

The Question of God

The Question

Do you suffer the question of God?¹

Does the word "God" suggest to you something more than a belief held by certain religious types of people that you can take or leave? Is it more than a philosophical puzzle to you? Does a sense of God enter into how you live, how you bond with friends, how you spend leisure time, how you love, while at the same time leaving you unsure of yourself and perplexed about the world?

Or, if the word "God" drags in too much heavy baggage for you, consider these questions: After analyzing a situation in order to make a decision, do you sometimes experience a sort of inner revelation that is both contrary to your rational analysis yet more clear about what you should do? Or after being warned not to confide in a certain person, have you ever experienced a clear and strong inspiration to confide in him or her? Have you ever discovered in yourself a surprising fortitude when the odds against you seem overwhelming from a logical point of view? Have you ever found yourself being drawn by love into commitments that you could never explain to anyone else? Despite what you think about the job of living well, do you actually let being in love take you to places you'd rather not go, yet feel a deep hope that it's at these places that you will find your deepest joy and peace?

If not, if questions like these do not ring true for you, then consider that our culture may have effectively prevented you from facing issues that millions of good women and men throughout history regard as central to the deepest desires of the human heart.

To explain what I mean, I will begin, first, with a bold assertion, namely, that the question of God cannot be avoided by an authentic person. I'm not speaking of any particular belief about God, but only the prior *questions* that lead to anyone's belief about God. Nor am I speaking of *the word* "God." As far as possible (though this is not completely possible), I want to avoid any associations that spring to mind when reading the word "God." Nor am I speaking of just one clearly-formulated "question" about the supernatural. Rather, I'm speaking of the experience of all sorts of wonderment about where we really came from, what daily life is really all about, and what might be the destiny that we feel drawn toward despite the absence of any clear vision of where we're all headed.

Next I will describe several of the ways in which these questions of our origins, of the meaning of our everyday lives, and of our destiny occur to

us. These are all questions about a dimension of reality that is "above" the natural life as we know it. In this sense, they are *super-natural* questions. This is an attempt to remind you that you too may have experienced supernatural concerns without necessarily expressing them in words to yourself.

Then I will explain several ways our culture blocks these questions. After all, cultural pressure may well be the reason why perhaps you, and certainly many others, have yet to deal with them. I will conclude with some observations on how anyone who agrees with our assertion, that to be authentic means letting the question of God into consciousness, can actually let it in.

Assertion

The question of God cannot be avoided by an authentic person.

To understand this assertion, I should explain what I mean by *question* and by *authentic*.

Question

A question is essentially an expression of wonder. Something attracts us, bothers us, intrigues us, or scares us. Our wonder is not yet a question. But it moves us toward a question. We may formulate our question with words like *what, where, when, who, why, how, what for, truly, really, should I, should we, with whom, and for whom*. Indeed, we often grope for the right words to formulate what bothers us. To test the adequacy of our formulations, we always consult our prior experience of wonder—being attracted, bothered, intrigued, or scared. Our own wonder is the test whether our formulation of a question hits the nail on the head.



The event of wonder and its expression in a question are spiritual events. By "spiritual," I do not mean a characteristic that only holy people have. And by "wonder" and "question," I do not mean events that can be explained by a chemical analysis of the brain. The brain is physical; the mind is spiritual. Our brains are between our ears while our minds may be in Paris. All learning is a matter of asking and answering questions with our minds, not pouring information into a brain.

Authentic

To be authentic is to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love. These are all spiritual events. Moreover, these five events occur quite naturally in us as we grow up. They each take us beyond ourselves, as it were. They open us up to horizons of beauty, order, truth, goodness, and love, respectively. They may be difficult to analyze, but they are easily recognized and, in any case, it would be far more difficult to convince anyone that these events are *nothing but* chemical changes in the brain.

We fail in authenticity insofar as we avoid any of these five kinds of spiritual events—being oblivious, stupid, myth-minded, irresponsible, or self-absorbed. We are wounded in spirit.

So our assertion means that the question of God is taken seriously by anyone who values being attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love—that is, being an authentic person. It assumes that people can avoid the question, but not if they are being authentic. It allows that there are cultural pressures to suppress the question, and that children can grow up with only a faint awareness that something bothers them about how best to live—children who lack guidance on that inner work of being fully authentic. Only in an effort to be authentic will anyone try to formulate the question.

How we experience the question of God

Even though we assert that the question of God cannot be avoided by anyone being authentic, there is no single best way to formulate the question. This is because it originates at the level of unformulated wonder about what is absolutely ultimate, and our formulations can never capture the entire content of our wonder. In fact, wonder can rise to the level of expressed questions along at least four quite different branches. We can wonder about what we know of human *history*, about the human *nature* we share with everyone else, about the meaning of our *personal* existence, and about how to live out a *religious commitment*. If we look more closely at each of these four branches, we will more clearly see the sorts of questions about God blossoming from each of them. Again, keep in mind that by "God" I am only using a familiar term which, in fact, has been distorted in every conceivable way. The very reason I want to focus on the questions, and not on popular images or various religious teachings, is to help us find meaning for ourselves in this otherwise amorphous word, "God."

Our Historicity

We are historical beings. Almost everything we know and cherish is an inheritance. Sadly, our inheritance is not pure wealth. We can hardly help but wonder about the fact that our history is laced with both good and evil. There is hatred, greed, and pride; and there is love, generosity, and self-honesty. Our awareness becomes acute when we realize that it is this ragged history that imposes on us all sorts of assumptions about how to live, and that most people, ourselves included, have only a slight inkling whether the assumptions we have inherited bias us toward good or toward evil.

So history itself leads us to wonder: Are we fated to just do our best, without much hope that hatred, greed, and pride can be gradually reduced? It is unreasonable to believe that love, generosity, and self-honesty might actually emerge as solid foundations for human community? Are we forced to get along without any help from a power higher than human? Let me put it bluntly: Is the human race self-sufficient? Or is there readily available a vision and a power beyond humanity to overcome these wounds in our history?

Our Nature

We can also wonder about the fact that our desires to be authentic are "natural." That is, we all have spontaneous impulses to notice events (being attentive), to make sense of what we notice (being intelligent), to distinguish between what is true and what is just myth (being reasonable), to do what seems objectively better (being responsible), and to bond with others (being in love). Just because we don't follow these impulses perfectly doesn't mean we don't experience them. To try to follow them is exactly what it means to pursue authenticity for ourselves. When we reflect on how each impulse arises naturally in us, we can notice that the question of God can arise out of each impulse as well.

Our impulse to *be attentive* is often driven by a natural desire for beauty. We are "arrested" by the smell of a rose, the sound of a clarinet, the sight of a thundercloud. Artists, the good ones, aim to cause the arresting event in us which they first experienced, whether in the tangible world around them or in their imagination. They hope to lift our wonder *beyond* the physical, sensory dimensions of their artistic creations to something that is simultaneously hidden yet inviting to the spirit. Beauty ignites our wonder, which we may express in a question such as, "Is our desire for the ultimately beautiful doomed to be frustrated or fulfilled?"

Our impulse to *be intelligent* depends on an assumption that the universe is *intelligible*. *Intelligence* is a property of a knower, and *intelligible* is a property of a known. In other words, people seek

explanations because things have explanations. Intelligent scientists are committed to discovering the intelligibility in things. If certain data do not fit a law of physics, they don't dismiss it as having no explanation; no, they try to develop a more comprehensive law. We expect the universe to be intelligible despite the fact that our intelligence can only make tentative and revisable advances toward a fully adequate explanation. Furthermore, our intelligence not only discovers intelligibility in the universe; it also puts it there. When we design anything, we depend on our intelligence to put an intelligible order into the unrelated materials we're assembling. This raises the question of a divine creator. The universe itself is intelligible. So we naturally wonder whether the intelligibility of the universe springs from an intelligence. (I am not trying to *prove* God's existence here by the "Argument from Intelligent Design." My aim is simply to show that our wonder at the order of the universe naturally raises a question of God.)

Our impulse to *be reasonable* depends on an assumption that nothing in our ordinary experience had to be; everything is conditioned by something else. But here we are, a universe. Did the Big Bang "just happen" or did it happen because of something else? Even if physicists discover that something else led to the Big Bang, we can still ask why that something else exists. Eventually we can wonder whether everything "just happened" or else depends on some awesome reality which depends on nothing for its own existence, something that is not created by anything but created this universe as totally dependent reality.

Our impulse to *be responsible* makes us consider whether our actions are worthwhile. But does *worthwhile* mean just personal preference or is there an objective meaning that our preferences do not cause? There's plenty of evidence that we assume the existence of an objective moral order, an order we did not invent—indeed, an order that sometimes contradicts our personal preference. We praise goodness and condemn evil. We seek to be truly better persons and to save our children from corruption. So we can wonder about morality itself: Does human concern about the truly better and worse have a source beyond us that is profoundly moral by nature? Is the goodness of noble women and men completely reducible to the fact that we humans admire them? Or do we admire them because there is a supra-human source of an objective moral order that stirs both their nobility and our admiration?

Our impulse to *be in love* leads us to realize that love makes us who we are—both the love we receive and the love we give. When, say, a woman's beloved husband dies, it's no surprise to hear her say that her love for him has not died. But it is a cause of wonder if she were add, "and his love for me has not died either." Not that love is easy. Yet our very efforts to stay in love are solid evidence of a wonder whether our desire to stay in love is profoundly trustworthy and will somehow remain no matter what end lies in store for each of us and our planet as well. We can legitimately wonder whether our love is perhaps itself a gift of a divine lover, and a gift that will bring us to complete fulfillment beyond our wildest dreams, both through and beyond our deaths.

Our Personal Existence

We also wonder about our personal existence. This can happen in many ways. To see a few, consider these questions:

Is life obvious to you or deeply mysterious?

Are you aware of a kind of constant suffering, as if looking for something you lack or lost but don't know what?

Do you wonder whether you are here just by chance?

Are you an accident or are you meant?

Do recall, as a teenager, acting as though it really made no difference what you did, but now, as an adult, acting as though everything you do makes a real difference?

Do you not only remember a deceased loved one but still feel a living connection to him or her?

Do you feel an abiding shame that you wish would just evaporate?

Do you carry a burden of guilt—a justifiable guilt over things you've done—that you wish could be just lifted away for good?

What do your accomplishments ultimately mean? Since all memory of any one of us will vanish from the earth, do your accomplishments mean nothing?

Is there something permanent about you?

Is death the worst thing that can happen to you?

Do you experience an unexplainable joy in helping others?

We could express these questions in words like *purpose*, *meaning*, and *destiny*. But these very words can cloud the core experience of our own wonder. To let our wonder emerge, and to live in acute awareness of the

question despite the absence of clear answers is to accept the question of God.

Our Religious Concerns

If you consider yourself religious, or even "spiritual but not religious," what sort of things do you wonder about?

Does it bother you that many people have no idea of how to talk about the really most important questions?

Are you disappointed in the way religion helps you live authentically?

Is this inner restlessness in you a desire to be holy?

Are you afraid of wanting to be holy?

Is the Creator of everything now, as always, giving himself to you?

Does the loving Source of yourself offering himself to all?

Does this "God" offer himself *as far as divinely possible*?

Is your own fulfillment a matter of letting God in you—God as love— love your neighbor *as far as humanly possible*?

Is it reasonable to seek a religion to share your love and beliefs with others?

There are two kinds of people who answer No to at least some of these questions. There are the *firm atheists*. By these I include not only *anti*-theists who fight to eliminate religious belief everywhere but also the *a*-theists for whom the secular world is all that concerns them. Then there are the *firm theists*. By these I include those religious believers who feel so deeply confident that religion has given them the answers that they lose touch with the questions; their preaching is usually fruitless because a hearer doesn't don't recognize the questions he or she in fact experiences. Both the firm atheists and the firm theists avoid the question of God.

Those who answer Yes to some of these questions might still answer No to others. But to answer Yes to even one of these questions opens the heart to a horizon that this both alluring and frightening. What if the answer is Yes to them all? What if our human instincts to be authentic lead to a loving commitment to welcome an ultimate love from beyond life as we know it?

Cultural pressures to avoid the question

Besides this inner work of letting the full question of God come to light, there is an outer work of overcoming cultural pressures to avoid the question. Here, I will suggest three areas where we feel these pressures.

1. Suspicion of Religion

Religion simply has a bad reputation—and deservedly so. History has shown that people justify war and oppression by appeals to religion. And, more recently, the veil of secrecy has been lifted on religious leaders guilty of pedophilia or embezzlement.

Also, not all governments provide public funds for religious teaching. Canada and Ireland do, but Russia and the United States do not. Youngsters in Russia and the United States who are not members of a worshipping community (or are members of a worshipping community that forbids questions) are less likely to let their wonder about the mystery of life rise to the level of questions about God. The reason is simple: They seldom hear anyone talk about the mystery of life, of death, of love, of ultimate destiny. Or, if they do, they are taught that certain religious facts are so true as to be unquestionable.

2. Materialism

All through history, religion has opposed the assumption that material reality is the only reality. This assumption may be a matter of principle—a clear-headed belief that there is no such thing as spiritual reality. For others, the assumption may simply be embedded in their practical commitment to seek material possessions above all.

Modern science tends to support this attitude. It's based on the principle that by exploring observable data, we can discover laws and probabilities that explain things about life and the world that had been considered unknowable before the 16th century. Yet even people who understand scientific explanations are prone to make the fundamental mistake that scientific knowledge is the *only* valid knowledge. They can assume that to know that something exists, we need physical evidence that can be measured. We see this among those physicists who seek to develop a "Theory of Everything." What they mean by a "thing" is restricted to what can be known either directly by observation or indirectly by observing changes in movement, temperature, mass, or position that support conclusions like, "There must be a planet circling that star." So there's a pressure that if we want to know anything about God, including God's very existence, we need to see a vision, hear a message, or feel a miraculous healing. But most intelligent adults suspect reports of visions, divine messages, and miracles. In the absence of such evidence, many quietly decide that looking for God is fruitless.

3. Ethical Relativism

Ethical relativism denies the possibility of universal moral norms as a matter of principle. We see it in people who claim that each culture's beliefs or value system are "right" within that culture, and that it is impossible to validly judge another culture's values externally or objectively. As such there are no absolute moral norms, not "right/wrong" that applies to all cultures. Supporters of a "postmodern" ethics tend to reject universal norms on principle.

Ethical relativism can also show as an unexamined assumption. We see this in studies on the sociological and psychological dimensions of a culture's moral standards. Morality is presented as a cultural phenomenon without any further critique of that culture's morality. Such studies have validity in themselves, but when students are exposed to nothing but studies of phenomena, the importance of making their own judgments about better and worse tend to fade.

Ethical relativism, of course, denies or ignores even the question of whether there is a personal, divine source and destiny of everything. That would involve admitting that universal moral norms may exist in a universal creator who desires always the better.

Accepting the Question

To "accept the question of God" is a matter of taking one's wonder seriously. It does not mean accepting any particular formulation of the question. Still less does it mean any particular answer about "God." What it does mean is to get used to living in wonder. Negatively, this requires acting against the impulses not only to ignore our own wonder but also to embrace answers that eliminate the wonder. It means living between ignorance and certitude. It means living in hope.

Practically speaking, the best means to keep wonder alive is through the arts. We sustain our ultimate hopes through the familiar media of painting, music, sculpture, dance, poetry, and drama; we also experience it at times in certain architecture, gardens, and even wilderness. This is why almost all religions rely on ritual, symbols, movement, and architecture to lift the spirit to an incomprehensible yet inviting beyond.

-Tad Dunne

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1 The focus on the question of God, rather than answers about God, comes from the work of Bernard Lonergan. See his *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), pp. 101-03, 116, 342.