

“Conversations with an Atheist on the Existence of God--Science and God”

There are a lot of people who listen as Christians talk about science and what the Bible teaches in light of modern science. There are a lot of people who wonder, “Do we have to believe that the earth is only 6,000 years old in order to be a follower of Jesus Christ? Do we have to completely set aside the theory of evolution and say it’s untrue if we want to believe in God? Do we have to take the first three chapters of Genesis literally if we’re going to be a serious and thoughtful Christian?” And if that’s the case, to those who’ve been raised with the scientific method, it feels like they’re being asked to ignore something their minds knows to be true, for something that feels like a fairytale. And many people have opted out of that.

Today we begin a new series of messages on the questions that modern atheism is asking about faith. Now, I recognize that most of you sitting here today are people of faith, you’re not atheists. But there are a lot of people who come here who aren’t sure yet. You have questions. You may not be an atheist but, you’d call yourself an agnostic. You say, “I just don’t know if there’s a God.” Some of you would call yourselves atheists, and I’m glad you’re here today.

I’ve been preparing of this series for a several months now. Gathering information, articles, books, and messages from other pastors that raise these issues about modern atheism. One of the most well known books is by Richard Dawkins called *The GOD Delusion*. Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist by training. He’s a professor at the University of Oxford. Dawkins is not only an atheist, but he’s really an **evangelical** atheist. What he’s come to believe is that religious belief is actually harmful to society and he’s on a crusade to get rid of religion. He’s saying that it’s time that people recognize that this whole God thing is a dangerous delusion.

As I read through parts of his book I thought he raised some excellent points, some excellent critiques of religious faith, but when I got to his conclusions, I had to say, “No way.” The questions he raises are important, but there is another way to address those questions and find answers.

Another book I bought is called *Letter to a Christian Nation* by Sam Harris. Harris is primarily writing to fundamentalist Christians, but he wants all people to recognize once and for all that religious belief is ludicrous, hypocritical, narrow-minded and dangerous.

Part of the reaction of modern atheists like Richard Dawkins has come from the feeling that they were being attacked, that people of faith did not want to have conversation with them, but instead just reacted against them irrationally. When they see religion forcing its way into politics, classrooms, laboratories and courts they have said, “Enough!” Especially for Dawkins who sees his life work in evolutionary biology as being forced out of schools in favor of the view that the universe, the earth, and all of life is 6,000 years old. That’s become intolerable to him. You do that often enough and long enough and he will become like a cornered animal and he will strike back. Eventually he’s going to get angry, and eventually he’s going to launch a crusade. And that’s what he and Harris and a few others have done. As you read their books, you can tell they’re angry. They’re not just being scholarly, they’re being snide and judgmental...just like the Christians they’ve been dealing with for the last 20 years.

Richard Dawkins makes it clear what his goal is. He writes, “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.” (p. 4). I know I probably disappointed him by not becoming an atheist, but I have no doubt that the questions these authors raise are troubling to a lot of people, and for lots of people, these are the questions you’ve already being raising.

So what we’re going to do in this series is address some of these questions. Each week we’ll look at a different question. Like today we’ll ask, “Does science eliminate the need for belief in God?” Then we’ll look at all the violence that’s done in the name of religion. Then we’ll look at all the strange things the Bible says that don’t make sense to us today. Then we’ll look at the problem of suffering. How can we believe in a God when there is so much suffering? Then in the last week I’ll try to bring it all together and give you the best case possible for the existence of God and the implications of that for you and me.

So what about God and science? Well, my goal is not to convince you of the existence of God by scientific proof. That’s impossible. Impossible because a believer and an atheist can look at the exact same scientific information and come to different conclusions. So I’m not going to try to give you scientific proofs of

God's existence. Instead I want to prove to you that you can be a thinking, intelligent person, who loves scientific discovery, AND you can believe in God. You can wrestle with questions and doubts and be a committed Christian.

I find that people who have wrestled with faith, and examined it, and struggled with questions, they come out the other side and they have a much deeper, more mature faith than those who never really asked any questions, never really wrestled. I would say that doubt and struggling with that in periods of life is a good thing, not a bad thing.

So with all that in mind take out your outline and study guide...

So let's jump into some of the questions that raise doubts in people's minds. Let's start with some issues from science that cause atheists to reject the idea of God. Let's start with creation. Many atheists are simply stunned that people of faith would say the earth is just 6,000 years old. That's what some Christians say who try to literally read the stories of creation in Genesis chapter 1 and 2.

But I've got to say that I don't know of very many Christian that believe the earth is only 6,000 years old. Most of the Christians I talk with believe that the universe is billions of years old (14 billion), and that Earth was formed about 4 billion years ago and life began to form shortly after that.

And I don't know very many Christians who think evolution is totally wrong. Most Christians I know would say that evolution was a mechanism that God used to bring life about. That God guided it all along to bring the variety and complexity of life we see into being.

And most Christians I know look at Genesis 1 and 2, the creation stories, and they don't read them as scientific texts explaining how the universe came into being. They read them and see the "why" behind creation, not the "how." **Why** God created life, **why** God created human beings, and that it was good. Genesis 1 and 2 are not the science of how God created the universe, but they teach us that there is a God who was before the beginning, before the big bang. Before anything else was, God was. And God set everything into motion, and said, "Let there be..." and it was. And it teaches us that God created everything to be good.

Then we find that God created human beings as the crowning creation and he gave us the capacity to reason, and think, and love, and ask questions about whether there is a God. It's saying that that part of us is like God. We're created in the image of God. That's how many of us read Genesis 1 and 2, the stories of creation.

There are other questions raised by neo-atheists. One is why we even need religion today when we don't need God as an explanation of things we couldn't explain. In the past, anything that couldn't be explained was attributed to God, or the gods. But today we understand rain, and floods, and earthquakes, and droughts. When these happen we understand it's not God's wrath. We understand that when couples are struggling with infertility, it's not God's judgment.

We understand tsunamis. I'm thankful that our scientists have helped us to understand this, so that when a tsunami strikes, like it did three years ago, we know that's not the wrath of God. We didn't sit here and say, "God must be judging the people of Southeast Asia." We said, "There was an earthquake at sea that caused a massive destructive wave and that requires an outpouring of compassion from us to help people."

Neo atheists say that the more science reveals the mechanisms about how the earth operates, the less we need God to explain things, so our need for God is getting less and less. But for me, just because I know the mechanism behind how something works, doesn't mean that there is no need to explain the mechanical engineer who designed it. Just because science can explain something, that doesn't diminish the wonder or mystery of God.

A little over a year and half ago Janet and I went to St. Paul, MN for a couple of days. And one thing we did was to an exhibit at the Science Museum called "Body World." It was an amazing journey through the human body where you could look at every organ system, its function, how it integrates with all the other systems of the body. That sort of thing may not be for everybody, but throughout that whole exhibit I saw God, the master engineer, the master designer, creating this unbelievably complex thing we call our bodies, and that's not to mention the super-complexity of our brains. I saw God everywhere. When I can understand

something scientifically, it causes me to marvel at who God is. And I believe ultimately God is responsible for those things.

Let's shift gears and look at some big questions that many atheists pose, that we pose. In fact, kids sometimes are the ones who bring out these questions. Like, "Who made God? What is God made of? Why can't we see God?"

Let's think about these questions. Who made God? The question itself points out that we just inherently believe that everything has a cause. If we see something, it had to be made by something else—a cause. That's one of the laws of science, there must be a cause for every effect. So if God made the universe and everything in it, kids say, "Awesome! But who made God?" How do you answer that?

Less than 100 years ago our own scientists said the universe was static, eternal, always there. So even scientists said something could always be, why not God? Maybe God is the singularity of the universe that science is groping to describe? That which always was, is, and always will be? And I'm content to allow some mystery about that, about God, about time and space. But I see a convergence here of science and faith.

What is God made of? The descriptions of God in the Old Testament talk about God's glory, or "shekinah" in Hebrew. That glory is radiance, and light...it's energy. This is fascinating to me, because science tells us that all matter is energy. It makes me wonder if the stuff of God is energy itself. If all matter is made up of energy, if the entire universe is made up of energy, if all molecules are made of energy, maybe God is pure energy. Einstein didn't believe in a personal God but he did talk about God to describe all the energy and all the laws of the universe. But God is not just energy, God is also personal. God speaks, God interacts with creation.

I think this is what Paul was getting at in the New Testament, in Acts 17 when he said, **"²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it ... gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For 'In him we live and move and have our being'..." (Acts 17:24-28, NRSV).** That to me goes right along with current science, current understanding of energy, and my understanding of God. God is made of the raw stuff of life that is all around us.

So why can't we see God? That's another big question, isn't it? The answer to this is purely a matter of perspective. Maybe we have trouble seeing God, like we have trouble seeing the forest for the trees. Maybe it's like two cells in your body that are talking to each other. There's an older one and a younger one. The older cell says, "I believe there is such a thing as a human being." The younger cell says, "I don't believe. I've never seen any evidence that says there is a human being. I don't think we need the human being hypothesis anymore, because now we understand cell structure, and DNA. None of these other cells around us seem to need a human being. They just seem to reproduce themselves and do just fine. Why do we need an idea of a human being anymore? I would believe in a human being if one would show up, right here, right now."

We say, "God, show yourself." And God is in all things, and beyond all things. In him we live and move and have our being, and all energy and life comes from him, and yet we say we can't see God. God must get a good chuckle out that! Of course, Christians believe that he did show up, and come knocking at our door, like us, so we could actually see. We'll talk more about that in a couple of weeks.

Let's shift gears and look some of the places where people who are believers see the hand of God in science. One would be the Big Bang. In 1927, the Belgian priest and scientist Georges Lemaître was the first to propose that the universe began with the explosion of a primeval chunk the size of a dime. That dime-sized chunk contained all the matter and energy of the universe, as well as the four dimensions of time and space. Years later, Edwin Hubble found experimental evidence to help justify Lemaître's theory. The big bang theory

became nearly unanimously accepted by scientists in 1992 when more observations were made that confirmed it. Frederick Burnham, a science historian said in 1992, "These findings, now available, make the idea that God created the universe a more respectable hypothesis today than at any time in the last 100 years."

Why? Because it leads to the question, where did that first chunk come from? Scientists don't know. And what set the big bang in motion? Every effect must have a cause? And what was outside that first nugget of matter? Richard Dawkins looks at that and says, "Someday science will explain that, right now we just don't know." But when I hear this I can't help but hear the words, "God said, let there be light, and there was." That God was outside that beginning of the universe. Outside of time and space, and yet inside of time and space.

Then look at the laws of the universe. There is an amazing software that operates our universe and there are universal constants that we can discover and explore. Mathematicians and physicists are able to lay out these formulas that describe how our universe works. It's amazing that they are figuring out the software codes that allow this universe to exist and operate. When science looks at this it says, "These constants in the universe allowed this planet and life to exist." Dawkins looks at these universal constants and laws he says, "You know it really is pretty amazing that these laws are here. And that they organized themselves spontaneously. And the probability of that is mathematically next to impossible." But when I hear about the laws of the universe, this amazing software that runs all that is, I see an amazing mind behind it all, and putting it all into motion.

Then there's something called the anthropic principle that was proposed by scientists in the 1970's. The idea is that when you look at life on earth, what's amazing is that it seems like everything on earth was designed to bring about life. There are 75 factors, that if **any** one of them were just a fraction different, life could not exist. Like the distance of the earth from the sun, the properties of water and air. The universe, and our solar system and our planet appear to be finely tuned to produce life. Atheists would say, "As improbable as it is, it's just chance." I look and think that there is a God who desires to have life, who tuned all this so life could happen and be sustained.

There's the emergence of life on Earth. About 4 billion years ago, life happened. Atheists would say it happened spontaneously. Inanimate amino acids formed spontaneously, then formed themselves into cells that had the ability to move, and reproduce, and change food into energy, and pass along a complex set of software. The DNA code to operate the simplest single cell is more than all the words in Dawkins' book. Atheists say all that happened spontaneously, without any design or help. When I look at it I hear God say, "Let the seas team with life, and they did, and God saw that it was good."

From that single cell, to vast leaps in complexity, to human life, to human consciousness. That we are self-aware, that we can reason, that we can ask questions, that we can think abstractly, that we can love. Dawkins says that all those abilities are a genetic mutation that happened by chance and was passed on by natural selection. When I see these scientific facts, I hear God saying, "Let us make humankind in our image. In the image of God, God made them." Dawkins himself says the statistical probability of all these things happening is very, very improbable. I look at the statistical improbability and I say that that probability increases vastly with a creator behind all of these things.

None of these things are proofs for the existence of God; they are just things that I see through the discoveries of science that point me toward God, not away from him. It all looks like the handiwork of God.

Whenever I talk about things like this, I can't help but think of my late grandfather. He's the atheist that I'm having this conversation. I became a follower of Christ when I was 12, and I felt a calling to ministry at age 14 or 15. My grandfather was an atheist, in large part because he was a scientist, an anthropologist and paleontologist. And he was told by Christians that he was wrong, and misguided, going to hell. When I told my grandfather that I was going into the ministry I could tell he was disappointed. He told me that was fine if I wanted to do it, but that he didn't want a grandson who was ignorant, and he didn't want a grandson who was closed minded. I've not forgotten those words. And I wish he were still alive, so we could talk, and I could

maybe help him see what I see, and I how see God in the very things he put his life into studying and writing about. That he didn't have to reject science in order to believe in God, in order to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

I've been fascinated with science ever since I was a little boy. I see science and faith, not as adversaries, but as each one needing the other to get the most complete picture of the truth. Albert Einstein wrote, "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." That makes sense to me.

This series of messages is called conversations with an atheist, and that's exactly what I want it to be. I'm not going to bash Richard Dawkins or degrade him or Sam Harris or anyone. That is exactly what drove my grandfather away from faith. No one of faith would ever really have a conversation with him. All he got was judgment, anger, and insults. We can do better. I believe Jesus calls us to do better. And over the course of the next few weeks that's exactly what I propose to do. To converse, to see the criticisms that modern atheists are leveling against Christianity, and make rational, faithful, loving responses. I hope you will join me in this important journey. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources for this message.