

Does Faith Make Sense?

by J. Edwin Orr

J. Edwin Orr argues that while faith in God cannot be scientifically proven, it is the most reasonable explanation for the existence and order of the universe.

Duration: 18:37

Scripture: Genesis 2:2

Topics: "Faith"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a personal experience of encountering a dying man who had lost all his senses except for touch. This leads to a discussion about the limitations of our five senses and the argument for purposeful design in the world. The speaker presents examples, such as a watch and a jeep, to illustrate the complexity and order in the universe, suggesting that they cannot be the result of chance. The sermon also addresses the existence of evil and the belief in an infinite God, highlighting the contradiction between the concept of a perfect God and the presence of wickedness in the world.

Transcript

Is it possible to prove that there is a God? I would say no, it's not possible, if by proof you mean scientific proof. What scientific test could anyone use anyway? Litmus paper? Spectrograph? Geiger counter? No, but it is possible to show that faith in God is most reasonable, and that alternative views are less reasonable. But how may we do so? Everyone knows that in intelligent discussion, one must start with a measure of agreement.

I remember when our children were very much younger, hearing an argument between my son and daughter. Said my daughter, I tell you it is. And my son retorted, I tell you it's not.

She said, but it is. And he replied, but it isn't. So my daughter observed, you know nothing.

And my son repeated, you know nothing. Said she, listen to the copycat. And he chortled, listen to the copycat.

Then she said, oh shut up. And he replied, you shut up. And I said, both of you, shut up.

They weren't trying to discover any truth, they were just arguing. And many such arguments occur among grown-up people too. When I was crossing the Pacific Ocean with 8,000 American soldiers bound for Guadalcanal, I was involved one night in an argument with a rude atheist from Brooklyn.

I can stand atheists, and I can stand people from Brooklyn, but atheists from Brooklyn are very hard to take. Go on chaplain, he said, you don't believe all that, do you? Of course I do, I said. Then I added, do you believe in the Bible? The Bible is only a book, he replied.

It's an inspired book. He said, that's what you say. Well then, I said, do you believe in Christ? He said, Christ is dead.

He rose again from the dead. He said, that's what you say. Well, said I, do you believe in God? No, he said, I'm an atheist.

What do you believe in then? He said, I believe that all religion is a racket. No, it's not, I said. Yes, it is, he said.

That's just what you say, I retorted. There we were, just like a couple of kids arguing about nothing. Now, let's suppose we engaged in a debate with an unbeliever, rather in this manner.

Now, sir, we differ on many points, don't we? But we ought, as you agree, to have an exchange of views. Isn't there anything that we can agree on? Where would we best begin? Surely there are common grounds somewhere. Now, the very first point of agreement is, I think, the axiom of existence.

I believe that I exist, and my friend believes that he exists. This is an axiom, a truth so self-evident that no amount of reasoning can make it any plainer. I was speaking at California Polytechnic when a student rose to say that he did not accept existence as an axiom, but rather as an illusion of the five senses.

That's strange, said I, that you should come all the way from your home to study here in California, and you're not sure whether you're here or not. But I knew what he meant. One of our planes crashed at Morotai.

It was my sad duty to bury some of the men who were killed, as well as to help some of those who were badly burned. One man was dying, and I was reading to him from the 23rd Psalm, when suddenly he called out, Open the window, doc. It's awful stuffy here.

The poor fellow was out in the open air in a temporary casualty ward of the hospital. He had not heard me because he was deaf. He had not seen me because he was blind.

Presumably he'd lost a sense of smell and taste. The only sense left to him was a sense of touch which he was fast losing, for he soon lapsed into a coma, and that was the end of this life for him. He was still alive, but life did not mean a thing to him.

So in one sense we are prisoners of our five senses. Can we go any further? Can a believer and an unbeliever find common ground? Yes, we believe in the fact of design or order or pattern in the universe. Every great scientific achievement of recent years has been planned on the premise of design.

It was necessary to study the ordered movement of the moon in order to launch a rocket in that direction. It runs like clockwork, just as the tides do. We find this design everywhere we look around us, whether with microscope or with telescope.

Of course there are some people who question this universality of design. At the University of Adelaide, the President of the Rationalist Club asked me, Sir, are you not just choosing facts that suit your argument? Is there not a great deal of chaos in the universe? For example, in the air in this room the

molecules are bombarding each other in every possible way in the most chaotic fashion? On the contrary, I said, this very chaos in diffusion of gases is an argument for design. If it were not for such diffusion of gases, all the carbon dioxide would collect around me and I would drop dead while talking to you.

If it were not for the diffusion of gases, certain gases poisonous to human life would collect in one place and life would be an impossibility. This is an argument for purposeful design. Now, an axiom is universally accepted and a fact may be observed or demonstrated, but what hypothesis may we use to explain the fact of design? Is it necessary to explain the fact of design? I have a wristwatch bought in Brazil during the spiritual awakening there in 1952.

It has a second hand, a minute hand, an hour hand and an alarm. Would anyone believe that this all happened by chance? During World War II, our military organization moved out of Sansepur in New Guinea. We left behind us a jeep.

A Papuan native who had never seen a jeep before came down the mountain. Not only had he never seen a jeep, he had never seen a wheelbarrow. His wife asked him, what is this? He replied, I don't know.

What is it called? I don't know. What does it do? I don't know. Where does it come from? He replied, I don't know, but whoever made this thing must be a lot more intelligent than I am.

Of course, it should be admitted that a savage could be educated to understand the workings of an automobile. He could, even with the help of others, become skilled enough to build one. Our scientists, likewise, have become more informed about the workings of the universe and more ingenious in inventing things within its laws.

But they lack the supreme intelligence and mighty power of God. We look at the universe and all we can say is that whoever made it must be a lot more intelligent than we are. A lot more intelligent than the population of this city.

A lot more intelligent than the population of this country. A lot more intelligent than the population of this world. In fact, this supreme being who brought the universe into existence must be much more intelligent than all the human race combined in all their millions.

Some people call him the great architect. Others call him the first great cause. We call him God.

And this is the most reasonable of the explanations of the a designer. Someone may say that to follow an axiom and a fact with an hypothesis is weakening the argument. Quite the contrary.

Most scientific discoveries are made on the basis of hypotheses. This hypothesis of a designer is most reasonable. There is not any explanation more reasonable.

Nevertheless, agreement upon the reasonable hypothesis of a designer by no means solves the problem for an inquirer. Some who believe the fact of a designer are very vague indeed about his nature. Let's consider some of these ideas.

Now some people believe that God is nothing more than an intelligent and voluntary but wholly impersonal substance identified with the totality of the universe. That's the meaning of the word pantheism, meaning that all is God. An Indian said to me once, of course I believe in God.

God is the all in all things. God is light and God is darkness. God is warmth and God is cold.

God is near and God is far. God is good and God is evil. All that exists and everything that happens is God.

You mean, said I, that God is the universe? Is the universe eternal? How then do you account for the second law of thermodynamics? Is the universe perfect? How then do you account for the evil every one of us can see? If all things are equally expressions of God, all things should be equally admirable. Every day we see around us actions good and commendable, reflecting God. But when we see actions we cannot but describe as wicked and deplorable, we cannot blame a perfect God.

My Indian friend protests that he did believe in infinite God, yet I said you lock him up in a finite universe. Besides, if I were to judge from the world around us, I would say that your pantheist God is not yet made. He's still in the process of being manufactured, just as the world is going along.

You say that we're all parts and particles of God, yet I'm quite sure that I'm not God. My conscience protests against such a presumption. God is over all and in all, that's true.

Therefore he cannot be the universe that he's over. He must be distinct from the universe he moves in, as I am distinct from the shoes I walk in. Could an impersonal God produce self-conscious beings free like myself? If the creator includes in himself all good and evil, why should any creature be held responsible for his actions? It was not difficult to tell my inquiring Indian friend that I'd always held Mahatma Gandhi in greatest respect.

Then how could I believe in a God inferior in morality to Gandhi, as do some who hold this pantheistic interpretation? In India, there are people living in strictest honesty, but there are also folks who worship God by thieving. They're called thugs. There are people of the highest sex purity, but there are those who worship God by debauchery.

When pantheism is allowed to prevail, it soon degenerates into idolatry. People begin to worship the God of the sky, and the God of the wind, and the God of the sea, and the God of health, and the God of disease, and the God of purity, and the God of impurity. The worshiper kneels before a gaudy wooden idol.

The idol seems so near, yet the God is so far away. The true God seems so far away, yet he is truly near. Pantheism begets idolatry and degradation.

Anyone can see that for himself as he travels around the world. On the other hand, there are some people who do grant the existence of God, but they deny that he's knowable or approachable. On one occasion, I'd been conducting divine service on board a landing ship, first of all for the Protestant men, then for the Roman Catholic men, by an unusual papal dispensation.

There was a colonel of the United States Army leaning over the railing of the invasion ship, discussing the address given. I enjoyed your talk, chaplain, he said. You know, I believe in the existence of God, but I don't believe in Jesus Christ or in prayer or anything like that.

I believe that God created the universe. He set the ball rolling, so to speak, but I don't believe that God interferes in things. He delegates his authority to nature in a sort of chain of command.

The colonel was quite pleased when I said, well, that's the same point of view as Thomas Jefferson. He was what you call a deist. Well, said the colonel, I'm glad to hear that I'm in such good company, but now

let me explain, chaplain.

General MacArthur is in full command of this theater of war. Now supposing Sergeant Joe Blow wants a fellow to go to San Francisco to see his girlfriend, he won't get past his captain, let alone see General MacArthur. Now General MacArthur is ultimately responsible for Sergeant Joe Blow, but General MacArthur is too big and too busy to be bothered with Joe Blow and his affairs.

Don't you agree? I'm sure you do. When I noted the colonel went on, now that's my idea of God. God is ultimately responsible for all of us, but he has delegated his authority to nature, therefore he could not be interested in our petty affairs.

He's much too big and too busy. Colonel, said I, there's a young fellow named Arthur MacArthur, and I'm quite sure he has the right to go to see his father anytime he desires, and even if his father were busy, he would say, gentlemen, I would like you to meet my son, Arthur. He is his child, and the great message of Jesus Christ is simply that God is our father, and that we may have access to God through him.

Deism denies the imminence of God, just as pantheism denies God's transcendence. In other words, deism denies God's nearness, just as pantheism won't allow that he is above and beyond us. Deism and pantheism discourage real fellowship with an intelligent and loving creator.

Now, there are other systems we could consider, but they're not very popular among western people, so we don't need to go into details. So we come to another question. If there is a supreme being, as the majority of the world's inhabitants believe, could he communicate with me? Could a supreme intelligence communicate with a minor one? Well, why not? When I address English speaking students, I use the English tongue, but whenever I speak to students unfamiliar with English, I use an interpreter.

Likewise, some people have been more aware of God than others, and divine revelation has been written down for us and translated into a multitude of tongues. The Old Testament tells us preparation of a chosen people. The New Testament records the life and teachings of Christ.

A sergeant asked me once what I meant by the revelation of God in the scriptures. Isn't the Bible only a book, he said? So I told him what happened when I visited Soviet Russia in 1935. A man could get married on the tenth of the month, take his wife to a hotel for the honeymoon, kiss her goodbye on the morning of the 13th, go down to the divorce bureau and divorce her.

He didn't even need to go back to tell the girl because the office sent a postcard. Twelve years later, a professor from behind the Iron Curtain came to visit me at Oxford University, and he told me it had become extremely difficult for anyone to get divorced in Russia. Why? Why the change? Well, girls had been committing suicide, babies were being abandoned, social diseases were increasing, and the children were turning into juvenile delinquents by the million.

The Soviet government wisely put a stop to the abuses and decreed an end to this easy divorce. All governments agree that marriage must be protected to ensure a happy society. But thousands of years ago, Moses said, thou shalt not commit adultery, and this stressed the sanctity of the marriage relationship.

A family should be a closed unit. A man should be loyal to the woman who bears his children, and a woman should be loyal to the man who fathers her children. In 1935, during that visit to Russia, I noticed that one day in seven was not kept as a holiday.

Instead, workers took off the sixth, the twelfth, the eighteenth, the twenty-fourth, and the thirtieth of any month. Why? The French revolutionists tried one day in ten for much the same reason, and this was a blow at organized religion, because in Russia, Muslims could not go to the mosque on Friday more than eight times a year, and Jews couldn't go to synagogue on Saturday more than eight times a year, and godly Christians could not go to church on Sunday more than eight times a year. But now the Russians have returned to one day in seven.

Why? During the Blitz, the Royal Factory Commission in Britain was trying to discover a way of obtaining maximum efficiency from willing workers. They found that men who worked six days and took one day off did better work than men working in any other pattern whatsoever. But the Bible taught long ago, sixth day shalt thou labor and do all thy work, the seventh is the rest of the Lord thy God.

We here Christians believe that God has revealed himself primarily in Holy Scripture, supremely in Jesus Christ. The greatest figure of history was no ordinary man. He revealed the character of God in a way utterly unsurpassed, certainly never matched in any other religion.

Of course there's a great deal of confusion about the world's religions. We can say quite kindly and quite firmly, Confucianism is a code of ethics devised by a great teacher. Buddhism is a philosophy of life propounded by a great thinker.

But the revealed religions of the world are Judaism, regarded by Christians as a preparation for Christ, and Christianity itself as the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, followed by Islam, regarded by Christians as an aberration of Judeo-Christianity. So we're going to put this to the final test. We've talked about an axiom, a fact, an hypothesis, a question, and now is there a test? The test is the test of experience.

Whoever comes to God must first believe that he exists and that he rewards those who diligently seek him. Those who have taken the trouble to put this to the test have found it to be true. It has brought us into fellowship with the maker of the cosmos.

If there is a supreme being, our relationship to him is the most important question in life.

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