

A Sermon for Agnostics, given by Dr Ralph Walker, Emeritus Fellow in Philosophy, on Sunday 26 October 2014 in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

“A Sermon for Agnostics”: I hope there’s a message for Christians as well; and atheists too. Perhaps for Christians and atheists even more than agnostics. For if you are an agnostic, rather than an atheist, that suggests you have at least thought about these matters, without reaching a conclusion. And I want above all to stress the importance of thinking about these things, and trying to work them out for oneself. It is better to be a reflective agnostic than an unreflective Christian.

It is easy just to take for granted what you were taught when you were very young. It is also irresponsible. You might, certainly, have been lucky, and learnt the truth; but of course many other people were taught very different things. These questions, about the existence and nature of God, are important ones, and we all need to think them through for ourselves to achieve a more reliable understanding. That is what a college is for. It is one of the things that life is for.

I am a Christian, but I spent ten years of my life as an agnostic. What exactly *is* the issue between agnostics and believers? Every term in Oxford you see advertisements for debates on whether God exists. These debates are usually at cross-purposes. Who is this person, “God”, whose existence is in question? The people arguing against God’s existence can present excellent arguments against the sort of God that some unthinking Christians believe in; the God of childhood fantasy. On that they are right. That God belongs with Santa Claus. But to say this is not to end the question. It is hardly even to begin it. What does one believe in, if one believes in God?

The creeds are supposed to help us with this. That is why the Church wants to recite them, and to recite the Nicene Creed after this sermon. But in their present form the creeds are almost useless, because they were written long ago, against a very different intellectual background from ours. As Fr Michael said in First Week, you should “let them wash over you like a poem in a language you don’t speak”. That’s right. They try to capture something that cannot be caught in words, so they use metaphors. These metaphors made good sense to people in the fourth century; many of them are almost incomprehensible now. For hundreds of years, the Church was split over whether the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son, or only from the Father. It is hard now to even to make sense of the question.

Some bits may seem clearer. “I believe in God, the Father Almighty”. I can go along with that; except that God isn’t a father, and isn’t almighty. “Father” is an outdated metaphor, which makes some sense, though it is rather vague; “almighty” needs quite a bit of thought – *could* God have created a morally perfect world, for example? If so, why didn’t he? “And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God” – “son” in what sense? Certainly not “begotten” in the ordinary meaning of the word, because that would require sexual intercourse. And sexual intercourse taking place “before all worlds”, apparently.

The moral for Christians is that all these things need to be thought through. Of course many Christians do think them through; but on the other hand many Christians don’t. The moral for atheists is that refuting the more literal forms of theism doesn’t establish that there is no God. The moral for agnostics is that we need to start in a different place, and ask what, if anything, we do have reason to believe in this area.

So what can we say? We can start with something very obvious. We learn about the world through sense-perception, but sense-perception is just the starting point. It needs to be interpreted and understood, and that can only be done by relying on the principles that govern human thought. These are very familiar principles, and we cannot do without them. They tell us to expect the future to resemble the past in various ways, and they tell us how to make generalisations; they tell us how to build theories, and to treat the simplest theories as the most likely to be true. Without these principles science would not be possible, and our knowledge of the world would be very limited indeed.

But they are *our* principles, *human* principles, and the fact that we find them indispensable does not make them true. Nevertheless science is quite remarkably successful in applying them to understanding the universe, from remote galaxies to sub-atomic structures. In every field of science, these principles of ours yield *predictions* that we can actually *see* to be true. This happens again and again and again, and very reliably. Why should it be that the human mind is so very successful in discovering how the universe works?

It can only be so if the principles of our thought somehow match the principles that govern the universe. But why should this be? There are three possible explanations, and only three. The first is, that the way the universe is somehow makes us have the principles we do. The second is, that the principles of human thought somehow make the universe to be the way it is. The third is, that there is some other being, different from the universe and different from ourselves, that makes our principles match the universe. If that is so we have a further question: could such a being properly be called God?

Agnostics usually go for the first explanation. The universe causes us to have these principles, through evolution. The principles of our thinking are those that our ancestors needed to survive and to outdo their competitors. Without them the human race could never have developed. So there is nothing surprising about the fact that the principles of our thinking match the way the world works.

That may seem plausible, but it won't do. Our ancestors did need some basic principles of thinking, of course, but only very basic ones compared with ours. They had to form expectations about where to find food and how to make simple tools. They had no need to think of general laws of nature, laws that extend not just to the immediate future but to centuries ahead. The ways of thinking they needed for survival don't even begin to explain the principles that we rely on in forming scientific theories. I mentioned the principle that the simplest explanation is likely to be true. In determining what counts as "simple" we often mean "mathematically simple", but our ancestors had no need for mathematics at all, beyond perhaps the most elementary arithmetic. Nothing in the evolution of our ancestors can explain the successes of organic chemistry or molecular biology. It is as though the world had been designed to be comprehensible to us; or as though we had been designed to understand the world.

What then about the second explanation for the match: that the principles of human thought somehow make the universe the way it is? In that case, the universe itself has to be a projection of the mind. But it cannot be a projection just of your mind, or of mine; for the same principles of our thinking govern our knowledge of one another. It would have to be a projection of some greater mind, of which we are all parts. All of what we call physical

reality would consist in the thoughts, the ideas, of this greater mind, in whose thoughts we share. This view can seem very strange, but it is not obviously wrong, and not so very long ago it was common amongst Oxford philosophers. Could that greater mind be called God? Perhaps. Actually I don't think it can really be true that the universe is a projection of mind, and that this suggestion can ultimately be shown to be incoherent. But I can't argue that here, and I do think it's worth thinking about – even if it does seem a bit surprising.

There remains only the third explanation, that some being much more powerful than us has set things up so that our thinking corresponds with the way the world works. Such a being would have to be powerful enough to design either the world, or our minds, or both. In fact, it would have to be responsible for both. For the universe must exhibit patterns through and through if it is to be comprehensible to any kind of being at all – no being could make sense out of random disorder. And our minds must be set up to have the capacity to recognize the specific patterns that the universe has. The being that has done this sounds quite like the God of orthodox theism, though I must admit I can't show that he *created* the universe – partly because I am not quite sure what “creation” would mean. Whether or not he created it, he designed it. And he designed it in a way that shows benevolence towards us, for he has given us the capacity to understand it – perhaps not to understand all of it, but to understand a very great deal of it, much more than we need to survive or bring up our children.

Can we describe this God as *personal*? Yes. Persons are beings that have plans and intentions, beings that can carry out designs; and God has carried out a design, a design intended for our good. And this, I think, is as far as *argument* can take us. But there is more to be said.

Argument uses the methods, the forms of thought, that are used by science. But there is a great deal in our lives that science ignores, or cannot really handle. Music is central to the life of this College, and of this Chapel. At its best, music conveys a depth and a spirituality that goes beyond anything science can describe. The same is true of all high art, including painting, poetry and literature. There are things here that can be felt, but never fully articulated; they open a window to something beyond the world of matter in motion. In doing that, they point us towards a relationship with a compassionate God, as today's readings tell us: a God who is to be loved, because he has given us all we have and are, and the love of whom makes us better able to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Few would dispute the value of personal relationships. Neither this value, nor moral nor aesthetic value, belong in the domain of natural science. Science can help us to understand many things, but it cannot conjure value out of existence, for science itself rests upon values. The whole scientific enterprise is pointless unless it seeks to achieve something of worth. And whether we are scientists or not, it is only by using the powers of thought, and the appreciation of value, that God has given to us that we can come to understand our place in the world, and how we must shape our course through it.