

Walking with Faith and the Human Conscience

Jason Chesser

Unfortunately, there exists a chasm between science and religion that traces its formation to the fundamental difference between the two: faith. Faith is an interesting phenomenon. On one hand, some use faith as a justification for beliefs and behaviors that mainstream society would consider unusual. On the other hand, many consider faith to be an evolutionary mechanism by which the weak-minded maintain sanity. Obviously, these examples represent the polar extremes of our population, most of whose members fall closer to its middle than either of the aforementioned poles. Those individuals toward the center have by some means managed to grasp the notion that science and religion cannot be reconciled, because instead of being opposing points of view, they are inherently different means of reaching conclusions that pertain to fundamentally different problems. Where science deals with questions that can be tested empirically, religion often deals with issues of morality and philosophy. Because science deals with knowledge, which is itself fluid, it can claim no absolute truths. Conversely, without some absolute moral foundation to build upon, the formation of religious doctrine and dogma would be difficult, if not impossible. Science, though possessing a more advanced methodology for solving problems, does not eclipse the necessity or pertinence of religion in human society; nor is religion, within its own bounds, equipped to draw conclusions based upon experimentally derived data. The irony of the situation presented by this statement is that all humans—without exception—have used the scientific method and exercised faith of some form at one time.

Anyone who has ever asked a question and methodically sought its answer by testing various solutions for said problem and rejecting those that did not agree with the results of the tests performed has used the scientific method, albeit, perhaps, on a rudimentary level. Because of its logic, the scientific method makes sense. Conversely, faith by definition is not always intended to make sense. Yet, without exercising some measure of faith, no human could function. No one can be certain of any

facet of his own life save that of conscious existence. Everything else is accepted on faith. The only window that the conscience possesses to the outside world is through the various activities of the brain. As it is currently understood, sight is the result of the retina of the eye being bombarded with photons, which catalyze a chemical reaction. This reaction results in an electrical impulse being sent to the brain that is then interpreted by the brain, our conscience, as sight. It is only because the conscience takes a step of faith that it accepts this interpretation as reality. To argue that this perceived reality could be substantiated as actuality by the other four senses is ridiculous, because they too are simply the results of chemical reactions that are interpreted by the conscience via different pathways in the nervous system. This leads to an important point. Perception produces reality for the individual. However, the individual's supposed reality does not necessarily constitute truth. The fundamental error that all humans make is in assuming that this world is as it seems to be because the five senses portray it as such. In other words, if an object is measured with an instrument that is skewed, the measurement is flawed, despite the fact that the same measurement is obtained with each trial. If the five senses all misrepresent the natural world to the same degree and in the same manner, who is the wiser? If it is possible that the senses are partially derelict in reporting what is actually perceived, is it impossible that they are not completely negligent in conveying other actualities? After taking this question into consideration it becomes easier to understand why some are capable of possessing such a strong belief in a god who has not, at least in modern times, manifested itself as tangibly as is claimed to have been the case in antiquity.

There are only three perspectives through which humanity can or ever will assess the possibility of the existence of God. The most simply explained is atheism. For the purposes of this discussion atheism is defined as the acceptance as fact that there exists no God or supreme intelligence. Unfortunately for the atheist, a professor of atheism, such a belief is

philosophically impossible to maintain or defend. To claim that there exists no supreme intelligence would require infinite knowledge of this universe and all others. One possessing such knowledge would by definition be the supreme intelligence, God. On the other extreme lies theism, which is defined herein as the acceptance as fact that there exists a god who is the supreme intelligence. While many of the world's religious faithful would claim to adhere to this doctrine, upon further examination it also proves to be philosophically indefensible. Anyone discussing a belief system with one of its adherents would likely hear story upon story of personal experiences validating said doctrine and supporting the existence of a god associated therewith. As convincing as such stories may at first appear, it must be recalled that all experiences perceived as dealing with religion are by their very nature subjective and, therefore, prove nothing reliably. Although for the individual such experiences may be sufficiently real to be accepted as fact. Because they are not easily quantified, such experiences ultimately provide no proof of the validity of the doctrines that they are construed to represent. Because of the abstractness of the concept, the existence of God could only be categorically proven through the most concrete of methods, mathematics. While it is indubitable that many have invested considerable time in developing mathematical models that support the possible existence of God by examining the probability of the occurrence of various observed phenomena, including the formation of our universe, these data can only adumbrate at best, and by no means substantiate the existence of a supreme being. Although mathematics would be the most concrete method of verifying God's existence, it is also somewhat naïve. In order to prove the existence of an almighty being using the laws of mathematics, such a being would by necessity be subject to the same laws, thereby robbing God of the title "almighty."

The inevitable consequence of this examination is the realization that, admit it or not, all humans fall into the middle category – agnosticism. Agnosticism does not claim that God does or does not exist; it simply states that, ultimately, there is no way of categorically ascertaining this information as a mortal. Of course,

those who believe God does not exist would fall into this group. Yet, because the nature of faith demands that absolute proof be lacking, the religious faithful must also be classified as agnostics. In fact, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is this belief, despite the absence of concrete evidence, which is reckoned as righteousness to those who hold it. Unfortunately, there exist many among the faithful who refuse to acknowledge the importance of the element of the unknown in their own walks of faith. Their declination to discuss matters that could present an intellectual challenge is not faith at all; it is a self-imposed ignorance that is perpetuated by laziness and consternation. Such so-called faith is built more upon insecurity and fear of the unknown than upon a trust in their God. Were these individuals to have true faith in a god, and if this god were worthy of their faith, would this god-faith relationship not be capable of withstanding intellectual scrutiny? The apparent response would be a resounding "no." Such individuals are not worthy of being included with their religious brethren under the title "faithful." They are, instead, a cancer on the very organism that they claim to defend. It is these individuals who are often portrayed as the bigoted religious zealots who vehemently oppose any advancement in knowledge that threatens to upset their dimly narrow worldview. Understandably, it is these individuals upon whom the detractors of religion focus when attempting to undermine its validity. However, it must be noted that the validity of a doctrine is in no way dependent on the zeal, reasonability, or fervor of those who claim to profess it. Despite the undue attention that such individuals are given, it should be recalled that they represent a small minority in their respective faiths. Similarly, it can also be assumed that those who would actively persecute religious adherents are far outnumbered by those who, while professing no religious beliefs of their own, look upon those who do with at least a mild benevolence. It is only by acknowledging the importance and limitations of both science and religion that our society with its plethora of approaches for substantiating or discounting the existence of God can come to an acceptable consensus between those who believe and those who do not, in order that each may hold a respectable position on faith.

Jason Chesser from Ozark, Alabama is a National Alumni Association Outstanding Senior. He is currently researching the phylogeography of the eastern narrowmouth toad. In addition to volunteering his time in the Vertebrate Paleontology Collection at the Alabama Museum of Natural History, Jason is a biology major and student of Ancient Greek and Hebrew at UA.