

Do You Believe in God? or My Belief System

Pat McKeown, February 2010

I'm writing this at the tender age of 79 and feel I want to set out my views on what is all too often a ticklish topic for discussion, especially among so many of my generation.

So, first, my own background. Like many others I was baptised into the Church of England (C of E), largely, I came to understand, because my mother insisted. My father and his father were certainly non-believers and I think I first heard the term "atheist" from them in the somewhat limited discussions I had with them on religion in my early teens. In Coventry, when I was 5 to 11, we didn't go to church but I went to a C of E primary school; it was the only school nearby and within walking distance (approx one mile).

When we moved to Scotland shortly after the Coventry "blitz" (my Dad who was in the AID, the Aeronautical Inspection Directorate of the Ministry of Aircraft Production, was moved to Prestwick in Ayrshire, Scotland, to take charge of the receipt and inspection of American "lease-lend" Fortress and Liberator bombers that could just fly across the North Atlantic into Prestwick), my mother encouraged me to go to Sunday School with some of my school friends. The family of one of these were members of the Free Presbyterians, the "Wee Frees", a small and very strict non-conformist church in Scotland which seemed to dwell heavily on the Old Testament and preached hell-fire and damnation for those who sinned. The church was dark and gloomy and the preacher who spoke at Sunday School was large, ugly, wore a large black gown and frightened the life out of most of us kids. I remember having nightmares about it until my Dad told me that he didn't believe a word of it, that I shouldn't worry about it at all, that I should think for myself and not take on board anything I was told without questioning it first and, if I wished, discuss it with him.

A second family took me with them on Sunday mornings to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland; a much grander building and where the Sunday School was much less oppressive but still, in retrospect, engaged in mild brain-washing rather than teaching with discussion.

When my father was moved in 1944 to the (AID) Eastern region based in Cambridge, I followed after having completed the school year in Prestwick. Apart from school prayers, a dash of RE and becoming a Sea Scout in which there was emphasis on comradely, self-disciplined and charitable behaviour, I had little or no religious experience although I was always interested in the story of Christ, Christianity and other religions. I read the Bible quite extensively but with increasing scepticism of the truth, and its relevance to modern life, particularly of the Old Testament.

It was not until my father and thus the family then moved on to Bristol in 1947 where I met Mary, that through her and her family I started to go to church, namely Westbury-on-Trym Methodist church. This severely challenged my already shaky belief especially in the "fundamentals" namely the immense difference in the Gods of the Old Testament and New, the resurrection, the supernatural and divinity in general, the Trinity in particular and what often seemed to me the hypocrisy of un-Christian behaviour of some of the seniors towards others. This was compounded by the close and uncritical association of

the C of E with the military and British foreign policy. However I stuck with it and greatly enjoyed involvement in the excellent “Over Twenties” (youth) club, after National Service in the Army, when I returned home to Bristol.

In August 1954, Mary and I were married at Westbury Methodist church and lived on for about a month in my parent’s Clifton flat before taking up my scholarship at The College of Aeronautics, Cranfield, moving to Wolverton in North Bucks where we lived for two years in a very rudimentary flat behind and over a chemist shop. The owner was a kind but very eccentric Methodist who let us have the flat for £1 per week, including electricity. We were welcomed into the main Methodist church and were shown kindnesses by several members, one of whom, the local bank manager, let us take baths at his home (we had neither bath nor shower in our flat). On completing my course at Cranfield, we moved to Putnoe in Bedford. For several years we went occasionally to the Methodist church and even had our first son Jonathan baptised there. In all of this I had even more difficulty with Bible readings and sermons (especially those based on the Old Testament) and at Anglican services, the creed, which I could not honestly say, let alone believe. I still can’t because I don’t.

We then went a few times to the Quakers (Society of Friends), where there was no creed, no community prayers, no hymns and no expressed dogma but where the people fully lived up to their group name, “friends”. The out-and-out goodness of these people sticks in my mind.

Since then, I have become established in my career as a scientist and engineer but in recent years, in particular, have studied extensively the beliefs, practices and history of several religions, especially Christianity, in order to rationalise and understand my own belief system.

So, do I believe in God? My answer always has to start with a question... “First, what do you mean by God?”; “How do you define God?”; “Which God?”; “Do you mean the God of the Old Testament or of the New?” (they are very different, the former being cruel, vengeful and jealous, certainly not the loving God portrayed by Christ) (see OT below); “Do you mean a personal God, one to whom you can pray and who you believe will react to you personally?”; Or, “do you mean the “God” of Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Aristotle et al, which they see as synonymous with nature?” Or is it just some form of intelligence behind the formation of the universe before and after the Big Bang? (Fred Hoyle and many others).

The short answer is “No, I don’t.” I am a Humanist, which means I believe in working to achieve the maximum happiness of the largest number of people (without any need to believe in the supernatural, such as a personal god).

However, I would not describe myself, in any way, as a militant atheist or “a born-again atheist” (Gore Vidal) by which I mean that I do not proselytise or seek to convert for humanism or atheism. I find proselytising by many religionists, especially “the holier than thou” types who assert that only those who are religious believers can do good, irritating and naïve. However, I am always more than willing to discuss and explain my own philosophy (philosophy, defined briefly as “a seeking after truth”) or my “belief system”.

But I must emphasise that I do not want to undermine the religious faith of those for

whom it is so important in giving feelings of support, security and purpose in life.

So this article is written in the hope that it might help some people to think for themselves; have the courage to discuss, study in depth and look for reason, logic, evidence and proof of theories and beliefs and where appropriate, escape from their fear of non-compliance with religious dogma and practice.

I believe that all religions are man-made. This is fundamental. One can envisage how in the earliest of primitive tribes of *homo-sapiens* how the leader, in that position through his strength, fighting ability and authority, might have been supported by an above-average-intelligence, cunning, right-hand person who provided explanations for those phenomena that caused fear such as thunder and lightning, eclipses of the sun and moon, failure of crops etc....in the form of evil spirits and “gods”, with whom only they, the shamans, could communicate and intercede, through magic, sorcery and frequently through sacrifices to these gods, including human sacrifice. This gave them great power over the tribes peoples, trading on fear and the authority this gave them – the beginnings of the religious power structures that would follow thousands of years later.

Most religions have good intentions and try to help people improve themselves and live in harmony with all others but regrettably, many become vehicles for those seeking power and as history has shown, develop into powerful organisations that suppress and oppress and from time to time, do evil things or allow devotees on the fringes to do evil without reprimand or effort to correct them. Almost every day we see examples of religiously motivated terrorism, hatred and intolerance to put alongside the good that is done in terms of social support, cohesiveness and charity.

My major departure from religion is that it is based on “faith”, belief in certain propositions without the need for evidence or in most cases, it seems, without rational thought and deduction in the light of modern philosophies, scientific method and knowledge. The three Abrahamic religions and Hinduism are heavily based on what are widely claimed to be universal truths.... on written statements which are stated to be literally true, to be “the word of God” and based on beliefs in the supernatural. The Talmud, the Old and New Testaments of the Bible and the Qur’an (Koran) are examples of this and I will set out, briefly, my analyses of them later.

Can only those who believe in God do good?

Of course not! This naïve, uninformed assertion is ridiculous but frequently made. It is very interesting to read Karen Armstrong’s “The Great Transformation” in which she makes clear how fortunate what we call “civilisation” today is to have been heavily influenced by “the great world traditions” that have “nourished humanity” from 1600 BCE to say, 400 BCE, (Before the Christian Era), in particular Confucianism, Buddhism, monotheism in Israel and the philosophical rationalism of the Greeks (Socrates/Plato). All tried to obviate the savagery and lack of concern for human life and welfare prevalent in their regions in this period.

This was the period of Confucius (551-479 BCE), Gautama the Buddha (490-410), Socrates (480-399), who, she says “can still fill us with emotion because they show us what a human being should be”. She claims that including Jeremiah, this, the “Axial Age” was the greatest period of intellectual, psychological, philosophical and religious change

in recorded history, brought about by these intellectual, thinking, philosophical leaders. “Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and Islam were all latter day flowerings of the original Axial Age,” she says.

The second and greater change, of course, was the “The Great Western Transformation”, “The (Scientific) Enlightenment” that enabled us to lift much of the oppression of the Catholic churches in Europe and created today’s scientific and technical age. (The term “Enlightenment” was coined by the leading 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant who, amongst many other radical ideas and with Laplace, introduced the concept of the evolution of the universe. The Enlightenment is said to span the years from about 1735 to 1819).

Let us briefly take the dialectic teaching of Socrates “who used a rigorous dialogue designed to expose false beliefs and elicit truth”. The knowledge acquired from this exhaustive technique was “inseparable from virtue”. He and his student Plato asserted that people must interrogate their most fundamental assumptions; only then could they think and act “correctly”. They spoke of the *psyche*, which enabled humans to “reason and inspired them to seek goodness.” At the end of his life, Socrates said, “We ought not to retaliate or render evil for evil to anyone whatever evil we may have suffered from him.” (Have you heard just that elsewhere?) He focussed on ethics, how to be virtuous and lead the ‘good life’.... which leads to ‘the happy life’.

Just before him, but in China, Confucius, formal name Kong Qiu, also focussed on ethics and emphasised personal and government morality, kindness, sincerity and justice, aiming to build a great harmonious and humanistic society. One of his famous exhortations was “Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself”. Eventually he made a big impact on, and gained a large following of, people from the poor to the powerful, without resorting to the supernatural. Confucianism is not usually referred to as a religion but more as a moral code, a way of life.

Also at about the same time, Buddha, “the awakened one”, more often, “the enlightened one”, was teaching the importance of kindness and compassion and in his “Third Universal Truth”, that the world is in continuous change due to ‘cause and effect’ (in keeping with science today)...and that “Do good and we gain good” such as happiness in friendship, family and society. Buddha, like Jesus, wrote nothing himself but his followers did, including his “laws”: no killing; no stealing; no lying; no sexual misconduct; no intoxicants; (the latter to maintain a clear mind). Again, Buddhism does not invoke the supernatural in the form of God or gods, but it is widely regarded as a religion. I do not find it surprising that so many thinking people I talk to about religion express sympathy and admiration for Buddhist philosophy or moral code. There are countless other, but perhaps rather less significant examples of philosophies, movements and organisations that do good to others, to groups, to society at large but do not invoke the supernatural; they are not based on, or motivated by God or gods.

But while mentioning philosophers, I have to say that my favourite since my teens, is John Stuart Mill who in 1859 published his outstanding book “On Liberty” celebrating “the wellbeing of mankind” and promoting the freedom of others ‘as earnestly as we defend our own’. As Andrew Copson of the BHA recently pointed out, Mill’s convictions about the worth and dignity of human life stimulated him to take social action, including

opposition to slavery and amongst many other actions, give support for gender equality. He was an early humanist who came in for much political and religious criticism of his views.

In 1943, Abraham Maslow, “the father of humanistic psychology” wrote “A Theory of Human Motivation”, a major contribution to the understanding of human motivation and personal development throughout ‘an average human life’. It is called “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs” (see the diagram below).



In short, each of us is motivated by needs starting from the lowest. Each need must be satisfied before we move upwards to the next higher level of need. (I always included his theory in lectures to my MSc students in explaining good leadership and personal management in industrial/commercial organisations; how can employees be expected to strive for “esteem” and “self actualisation” when they are worried about providing adequate support of their families? etc) But the key issue here is the Belonging and Love Needs (friendship, social groupings), the Esteem Needs (achievement, respect of others) and the Self Actualisation Needs (personal growth, morality, creativity). All these point to the built-in (genetic?) motive within humans to safeguard themselves, their offspring and thus their own group and society. This is in keeping with the Darwinian based “selfish gene” of Richard Dawkins.

Put simply, this shows that moral behaviour is a natural feature of human motivation. Of course, we can see many cases of evil behaviour of which the outstanding examples are mass violence, murder and genocide, frequently led by political, military and religious leaders who have established huge influence and control over their followers by charisma, manipulation, fear and oppression. (Hitler, Stalin, Mao, G.W. Bush and Tony Blair)

I have already said that I am a humanist so let me say a little about that. Humanism is a

stance on life based on the idea and conviction that people “can be good” and will do good without a belief in God or gods. Humans are in integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary development and are motivated to work for the benefit of society and in the process, maximise happiness including their own. (e.g. the teachings of Confucius, Socrates, Buddha, Christ (the Sermon on the Mount, the way to good)) However, this is not to deny that at grass-roots levels Christian groups are, in many cases, better organised in charitable activities than non-believers.

So where do I part company with religion, particularly organised religions?

First and foremost, they are belief systems not based on evidence, observable, experimental or rational. In particular, this applies in terms of the supernatural, divinity, religious revelation, a “personal God” and the use of “tradition”, fear (Hell and Damnation) and coercion to impose these beliefs. To these I must add the practice of vigorous proselytising; the use of force in cases such as the current wars between Islam and Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism; the Papacy’s deal/collaboration with Mussolini and its failure to resist Nazism during the extermination of 70% of European Jews; the use of God as a divine recruiting officer in the UK during WW1 and WW2. These are only a few modern cases of organised religion gainsaying its main tenet of “love thy neighbour”. There are many, many more in antiquity and medieval times.

The Inquisition set up by the Catholic Church to eliminate Christian heretics is just one poignant case. Jacques Fournier, born of humble parentage in what is now Ariège, France in about 1285, became a Cistercian monk, Abbot, then Bishop and was elected Pope (Benedict XII) at Avignon in 1334. (NB here, the claimed apostolic succession from Peter) and distinguished himself by the persecution, torture, burning at the stake and mass murder of the Cathars in the Languedoc. The Cathars proclaimed themselves as ‘good’ Christians but because they accepted in effect two deities, God and Satan, were deemed heretical. As Inquisitor, he had a minutely detailed ledger written, which he kept at his Papal palace in Avignon. From there it passed to the Vatican Library. Has the Vatican ever admitted these, its murderous shortcomings? I don’t think so.

The imprisonment and terrorising of Galileo Galilei¹, this time by the Italian Inquisition, for proclaiming that Copernicus was correct in his assertion that the Sun and not the Earth, was the centre of the solar system, pales into insignificance compared to the wholesale violence perpetrated against those of differing Christian adherences by both Protestants and Catholics in England, Scotland, Ireland and France etc during the last three hundred years. The “troubles” of Northern Ireland are a reminder of this today. And so is the violent hatred between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims especially in Iraq.

It would be possible to fill a book on this aspect of my views alone but I will leave it at that.

But I have to mention the doctrine of “Papal Infallibility” voted 533 to 2 by the first Vatican Council in 1870 as another example of the suppression of alternative thinking and expression by organised religion. Said to apply only to “faith and morals” it reinforces the ludicrous and inhuman policies of the RC Church on such practices as contraception and

¹ It was 350 years after his death, in 1996 that the RC church announced that it had now accepted evolution as more than an hypothesis of science; it was not until 2000 that Pope John apologised for its treatment of Galileo.

abortion. And it was only in 1950 that the Pope finally told Roman Catholics that they had to believe in the bodily assumption to heaven of Mary, the mother of Christ. So followers have to believe this because he says so! This is one of my many objections to faith-based religious beliefs. Don't look for the evidence (there isn't any) but you must believe this or you are a heretic. I don't think the Inquisition is still in place, so you can breathe again!

Incidentally, within Islam, the Shia believe in Ismah, the Infallibility of Prophets and Imams (Grand Ayatollah Shirazi). But "the rightly guided Ahlus Sunnah (Sunnis) consider this belief to be *shirk*," (heretical).

In October 2006, it was reported in the London Times that a papal source had revealed that Pope Benedict XVI in a mass in Rome would abolish *Limbus Infantium*, one of the two sections of Limbo, where the souls of un-baptised children go. Pope Pius X (1903-14) declared Limbo to be a place where the un-baptised "do not have the joy of God but ...that neither do they deserve Paradise but neither do they deserve Hell or Purgatory". Can you believe this?! It took seven centuries for the RC church to come to this more compassionate position, but wait, "Purgatory, Heaven's waiting room", still exists! It's utterly absurd: another religious tool for oppression.

A loving God?

This question is debated even more heatedly every time there is a major natural disaster let alone one for which human frailty or shortcomings are blamed. "How can a loving God cause or allow such catastrophic loss of human life to happen?" The Lisbon earthquake in 1775 in which 90,000 died resulted in a substantial drop in Christian belief through deep scepticism in the "goodness of God". "If this is the best that God can do, why did he create at all?" The tsunami on the 26th December 2004 that hit Aceh province of Indonesia, Phuket and even reached the east coast of Africa, killed some 230,000 people. Local Islamic and RC leaders said "this was a warning from God; He didn't want us to wallow in our degeneracy"; "the people are being tested and if they don't pass they are going to go to hell!" An Anglican priest in the UK said very much the same! What an amazing grip religion has on some people, a topic I will address briefly later.

Now we see the loss of perhaps 250,000 people in Haiti caused by another huge earthquake bringing death, maiming of thousands, hunger, decay and misery. Is this compatible with a loving, all powerful God?

The Old Testament.(OT): I have already mentioned my great distaste for the Old Testament (OT) It is little more than the history of a tribe of Israel (Abraham lived around 2,000 years BC, in the Bronze Age) portraying a vengeful, jealous and thoroughly unloving God (Jahweh, extolled as a divine warrior) in which "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"² dominated. One can appreciate how at various times there have been calls for dropping the OT from the Bible.

The Bible OT, tells the story of the development of early Israel. But it was not until about 800 BCE that the oral narratives were started to be written down and this is said to have taken more than 400 years with the Israelite prophets, poets and visionaries changing, embroidering, adding and reinterpreting it. It certainly raises the question of how much is

² This disastrous and self defeating tenet flourishes today, most notably in the murderous Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

myth and how much is reliable history. For example, extensive archaeology since 1967 has not confirmed in the slightest detail the flight from Egypt led by Moses and the following mass destruction described in the book of Joshua....no signs of foreign invasion, no Egyptian artefacts and no change in population. The general scholarly consensus is that the “exodus from Egypt is not historical”.

The parting of the waters of the Sea of Reeds and the immediate drowning of Pharaoh and his pursuing army along with all the other OT “miracles” are either readily explained by natural causes or are mythical. I maintain that this is true of all the “miracles.”

Karen Armstrong explains that scholars believe that two early texts in the books of Genesis, Exodus and Numbers, were first combined and then later, in the 6th century BC, were edited by a priestly writer who added his own traditions. These early texts brought together ancient stories that had been recited by bards and transmitted orally from one generation to the next. “These narratives are more than history; they were an attempt not only to describe the past but to discover what they meant, so they both included mythical material alongside their more historically based narratives,” she writes.

Others, such as theologian Dr Robert Beckford, have supported this through research and say that there is no way that the first five books were written by Moses as frequently claimed. So much for the Bible being “the (literal) word of God” as pumped out to the gullible masses by those bible thumping Southern Baptist multi-millionaire TV evangelists!

And then consider how appropriate it is in a religion that teaches and advocates “love thy neighbour” to have “the word of God” include passages such as Deuteronomy 13.7-11:

If your brother, the son of your father or of your mother, or your son or daughter, or the spouse whom you embrace or your most intimate friend, tries to seduce you, saying “Let us go and serve other gods... you must not consent, you must not listen to him; you must show him no pity, you must not spare him or conceal his guilt. No, you must kill him; your hand must strike the first blow in putting him to death and the hands of the rest of the people following. You must stone him to death, since he has tried to divert you from Yahweh your God...”

This is one of many such passages so you can understand my deep distaste for the OT and wish that Christianity had the sense to remove the whole of the OT from the Bible, as Marcian tried to do so long ago.

The New Testament (NT): Christianity began as one of several 1st century AD movements trying to find new and better ways of being Jewish but centred on the life and death of a “Galilean faith healer” crucified by the Romans in about 30 AD. Jesus of Nazareth was deemed the “son of God” a term that is said in the Jewish sense to mean someone who had been assigned a special task by God and had a special relationship with him. (King David and Solomon were also called “sons of God”). It’s interesting how the charming story of the “virgin birth” was written to put a more literal meaning of “son” on to Jesus and thus justify the claim of divinity for him. Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins famously, and Archbishop Ramsey later, were reported as casting doubt on the literal truth of the Virgin Birth and the Three Wise Men, saying that to be a Christian you don’t have

to believe in the Virgin Birth. But you do have to believe in the Resurrection.

It was Paul, probably the first Christian writer, who made Christianity a gentile religion. He was, of course, a Jew, a Pharisee who never met Jesus and wrote to his converts in Asia Minor from about 25 years after the death of Christ. It was between 70 and 100 AD that it is believed that the first four books of the NT, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written.

However, in the first 350 to 400 years after Christ's death, there were more than 20 other gospels and 50 other texts about him and his life. The most notable "Lost (or "Hidden" or "Forbidden") Gospels" are claimed to be by apostle Peter (codex parchment excavated from a monk's grave by a French team in 1886), Thomas (Apostle "Doubting Thomas"; scroll dated earlier than Matthew (M), Mark (Mk), Luke (L) or John (Jn) and held by the Coptic Museum in Cairo), Philip, James (brother/step-brother(?) of Christ) and Mary Magdalene.

Peter apparently says that Jesus didn't die on the cross and in the abstrusely written Gospel said to be by the apostle Philip, he says "Those who say Mariam (Mary) conceived by the Holy Ghost are in error" and "Those who say the Lord first died and then arose are confused – for he arose and then he died". James did not refer to his brother Jesus being "divine" but spoke of him as a man who was a great teacher/prophet. The Nag Hammadi library of scrolls kept and preserved at the Coptic Museum contains about 50 early works of early Christianity and appears to include all of the above but several have parts missing due to damage. The Gospel of Thomas, written in Coptic, is one that is said to be complete and is a series of Christ's sayings or "pithy aphorisms". The Gnostic Christians (gnosis, Greek for "knowledge" or "insight") believed them. Their writings and traditions support the idea that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus and was pregnant at the time of his crucifixion. They placed no importance on the resurrection so were unsurprisingly, regarded by the early church fathers as subversive and heretical.

The texts of (M), (L) and (Jn) did not have their names on them but the gospels of Peter, Philip and Mary did. Perhaps this is not all that convincing since the real authorship of any of these writings so long after Christ's crucifixion, seems to be in serious doubt anyway.

The Rev Peter Owen Jones, an Anglican priest who explored the Lost Gospels for the BBC television documentary of the same name said that during his formal training in the priesthood, he was never exposed to the existence and content of these rejected and banned books. Others have said, "You will be hard pressed to find any cleric who knows about the Lost Gospels, let alone has studied them." I have verified this from my own questions to clerics, in recent years.

So who decided what the Bible should consist of?

In 139 AD, a fairly rich man went from ancient Turkey to call the first council of Christian leaders in Rome having donated 200,000 *cisterces* to the ancient church. His name was Marcian (216-277) and he tried to get them to abandon the OT, and thus its God, from a set of texts which were to represent Christian orthodox belief based purely on the loving God of the NT which he called "the gospel of life". He postulated that there were two Gods, one good, one bad, the latter being that of the OT. Even the second of

Marcian's writings was long before the "inspired" gospels are believed to have been written. But the early church fathers couldn't accept his ideas so they excommunicated him and returned his money. Then they had to produce their own texts.

But in 312 AD, the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. In fact he first put it on an equal footing with Roman paganism. It is said that the Church and the Empire progressively became one, with Constantine as the interpreter of both law and policy.

In 330 AD he began an assault on paganism but started to merge some aspects of both such as making December 25th, the birthday of the Unconquered Sun god, the official holiday now celebrated as the birthday of Jesus. He made rest on Saturday unlawful transferring it to the first day not the last day of the week. He designed and set up the church hierarchy and established a set of beliefs and practices which are the basis of all mainstream Bible-based churches today. Critically, this included the elimination of more than 500 books comprising the early "Bible" which were unacceptable to the new doctrine of the Church. They were branded as not being "inspired", "not acceptable", "heretical" or "corruptive" and thus "forbidden" because they do not support all of the canonical or official beliefs set out by the Church. They needed Jesus to have suffered and be resurrected, a miracle that proved divine intervention. However, Constantine also needed an old religion for it to be respected and accepted so he included the OT in spite of having previously "classified everything Jewish to be an abomination."

In 447, Pope Leo the Great ordered Gnostic texts to be "burned with fire" and for the next 300 years, bishops went across Europe banning any that had survived.

Some Interesting Coincidences?

About 800 BC, Hindus speak of Krishna "as an incarnation of God". When he was a baby, an Indian king wanted to kill him. His parents fled with him and 'the river parted'. Later he said to his followers "forsake all and follow me."

About 2500 BC, Egyptian god Osiris (sister and wife, Isis), "the merciful god of the dead in the afterlife" was killed and "after three days was resurrected" (The ancient Egyptians baptised their babies in the Nile)

About 600 BC, lived the Persian pagan "god" Mithras, "The Lord of Life" who was adopted by the Romans and for whom they built many temples, several in the UK from London to Hadrian's Wall. In the catacombs of Rome a relic of old Mithraic worship was preserved in the form of picture of the infant Mithra seated on the lap of his virgin mother while on their knees before him were three Persian Magi adoring and offering gifts. It is said that he had twelve companions to help him perform his ministry, performed miracles and ceremonies including a form of baptism to remove sins. It is also claimed that he was buried in a tomb and after three days rose again.

Of course, there are sects that have claimed that Christ was a reincarnation of Mithras, which I suppose is not altogether surprising. If he was the most powerful of the pagan gods of the Romans this would have made it somewhat easier for Constantine to substitute Jesus and Christianity as the formal state religion.

Some other interesting facts and speculation

About 250 BC, the Indian King Ashoka sent Buddhist priests to Egypt and Palestine by the Silk Road in the north and by sea in the south to spread Buddhist beliefs. Not much seems to be known about how successful they were but it has been used by a surprising number suggesting Buddhist influence on the teachings of Christ. The similarities in the teachings I outlined above support the plausibility of this.

It has also been suggested by several theologians that during the 25 years or so from childhood until he started his ministry, a biblical historical blank, Christ aged 14, went east and reached India (Kashmir) where he absorbed Buddhist teachings. Anglican priest Rev Peter Owen Jones led a BBC 2 documentary to this effect in March 2008 and went on to speculate that after recovering from his crucifixion, Christ escaped his persecutors and returned to Kashmir where some of the Ten Tribes of Israel had gone, driven there by the Assyrians, many centuries before. It is said that “a prophet in white robes”, named Izu, but later, Yus Asaph, (“the Healer”) lived, married and died at age 80 to be buried in Srinagar (based on a document dated 117 AD). They say he is buried in a shrine first built in 112 AD with his coffin placed east-west but above him is another of a 15th Century Islamic holy man in a coffin placed, by Islamic tradition, north-south. Carved footprints in bronze show scars where it is claimed, a nail could have gone through the feet, one over the other.

If this were to be found to be the tomb of Jesus, He didn't die on the Cross and He didn't rise up bodily “to sit at the right hand of God.” You can imagine how catastrophic this could be to the foundations of orthodox Christianity.

I think that perhaps you will now start to understand my deep scepticism, not to say disbelief, in organised religion and why I assert that all religions are man-made.

After the fall of Rome, “civilisation” in the west drifted down stream for two or three centuries but in the 7th century a new force appeared with faith, energy and the will to conquer. This was Islam, the youngest of the Abrahamic religions and led by its prophet, Mahomet (Muhammad Ibn Abdallah) (about 570 to 632 AD) Its strength was its simplicity, especially in comparison with Christianity which had dissipated much of its energy in theological controversies (the Trinity, for example) over three centuries with great ingenuity and much internal strife and violence. Muhammad was a successful Arab merchant in Mecca and received his first “revelations” in about 610 AD. He proclaimed Allah as the one true god, “Allah having sent the angel Gabriel to reveal his word to Muhammad.” Al-lah (“God” in Arabic) was said at that time, to be the same God as that of Jews and Christians.

In due course he authorised the writing down of his revelations to produce the first version of the Qur'an (Koran), stated to be “the Word of God”. At first the *surahs* or chapters were not written down but memorized. But he ordered one of his secretaries, Zayd Ibn Thabit to put them all into one book. He put the four “inspired” *surahs* together to form the authorized Qur'an.(a similar action to Constantine's about 300 years earlier) Later, Zayd was charged with collecting and removing all the different versions that had grown up. Most of the revelations of the Qur'an instructed Muslims on how to be generous, chivalrous and caring but others are interpreted, particularly by those taking hard-line literal views, as meaning that Islam is at war with Jews and Christians, to gain world domination in the cause of Allah....a *jihad* or holy war against the West. Like the

OT, the Qur'an contains passages that exhort its followers to war and slaughter:

God has promised all a good reward; but far richer is the recompense of those who fight for Him....he that leaves his dwelling to fight for God and His apostle and is then overtaken by death, shall be rewarded by God....The unbelievers are your inveterate enemies”(Koran 4:95-101)... The hereafter is better for those who would keep from evil.

The martyr is transported to Allah's garden where a flock of “dark-eyed houris (virgins?)” awaits him. “What is offered to the female suicide bomber?” I ask.

These are some of the roots of Islamic Fundamentalism which opposed, especially by the Christian Fundamentalism of the southern USA in particular, lays the foundation for continuous strife and world conflict. We have already experienced many “acts of terror” from both sides including “9/11” and the invasion of Iraq with the killing of some hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians.

Islam is also split and made unstable by the hatred and conflict between two of its main factions, Sunni and Shia. They disagreed early on about the legitimate succession to Muhammad as the leader of Islam and have warred to the present day. It's sad that Arab/Persian science, so strong in the 8th to 14th centuries, lost its way so that little science has been taught in some Islamic countries in the last two centuries. For Muslims, “the Qur'an establishes God's Law; it contains all knowledge.” I would observe that sections of Islam refuse to live in the modern world. They are authoritarian and generally do not permit freedom of thought, speech and certainly, belief. Remember oppression of women including forced marriages, genital mutilation and “honour killings”, but to be fair, none of these appear to be justified explicitly in the Qur'an. In principle, fundamentalist Islam is incompatible with democracy. In Iran today, we see a dictatorship and the opposition leader, Mir Hossein Mousavi recently said, “Dictatorship in the name of religion is the worst kind of dictatorship”. On this basis and with narrow, limited education, the culture of the Islamic world is more than somewhat primitive. This is one of the root causes of the enormous danger undermining any prospect of peace in the world for the foreseeable future.

So, what is Science?

The word *science* comes from the Latin word *scientia* meaning knowledge and used to be known as natural philosophy, a seeking after truth about the physical universe including the living things it has evolved. It establishes knowledge of, facts about and laws governing this physical universe. Scientific research is what scientists do; it is primarily analytical and produces discoveries. Very importantly, it covers the methods by which such knowledge is extended and the criteria by which its truth is tested to produce evidence. It can be theoretical or experimental. Scientific results including hypotheses and theories are considered “hard” only when they have been tested exhaustively either experimentally or have been found to be logically consistent with experimentally known laws and facts. Science can be said to be ‘a method of finding things out’ Science is driven essentially, by human curiosity about how the universe works and came about. It aims to answer “what?” and “how?” but not “why?” in the sense of “why are we here?” or

that meaningless phrase “what is the meaning of life?” (This implies that somebody put us here for a purpose).

T.H.Huxley said, “Science is nothing but trained and organised common sense”. I think it is rather more than that.

Science is neutral in terms of morality except as indicated above, in scientific analyses of human characteristics such as Maslow-type studies of Man’s motivations. Of course, scientists are like others in communities in terms of caring, compassion and being responsible members of society. The application and use of their discoveries (such as nuclear weapons) is the responsibility of society and in particular, military and political leaders.

An important and fundamental aspect of science, frequently misunderstood by those whose scientific exposure and learning is rather limited, is that they think science and scientists are too certain, perhaps to the point of arrogance, about their knowledge and assertions. But scientific knowledge is a body of statements of varying degrees of certainty....some most unsure, some nearly sure, but none absolutely certain. In other words, doubt or uncertainty is fundamental to science. The challenge relished by most scientists, is to seek to disprove or refine previously accepted hypotheses and theories as well as making new discoveries.

Of course, there are serious scientists who are religious. I have met several and even after much detailed discussion I have failed to understand how in all intellectual honesty they can have made the leap of faith necessary to believe in the supernatural. There is the argument that “God is ineffable” i.e. the human mind/brain cannot understand and thus will never be able to understand God and the universe. Personally, I don’t subscribe to this even in the light of latest findings and speculations in the field of quantum mechanics, which can seem very abstruse. The concepts of parallel universes, dark matter / dark energy and string theory etc add to the problem of understanding physics that is still very speculative. But I think it is an “cop out” stance to claim that we can’t ever understand because “God and his creation are unknowable.”

As Jim Watson, founder of the human genome project says, “I can’t believe anyone who accepts truth by revelation.”

Of course, technology, frequently classified as “applied science”, preceded pure science e.g. in the fashioning of tools, implements and weapons. Technology of which engineering is a special sub-set, has been called the “mother of civilisations, of arts and of sciences”; it liberates mankind from the constraints of the past through new and better inventions/innovations, devices and systems which can improve the standard of living and hopefully quality of life (but not always the latter). It is closely related to science and is frequently presented by the untrained media as being the same thing. It is not, but is sometimes the process of exploiting new discoveries in science. Just as frequently, it uses scientific understanding and analysis to improve the efficiency and quality of the products and systems it has designed, manufactured and brought to the market.

The spread and grip of religion throughout the world

According to the World Christian Encyclopaedia, which surveys and analyses the religious make-up of the entire world from time to time, there are 9,900 distinct and

separate religions in the world today! Some are direct sub-sets of Islam or Christianity such as the 8 million Ahmadis, a messianic Muslim sect based in Pakistan. Some are hybrids such as the 20 million Umbandans in Brazil who blend traditional African Yoruban religion with native South American beliefs, parts of Catholicism and 19th century spiritism. This is reported by Mark Penn and E.Kinney Zalesne in the section “Mini-Churched” in their book “Microtrends”. This is very worthwhile studying to gain a somewhat better understanding of the way cultures are changing in the world. In short, in spite of church attendance having fallen to less than 5% of the population in places like the UK, France, Holland, Sweden and Germany, a plethora of mini-religions exist or have developed around the world. This is at a time when Britain is rapidly secularising. The recent national “Social Attitudes Survey” (reported by the National Secular Society) shows that when asked to assess their own religiosity, “7% said they were very religious, 30% said they were somewhat religious, 22% said they were neither religious nor non-religious whereas 26% said they were very non-religious.” In 1983, “only 40% identified themselves as Anglican but by 2008 this had dropped to 23%.”

It certainly raises the question of why so many people need religious belief and the current speculation on whether there is a “God spot” in the human brain. Is religious behaviour purely an instinct, one that has evolved from an earlier form of animal life? Is there a “God Gene”? The latest study of which I am aware, was published in the journal “Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences” (USA), the equivalent of our Royal Society). You can take it that it is well challenged and authoritative. It involved analysing the brain responses of volunteers who had been asked to think about religious and moral problems. The researchers used MRI, magnetic resonance imaging machines to identify where the most energetically active regions of the brain are when these matters are being thought about. (Similar work is going on in the UK to help in understanding brain related diseases such as dementia, notably at Nottingham University). They found that people of different beliefs, religious persuasions, including atheists, all used the same electrical circuits in the brain to solve a perceived moral conundrum; the same circuits were used when religiously inclined people dealt with issues related to God.

Professor Grafman, who oversaw the work, said, “There is nothing unique about religious belief in these brain structures. Religion doesn’t have a “God spot” as such; instead it’s embedded in a whole range of other belief systems in the brain that we use everyday.”

Of course a major attraction of most religions (and a compelling one) is the promise made of an afterlife, life after death, heaven or paradise, a powerful tool for hope and suppressing fear; but also a tool for manipulation and oppression such as with the concepts of Limbo, Purgatory and Hell. I suppose that an inherent part of atheism is that we, like all other animals and living things, are made of “star-dust”, of molecules from the universe and will return to that state when we die. It holds no terrors for many, perhaps most, scientifically oriented people, including me. It reminds me of poetry written by one of the greatest scientists of the 20th century who wrote of the thrill, awe and sense of mystery when standing on the shore, alone and thinking, wondering about life, about the beginning of life, and by implication, death:

There are the rushing waves
mountains of molecules
each stupidly minding its own business
trillions apart
yet forming white surf in unison.

Ages on ages
before my eyes could see
year after year
thunderously pounding the shore as now.
for whom, for what?
on a dead planet
with no life to entertain.

Never at rest
tortured by energy
wasted prodigiously by the sun
poured into space.
A mite makes the sea roar.

Deep in the sea
all molecules repeat
the patterns of one another

till complex new ones are formed.
They make new ones like themselves
and a new dance starts.

Growing in size and complexity
living things
masses of atoms
DNA, protein
dancing a pattern ever more intricate

Out of the cradle
onto dry land
here it is standing:
atoms with consciousness;
matter with curiosity

Stands at the sea,
wonders at wondering:
a universe of atoms
an atom in the universe.

Richard P. Feynman, (1918-1988)

I think this is an excellent example of spirituality separated from religion.

Conclusions:

1. I set out to finally think through and then write down, my beliefs formed progressively throughout my life to date, partly because I needed to rationalise them in what I hope is a coherent and reasonably objective way. You might not think I have been as objective as I should have been, perhaps merely feeding my prejudices. I'm not a scholar of religion but being curious, I needed to explore it further. I, like many others, have the urge to seek for truth, to see and understand the world as it really is. As I said earlier, I have also written this in the hope that it might help some people to think for themselves; have the courage to discuss, study in depth and look for reason, logic, evidence in getting closer to proof of theories and beliefs; and where appropriate, escape from their fear of non-compliance with religious dogma and practice. But at the same time it is not my wish to undermine anyone's religious faith, probably an impossible balance to keep. But I have tried.
2. I was particularly motivated to refute the naïve assertion that only religious people can do good. This assertion points to lack of awareness, thinking and learning. Zoroaster, Confucius, Socrates and the Buddha and others, all proclaimed

philosophies of how mankind can live in harmony by subjugating the ego and selfishness and helping others. Maslow supports this in that his analysis points to the aim amongst most peoples of maintaining harmony in society, to be part of the Darwinian evolution of human kind.

3. I think that it is impossible to *prove* the existence or non-existence of God. I have set out my reasons for saying that the three Abrahamic religions in particular, are built on very, very shaky foundations particularly in terms of the Talmud, the Bible and the Qu'ran, being, as they claim, "the word of God". When you add to this the included examples of inhuman behaviour and exhortations to violence and murder in imposing their beliefs on others, it's no wonder that the modern, more educated world is reacting against them. I think that Auguste Comte, (1798-1857), the father of French positivism, was right when he said that societies will progress through the theological and the metaphysical to the positive stages of existence, the latter being, he said, a purer form of understanding where explanation is confined to the verifiable. One might say he described or even predicted humanism.
4. I re-assert that all religions are man-made and so, I am a humanist, 'a free-thinker'. I, like Feynman et al, wonder at the magnificence of the 'real world' but no, I cannot relate this to God or any other divine being. I am a Darwinian humanist and reject creationist beliefs. It is true that as yet, we don't understand exactly how life arose from the inanimate elements on Earth but there's every reason to expect that in due course, we will.
5. However, I think that although Christ was not divine, not literally the son of God and probably did not die on the cross, he was a great teacher, probably with mesmeric and healing powers and gave rise to a great worldwide movement to generally improve the civilised behaviour of mankind. The 'church' built on (some of) his teachings has besmirched them many times in its history and continues to do so today but nevertheless provides social cohesiveness based on much needed morality, charity and personal compassion, especially at grass-roots levels.
6. In the 20th Century, more than one hundred million people died as a result of conflict! This includes two World Wars which were not dominated by religious strife. However, I worry that the continuing conflict between Islam and other religions, Kashmir (Muslims v. Hindus), Sudan (Muslims v. Christians and animists), the Caucasus (Muslims v. Orthodox Christians), the Balkans (Muslims v. Orthodox Serbians), southern Thailand (Muslims v. Buddhists) not to mention Northern Ireland (Protestants v. Catholics) and Iraq etc (Shi'ites v. Sunnis) does not bode well for future peace in our world. Hey-ho!

What is the answer? In the short term, I don't know. In the long term, it has to be wider education and exposure to liberal democracy (if only that were practised much better in the world today!). H.G.Wells said, "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe."

What a challenge to our young people to make a better world than we have managed to do!

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