

## Is it Reasonable to Believe in God and Be Active in a Religion?

Many people see religion and religious ideas as irrational. They believe there is an incompatibility between religious ideas and feelings of faith on one hand, and rationality, science and facts on the other. They may have heard that, in fact, scientific psychology has found that religious beliefs and participation has a positive association with many social and psychological benefits, including more personal peace and life satisfaction, healthier and longer lives, better coping with adversity, etc.. They even may observe some other people benefiting from their faith, or doing nice things because of their religious beliefs. However they do not want to, indeed might say that they can't, just give up their rationality and "on faith" engage in some religion. It is certainly understandable that hearing of some others' "faith" in God etc. is not at all convincing, if that is perceived as a loss of rationality and descent into a delusion.

There is the curiosity that many, in fact millions, of intelligent and otherwise sane people believe and participate in religions. Unless one is very cynical indeed about humanity, this is a hint, that perhaps the situation is not as simple as rationality vs. religion, and that you need not choose just one or the other.

This modest article is meant to provide my thoughts on how you can maintain all of your rationality while believing in a God and participating in a religion. I do not attempt to "prove" that some particular religion is correct; indeed I will try to explain how this is not possible. However I will try to illustrate how it can be reasonable to believe in God and participate in a religion.

First we need to consider how we know things, beyond just our own existence. There are essentially two ways of knowing things, intellectually. One is using logic. "All triangles have 3 corners; this is a triangle; therefore it has 3 corners." We can be sure of that. Mathematics works this way.  $1 + 1 = 2$ . We can be certain of that, ultimately because we define "2" as "1+1". Correct logic results in certain knowledge.

Beyond logic, there is no absolute certainty. There can be reasonable inference, something called induction reasoning. All of scientific knowledge is based on inductive reasoning. Patterns are observed, and from those patterns, the probabilities of the likelihood of further such observations are inferred. Once a prediction can be made with a certain degree of probability, it is considered "true", although this is understood to mean "now we'll proceed as if it's true", not that it is absolutely certain. The everyday thinking of a rational person works that way as well. "I am going to the local grocery store to get my groceries." is based on my past experiences that there is a grocery store at that location where I am going. This is not certain knowledge; it is logically possible that when I get there it is now gone. However I am willing to live my life based on this type of inference using probabilities, not certainties.

Some people have tried to logically “prove” God exists, but have never succeeded, because the only way to do that is to begin with definitions that assume the existence of God, and so it just goes in circles. Logic can never give you any *new* knowledge that is not already implied within the definitions with which you start. It cannot “prove” novel information beyond that. It can never be used to prove with certainty that God exists, or that God does not exist. Indeed, logically, you can be certain of that. ☺

However, we can reason rationally about the issues, using inductive reasoning. We do not have to give up, with an agnostic shrug, just because we can’t reach logical certainty. Just as in every other endeavour in our lives, we can proceed with what we judge to be most probable or plausible, ultimately making decisions on the balance of probabilities, or in the absence of exact calculations, relative plausibility.

At each step, proceed with what seems most plausible to you, based on your experience and thinking.

Question 1: Does “God”, conceived as some sort of timeless intelligent creative force outside the bounds of our known physical universe, exist?

Atheists will assert that no, there is no God, the universe just happened, from nothing. They can’t prove that, but have faith in that idea. I look at the universe, with all its order and natural laws, all its evolving complexity, including conscious minds, and conclude that it seems quite implausible to me that it just arose from nothing. My whole life experience and reasoning tells me that in the physical universe nothing comes from nothing. So I think it is more likely that an intelligent creative force created our universe.

Question 2: If God did create the universe, do you think God would have some purpose for doing so? Or even more specifically, some purpose for setting up a complex sequence whereby I would come to exist?

One possibility is that the universe is just God’s random whim, for no reason. But to me, that just does not seem plausible, that this wonderful universe with all its evolving complexity was created *for no reason*. I find it is more reasonable to think the universe, and its parts, including me, have some purpose to God.

Question 3: Can we understand that purpose? One possibility is to not even try. That is unlikely to achieve success. To paraphrase Wayne Gretsky, you miss 100% of the shots you don’t take. Another relevant bit of folk wisdom is, “nothing ventured, nothing gained”. Trying to understand it seems more likely to lead to at least some degree of understanding. So I try.

Question 4: Am I more likely to improve my understanding just on my own, or more likely to benefit from the thinking and accumulated wisdom of other people as well?

In my life experience and observation, I have benefitted from learning from others, in many small and large ways. So I could just take a nature walk and try to be spiritually inspired by myself; but it seems more likely to me that I will improve my understanding by learning about the thoughts and teachings of others. This is especially so because other intelligent people have been thinking and writing about such issues for millennia. They almost always have organized themselves into groups, which we call “religions”. It is logically possible that I can think through and understand the issues all by myself, better than all those groups and generations of other people, and I have nothing to learn from them; but that seems unlikely to me. That has not been my experience with any other important endeavour.

Question 5: So, *which one* do I try to learn from? There are a multitude, so “all of them” is not a practical possibility. I could try to find “the best” one, but if that means “the true” one, it’s not clear how to judge that from the outside. It does seem to be more likely that I will learn better from a group or religion that is more readily comprehensible to me, one where the language, metaphors, and traditions are easier for me to understand. So the best one *for me* is one which is familiar and compatible with my culture and prior experience.

This latter way of making a choice may not be appropriate for you. Some people have had some negative impression of their most familiar religion, often the one their parents followed, such that they feel a conditioned aversion to it; and so prefer something different. That probably entails greater effort, but could be a better choice for some people. However going from some bad impression of one religion, to discounting all religion, would seem to be an unreasonable overgeneralization.

Christianity, and the Anglican denomination in particular, are most compatible with my life experience and preferences.

So, you may ask, what does that religion say about understanding our meaning and purpose? Why don’t I just simply state that, and save you the trouble of learning it from some religion?

It turns out that religious and spiritual insight can’t be neatly summarized in a few words. Some highlights can be stated, but will not be convincing in the absence of knowing the context. Also, spiritual insight sometimes develops more with experiential learning. If you want an example, then here is one: “Love your neighbour and love God”. However, that may seem trite, unless you understand the context and the full story, of which that is a reasonable conclusion.

Victor Day, Ph.D.