim women feel very strongly that they have a right to wear a veil or a burkha, whatever the situation, and that any objection to this is religious intolerance. On the other hand, many people find the wearing of veils uncomfortable to behold, ignorant and even insulting. This is a disagreement of religious opinion (since, although not a direct question of religious belief, the wearing of veils is a feature of Islamic culture) yet it is seen as religious intolerance. People have just as much right to object to the wearing of veils as they have to wear veils.

People need to realise that religious beliefs are not something to enforce on others, but rather something to factor into one's own decisions. Thus if one's beliefs make doing a job difficult (if only that it makes one's colleagues uncomfortable, or that the company one works for believes that it will offend potential clients) one should not be offended or demand that others adapt to fit in with our beliefs. In such situations, a person should accept that standing by one's principles (religious or otherwise) demands sacrifices and compromise of *oneself*, not of other people.

My personal feeling on the matter is that the wearing of veils and burkhas sustains a primitive and demeaning attitude towards women. I have heard the opinion that women find that when they are completely covered in this way, they are more comfortable, since they do not have to worry about being viewed as a sex object by men. I would suggest that by covering up in this way, a woman is *implying* that she *is* a sex object that needs to be covered up. It implies paranoia and a problem of self-image. It sustains and reinforces the view that women are simply things to be ogled at. It actually encourages the problem it purports to avoid. Furthermore, it implies a primitive animal sexuality in men; that men do view all women as nothing but sex objects, and that this is something that has to be sidestepped rather than addressed. It is a blatant insult to all men.

Religious mob mentality

In 2006, a Danish newspaper published cartoons that provoked a furious response from the Islamic community. The cartoons portrayed the prophet Mohammed as a terrorist (a reference to the terrorist activity of Islamic fundamentalist groups against various western countries, including the 9/11 attacks and London bombings). The cartoons sparked demonstrations in which Muslim protesters called for the beheading of those who had insulted Islam.

It infuriates me that religious communities are so prone to mob mentality. All it takes now is a cartoon; a drawing on a piece of paper, to instigate demands for beheadings, executions, holy wars and so on. Is religion so fragile that such a small thing can offend its followers to the point where they abandon reason? Is religious faith so weak that it cannot take the slightest knock?

Religious people frequently refer to the power of faith; how it can move mountains, change the world; it is the one constant that is the strongest influence in their life. Yet religious people seem always ready to be offended, and offended in the most extreme way. A faith that is believed to be so strong should not flinch at the slightest challenge. It should not be offended or disturbed by anything. Anyone who claims to have a strong faith should not be worried at all by anything that offends their religion, challenges their religion, or even refutes their religion entirely. They should rest assured that their faith is unbreakable, their religion rock solid. They should "turn the other cheek".

People who claim to be of a particular faith rarely seem to live by its principles. Forgiveness, tolerance and understanding are all religious virtues that are severely lacking in the religious mind-set. Any 'religion' that advocates killing another person under any circumstances cannot be a religion worth following. The problem of course is that followers of a religion can mould it to fit their own ends. They can interpret the text any way they want and do what they please. Many Muslims (not just the so called extremists, it seems) can say how the Koran indicates that you cannot kill someone and go to heaven, and in the same breath say that the Koran calls for the death of so-and-so for whatever reason.

This indicates to me that religion is not a way of guiding people to live their lives by wise principles; people live how they want to. Religion remains what it always was; a group of traditions, habits and superstitions. Religion has lost contact with why these traditions originated, and so they cannot be challenged – they are God's will and thus unquestionable. The religion of the past was used to influence a people; to draw people together in opposition to something. To convince people to do something for a non-religious motive requires that the justification makes sense; to do the same thing using religion requires no such complicated justification, simply touch the religion button. Light the blue touch-paper and retire to a safe distance. That religion of the past is still here today, and without a guiding principle, it is left to flail wildly, like a broken electrical cable, waiting to lash out with its blind medieval hostility.

Nobody needs a judge in the sky to tell them that caring for others is better than harming them, and that is the only useful thing any religion will tell you.

The wasted message of Christianity

Many Christians seem to have missed the point of Christianity. Whether you believe Jesus was the son of God, an inspirational rabbi, or simply an enduring myth, surely Jesus the man is not the important thing. What is important is the message.

It is often the case that a charismatic person attracts followers, but they focus on the person, not the message. The message was one of love; we must love one another for the world to work. We tend to see the world as competition between us and them; the rest of the world represents an obstacle to our desires. The message of Christianity, as I see it, was that if we care equally about everyone, we don't need to worry about competition. The problem with this message is that it only works if *everyone* follows the idea. Altruism cannot work if only a few people follow it.

One should realise, however, that philosophy is fluid, not absolute. No set of ideas is complete, and the usefulness of an idea will change with time. You must take even good ideas as a *beginning*, and continue them yourself. The problem is that the devotees of a religion tend to spend their time being impressed with the initial message rather than continuing the work. What they should have been doing is using the message and improving on it; thinking for themselves. I think that Jesus would be so disappointed that his followers have made no progress since his first steps at teaching the importance of caring for everyone.

If you follow the ideas of one man, you concentrate too much on the man and not the ideas. The core of the ideas will be lost but the devotion remains. You become a disciple; and this leads to obsession and a cessation of thought. You decide that these ideas are correct, so you stop thinking for yourself.

Atheism and spirituality

As an atheist, people tend to assume you don't think about spiritual issues. I get the impression that theists think we atheists don't like to think about the bigger picture; that in some way we lack the *soul* to consider something larger than ourselves; that we consider religion to be silly and not the sort of thing we like to think about. This is incorrect. I do not think religion is silly. Nonsense, yes, but not silly; it is deadly serious. I cannot, of course, speak for other atheists; unlike members of a religion, the opinions and belief system of an atheist are his own. Personally, I spend a lot of time thinking about the big questions, and I would like to reason out the answers myself rather than taking them off the shelf in a black box marked 'God'.

In the film Contact, there is a scene in which the heroine is being interviewed to determine whether she is a suitable candidate to represent the human race by being sent into space to meet an alien race. She is asked "Would you consider yourself a spiritual person?" Her reply indicates that she does not believe in God, and she is rejected in favour of someone who does. The question annoyed me, since the implication was that someone who did not believe in God was not a spiritual person and therefore had something lacking; something that really should be present in a human being.

I believe there are aspects of the human condition that lie outside our normal predictive and definitive abilities. I believe that one person may mean more to another than anything else, although neither can explain why. I believe one moment may mean more to a person than any number of years. I believe that, in human terms only, some things are eternal and some

things are inexplicable. For people that believe in a god, that is one of those things. In that sense, I believe I am a spiritual person, even though I do not believe in a god.

Faith in humanity

As I mentioned before, religious faith amounts to the acceptance of an hypothesis despite the absence of evidence; the ignorance of facts in preference to one's existing ideas. What I would like to see is some faith in humanity. We know what humanity can be like; selfish, vicious, stupid and downright nasty. We should be able to put our faith in what it could be; caring, creative, sensitive, strong and committed.

We are so used to the bad side of humanity; we base our decisions and assumptions on this. We assume the worst of people; when we see a good deed, a helping hand, a selfless act, we are suspicious. I will not deny that this is a good survival technique, yet this approach leads to a culture of mistrust, suspicion, and a culture where taking advantage of others is seen as acceptable; it is the norm. Assuming the worst *sustains* the worst. By accepting this selfish society (not even simply accepting it as okay, but simply accepting it as the norm and acting accordingly), we allow it to continue and to grow; we make it worse.

What we need to do is make a leap of faith. We must try not to see everyone else as 'the other', but see them as ourselves. We have to show trust, give other people the opportunity to decide whether to take the selfish, vicious, stupid and nasty route, or the caring, creative, sensitive route. Our current approach is to cover our backs at every turn; we try to force others to do the right thing rather than allowing them to *choose* to do the right thing.

The alternate approach requires a lot of faith; as we leave ourselves open to abuse. This is faith that actually costs; it actually means something. Furthermore, it is not simply the belief that people will do the right thing; I know that at present, there is little impetus to do the right thing for no other reason than that it is the right thing. I have faith, but I am a realist. All I believe is that people *can* do the right thing, and deep down they *want* to do the right thing, but they feel that in a harsh, unforgiving world, if you do the right thing, someone else will take advantage of you.

We have to be the first to say "I will not take advantage of you; I *will* do the right thing." We have to be the first to say "I give you the *opportunity* to do the right thing; show me you can. Show me what humanity can be. Show me my faith is justified."

But how do we do this? We have to let people understand the motivation for our show of trust. We are doing this not because we are fools, but because we are showing faith in humanity. We have to let people know that they are directly responsible for how humanity progresses. Each decision they make is a reflection of their character, and of the character of our entire species.