

A Question (or Answer) of God

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

On March 27, 2016, William Irwin, professor of philosophy at King's College, wrote an article in *The New York Times* called "God is a Question, Not an Answer" (page SR8.) Irwin contends that everyone with an open mind should "collectively celebrate the uncertainty of the question" of whether God exists. He maintains that "every honest atheist must admit that he has his doubts, that occasionally he thinks he might be wrong, that there could be a God after all – if not the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition, then a God of some kind."

I cannot speak for all atheists, but I consider myself to be honest, and I simply have no such doubts. The mere fact that we have gaps in our knowledge, and might always have gaps in our knowledge, does not lead me to believe that there could be a God after all. On the other hand, there are many theists that do not for one moment doubt that God exists.

This does not necessarily make these theists or atheists dogmatic. The atheist does not have to say she knows for a fact that there is no God, and the theist does not have to say that she knows for a fact that God exists. We are, after all, discussing a matter of belief or disbelief, not necessarily knowledge.

According to Irwin, Nathaniel Hawthorne said of Herman Melville that he was not "comfortable in his unbelief..." Irwin implies that such discomfort is actually admirable and "marks an honest approach to the question" of God's existence.

However, I feel no such discomfort, and I am reasonably certain that large numbers of other atheists feel no such discomfort. I feel equally certain that large numbers of theists feel no discomfort in their belief that God exists. Moreover, theists and atheists feeling no discomfort are not necessarily holding their positions dishonestly.

Confidence in one's well-thought out position does not make one dishonest or necessarily arrogant. Furthermore, it does not necessarily make one closed-minded. After all, as someone once said, "if you keep your mind open for too long, people will start throwing rubbish into it."

Irwin mentions the well-known story of Bertrand Russell, who, when asked what he would say to God if he met him on Judgement Day, simply remarked, "You gave us insufficient evidence." Irwin agrees that if God exists, he is "deus absconditus," or the hidden God.

This is what atheist philosophers refer to as the problem of hiddenness. Why does God make himself so ridiculously and excessively mysterious that so many people doubt his existence? Why is his existence a matter of faith rather than self-evident and axiomatic truth? Why is he apparently more concerned with being mysterious than he is with bringing people into his fold? Why do most theists consider faith to be a greater virtue than the discovery and presentation of strong evidence, as is the case with science? People with such an unscientific mindset must have something to hide. Only in spirituality is faith deemed better than actual knowledge.

Irwin also mentions Pascal's wager, a bet on the existence of God "which has tremendous consequences on one side and relatively trivial consequences on the other..." That is to say, if one believes in God, she loses very little. However, if one does not believe in God, she goes to Hell and possibly suffers a great deal in this world.

There is much wrong with Pascal's wager. It assumes that strong evidence for the existence of God is at least as strong as evidence against the existence of God. But I have seen no strong evidence whatsoever for the existence of God and mountains of evidence against the existence of God.

Pascal's wager is also a very selfish idea. Rather than merely focusing on trying to save one's supposed soul, we need to address the societal costs of religion. If there is no God we have already lost a great deal. Just think how many people have been oppressed, enslaved and murdered in the name of God. Just think of all the women and LGBT people that have had their lives ruined in the name of God. The damage done to the world in the name of God is downright incalculable, regardless of who might or might not get into Heaven or Hell.

If there is no God, billions of dollars have been wasted saving non-existent souls, tithing and giving other donations to churches that do not even have community

outreach programs. That money certainly could have been better spent to improve the lives of countless millions.

Irwin says that believers and unbelievers should join ranks and become “partners in a continuing conversation, addressing an enduring question.” I certainly agree with that. More importantly, they should, as Paul Kurtz advocated in his latter days, work together to discover and embrace common ethics and values. Such an endeavor would only make for a much more peaceful world.