

Science and Faith

by Dr Harold Coop.

Sometimes people, thinking of attending church, hesitate to do so because they have genuine intellectual difficulties and feel that without answers to these, faith can never be a possibility for them. They fear they will have to leave their questioning, perhaps even their brains behind, to embrace or even explore the Christian faith. Given the bizarre views of some people calling themselves Christians, and their actions, that's not surprising. Some of those evil people or cults will do things completely contrary to the mind of Christ, but rather than a cause for rejecting sensible Christianity, that shows how important it is to get it right.

It's important to realize that there is a whole world of intellectual Christianity that has included some of history's greatest thinkers. In such a complicated subject dealing with mankind's most profound problems, it's essential not to throw it all out because some things are difficult or absurd, any more than we would reject medicine because it is complex and sometimes errs, or has charlatan quacks. Our brains can get us more than half way to belief in God (theism), and the journey is exciting and empowering. Some sceptics have degrees in their own subject, but in religious thinking remain at a much lower level, having never even explored a church library. And I believe atheism leaves far more un-answered questions than does theism.

So this article deals with belief in God as opposed to mechanistic science, and another deals with the other great subject that concerns people; that of suffering.

Some scientists have calculated tremendous odds against the stupefying complexity and remarkable physical "coincidences" of our situation having evolved by chance. Perhaps the first and best known is Lecomte du Nouy of France, who estimated the chances of random physics coordinating with and combining with biological evolution to produce our world and species at minus 10 to the 125th. He and his famous book, "Human Destiny" still feature on Google.

Others disagree and think we are an insignificant by-product. But as you read this, a million nerve cells from each eye feed information to a hundred trillion nerve cell junctions in your brain. The number of possible ways of connecting them is greater than the number of atoms in the universe.

People have applied reason to their observations of our world for centuries. A famous argument was that of Britain's William Paley, who said that if he found an object with **purpose** (not just complexity which is quite different), he could correctly reason there was a mind behind it. A watch was his example; there must be a watch-maker.

However, intellectual challenges to our faith appear from time to time, and rather than walk away from the debate, Christians and seekers should consider these questions and

explore answers. There is plenty of material available in our church library or in Christian bookshops. However, as in any library, works will range from the profound to the simplistic, so some guidance is helpful.

In his latest book *The God Delusion*, Oxford professor Richard Dawkins asserts that even reasoned moderate faith does great harm, since, for him, allowing any form of belief without scientific proof helps fundamentalists to flourish. You can read some chapters on the internet at www.richarddawkins.net, and there is much debate on the web.

On the internet you can also find a response to this book from Professor Terry Eagleton, Professor of English, Manchester University: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/eagl01_.html and one from a scientific/biology point of view by Prof. H.Allen Orr, Rochester,U.S.A. at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/19775>. Scientists Alister and Joanna McGrath 's book of reply is called "the Dawkins Delusion". Its first author was an atheistic biophysicist but is now a leading theologian. He identifies all the flaws and deficiencies in the Dawkins arguments. Perhaps the best concise reply comes from Dr F S Collins, Director of the huge Human Genome Project (Some call it the best job in science in America.)www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/voices/collins.html (or Google Collins pbs org). He is now the major opponent of Dawkins in the U.S.A.

Questions tossed into the debate are:

- Belief in a loving god isn't compatible with so much suffering in the world (perhaps our oldest and most intense challenge, and addressed in a following article)
- Church history is full of evil, either done by Christians or in the name of Christianity. (Dawkins exploits extreme and multifactorial cases which are really political)
- In science, the big bang theory, together with mechanistic evolution, have finally abolished the need for God. (They haven't. Science has nothing to say about the "why", nor about the cause of the big bang, which is actually now being questioned.) The complexity of DNA and biochemistry are equally mechanistic, and are the final nails in religion's coffin, say some. But the complexity, astronomical or cellular, is so mind-blowing that even mega-time strains to explain it.
- All these things demonstrate that miracles are impossible. (They don't, as the detailed book "In Defence of Miracles", edited by Habermas, explains. Science describes what usually happens, and this is a very complex subject)
- All religions claim the truth, so it's likely none is true. But people have always striven for the meaning of life, and there is much expressing our best nature that is common to all religions. Perhaps that striving is a reason we are here.

It's perhaps best to look first at the international attack from some scientists on religion. The interview with Collins describes his journey of faith, as a thinking scientist, believing that science and faith must not be incompatible. (I agree with that; if they disagree then either the science or the faith must be wrong.)

Not surprisingly, he draws heavily on the influence of C.S Lewis , one of the greatest minds of the 20th century. His book “Mere Christianity,” is the most read theological book in the history of the world, apart from sacred texts like the Bible or the Koran, having been an international best-seller for 50 years. No other book of that type has that record.

This is because its brilliant first 3 chapters explain from first principles that for understanding the “why” of life, the moral law is more important evidence than science is. If we use science for this question we’ve picked up the wrong tools.

Lewis thinks that scientific argument, using fact, gets us only so far; we must look inside ourselves, the supreme creation, and we will get much further. He argues that a very complex house might show its creator was complex but not whether he was good or bad. But if, in the house’s centre, in pride of place above the fire, was a very beautiful painting, we could deduce that the builder/owner had some artistic sensitivity. And if the painting had deep religious awareness, we could also make deductions from that.

We, the most complex creatures in the universe can and must therefore look inside ourselves , and by this means we can be “in the know”.

Right in the centre of us, the supreme creation, there is something strange that isn’t explained by purely mechanistic evolutionary advantage and survival. It’s a moral law, varying a little but basically universally agreed. We believe some things “without proof” because our human experience shows us some unchallengeable laws about which science can say nothing.

Love is better than hate, truth better than falsehood, courage and self-sacrifice better than cowardice, kindness better than cruelty. It is wrong to torture an adult, worse to torture a child. Where did all that come from?

It’s no explanation to say it is from society’s conditioning for the good of the group , or as some biologists argue, that morals are nothing more than an inevitable behavioural byproduct of evolution.

If I am only an evolved conglomeration of atoms, why **should** I do, or not do anything , or care about the group, against my self-interest? Why should we admire self-sacrifice when the “natural law” is that the big eats the little? There is a compulsion and sometime a revulsion about the above matters in the paragraph two above this, which is much deeper and compelling than any evolutionary tendency or mere social constructs of convenience.

Perhaps, because of what it implies, the word “**should**” is the most important word in any language. It implies there is more to us than just atoms. If you argue that “If God made the world little kids shouldn’t get cancer”, you have immediately admitted a moral dimension. Why **shouldn’t** they if the world is purely a mechanical collection of atoms?

In “Mere Christianity” Lewis argues in much more detail than I can here, and answers objectors to his original BBC talks.

These things imply something behind the universe, more like a mind than anything else. To progress further it is essential to combine God-given reason with religious experience humbly to probe that Mind. Sometimes the reason and the love central to all religions get omitted. Many married couples with a life-long deep love do not believe that it is without a deeper meaning.

Leading Christians feel that Dawkins, by trying to use science, has set the wrong frame of reference for the debate. Lewis says it is only religion that can, and must, deal with the facts of our nature, unexplained by science. Nevertheless, a recent twist comes from the increasing interest in “life after life experiences”, following the book by American Dr Raymond Moody. It has now been found that many thousands of people have had similar experiences in many nations and cultures. Also called Near Death Experiences the website nearf.org , for their research foundation, (visit “about us” to find the serious researchers), now documents the myriad cases in over 20 languages, and tries to analyse them.

And we must all deal with the facts of history as well. Several sources confirm that Jesus Christ was cruelly put to death by the brutal Roman crucifixion. What we all must face and explain is what happened next. Eleven terrified men were cowering in back rooms, petrified that the searching Roman soldiers would find them, for they were marked out for the same fate. Wouldn't you be the same? What was it then, that changed them, in around 3 days, into a completely different, incredibly courageous group that faced the Roman Empire, and went out to change it, and then the whole of world history

They and others close to them were truthful sorts of people who would not go out to face death for a lie. Their detailed accounts of post-resurrection appearances and conversations make convincing reading, but many people spend little time on such an important subject. We cannot just explain away the fact that **something happened**, and that the mystery and love of Jesus still lives on as he said it would. Christians in all circumstances have verified over many hundreds of years that his presence and guidance can still be felt.

There are many Christian authors, of popular style. We can find answers to many challenges in 3 inexpensive books by Lee Strobel, an American pastor. With a Master of Studies in Law from Yale Law School, he was an award-winning legal journalist with the Chicago Tribune, so is good at questioning and explanation. He interviews leading theologians in the U.S.A., and probes their arguments.

His books are best read in order, *The Case for Faith*, *The Case for a Creator*, and then *The Case for Christ*; all published by Zondervan. The 3 books retail at about \$12 each, CS Lewis's "Mere Christianity" at \$25, in the Christian bookshops listed in our Yellow Pages. All are in our library.

The first Strobel book deals with the first two questions in the paragraph with bullet points above, and with doubt, and the balance of intellect and faith. The second deals with many matters of science, including the intelligent design debate (which has a spectrum of beliefs within it). The third examines evidence of biblical scholarship and authenticity.

Strobel makes easy reading, writing in a journalistic style. But unlike some authors, he expresses the counter-arguments powerfully, and tackles them fully and fairly (and, e.g., on suffering, he writes from experience, as a reporter in the slums of Chicago and Calcutta). He interviews the best theologians, philosophers, and scientists he can find. It is a fascinating privilege to sit at his side in these testing conversations. These three books are the best and most systematic concise summary of the modern debate that I've seen, and are easy to read. Strobel is a best seller in U.S.A.

Some chapter headings are:

From "The Case for Faith":

Since evil and suffering exist a loving God cannot.
Since miracles contradict science they cannot be true
Evolution explains life so God isn't needed
It's offensive to claim Jesus is the only way to God
Church history is littered with oppression and violence
I still have doubts so I can't be a Christian

From "The Case for a Creator"

(Strobel is not a fundamentalist 6-day creationist but examines evolutionary theory in detail with refreshing honesty. This book is 427 pages, with numerous references)

Doubts about Darwinism
Where science meets faith
The evidence of cosmology: beginning with a bang
The evidence of physics
The evidence of astronomy
The evidence of biochemistry
The challenge of DNA and the origin of life
The evidence of consciousness and the mind
The cumulative case

From "The Case for Christ"

14 chapters covering:

Evidence of eyewitnesses , documentary, scientific, medical, archeological , corroborative and also rebuttal evidence, the missing body, post-crucifixion appearances, etc (397 pages)

In these books you may find answers to most things challenging you or your young people. Your faith and theirs will be enriched by this knowledge.

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Many of us at St Aidans believe that declining standards in society, in New Zealand or throughout the world, are related to the general growth of secularism. Many young people do not now go to Sunday school, or to Church, or have any belief system to underpin their morality. Our beliefs determine our actions. It is not surprising that having dispensed with the religious ethos of our community, we read of worsening community problems in the newspapers every day. The values of many people , especially the young, are now set by TV, music celebrities or films . Did we really think that dropping our long-held belief system would have no serious repercussions?

Of course we must not believe something because it may help society; we must be convinced that it is true. This applies to Christianity as much as it does to any other subject which we critically examine. But these considerations do mean that it is very important to put some effort into a proper examination of Christian claims, by reading the best writers and not embracing superficial judgments. Many people use a facile argument or objection as an excuse to not delve deeply, and have never browsed a church library to find answers from the best thinkers.

Since many people find the problem of suffering their greatest stumbling block, an article on this follows, but many books in our library address this and other problems. We hope you will continue your reading.

Dr Harold Coop is a former eye surgeon, now an artist.