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Odds on God: Physicist says they're 2-to-1

By KAREN R. LONG

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In his new book, *The Probability of God* (Crown Forum, \$22.95), physicist Stephen Unwin calculates the mathematical probability that God exists at 67 percent.

The idea of math favoring God by a 2-to-1 ratio is cheeky. So is the subtitle to Unwin's new book, *A Simple Calculation That Proves the Ultimate Truth*, a flourish from the publisher's marketing department that makes the author wince.

But Unwin -- a witty physicist who has spent his career calculating probabilities -- thinks there is real merit in his figuring.

"There is something to annoy everyone in that number," Unwin told a Cleveland bookstore audience recently. "I've found a great number of people don't value uncertainty. Some tell me" -- he knitted his brow -- "that they don't appreciate my number and they know my address."

Despite inflamed camps of atheists and deists who assign probabilities of zero or 100 percent to the Creator, the book is coming out in paperback this fall. And Unwin's travels have taught him that many people privately occupy a murky middle. A Harris Poll last October found that 12 percent of Catholics, 8 percent of Protestants and 25 percent of Jews don't buy the existence of God.

"That alone tells us that belief systems are pretty strange things," Unwin said.

As a scientist who earned a doctorate in quantum gravity from the University of Manchester in England, Unwin likes numbers. "If you have a hammer, you tend to see every problem in terms of a nail," he said jokingly. "As a theoretical physicist, my bias is to want to work the numbers in some way. Answering a problem otherwise seems like working with a numberless bank statement, trivial and insubstantial."

In his day job, Unwin runs a consulting firm in Columbus, Ohio, figuring

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the odds of nuclear-power-plant disasters and the likelihood of complex equipment failures. A key tool is called the Bayesian theorem, a way to represent uncertainty in an equation.

Boldly, Unwin plugs evidence of God into this theorem. He points out, for instance, that giving money to the homeless with no thought of reciprocal reward is evidence of good -- and good is more likely to occur if God is in the universe. At another point, Unwin weighs natural disasters -- such as earthquakes, tornadoes and cancer -- to swing the equation against the probability of God. After six sets of evidence consideration -- ranging from the existence of evil to the case for miracles -- the probability comes out at 67.

For those who want to run their own version and set their own probabilities, his book includes a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for individual tabulation.

"This book is very bad news for anyone planning a career in evil," writes Rob Grant, co-creator of the *Red Dwarf* television series, in his book blurb. "Engaging, witty, concise and clear, Dr. Unwin's book achieves two impossible things: It makes Theology and Probability Theory accessible to humans."

One of the best things about the book is its humor. It seems the theoretical physicist can barely resist a joke.

"Is it realistic that the awesome machinery of probabilistic mathematics be used to power a concept so fluffy and blond as degrees of belief?" Unwin writes. "In the Bayesian world, this is precisely what a probability represents: a degree of belief or level of confidence that a proposition is true."

"You cannot, for example, vote for, say, a particular scientific or mathematical theory from a point of utter ignorance the way you can vote for, say, a presidential candidate. So rather than relying smugly on the fact of the broad applications of Bayesian methods as justification for our use of them, let's consider their pros and cons a little further -- and then proceed smugly."

The Rev. Dr. Richard Wing, pastor of First Community Church in Columbus, said Unwin's ideas have had an enthusiastic reception at home.

"I've got a highly educated congregation," Wing said. "Ninety-five percent are college-educated. We've got guys here working on chaos theory. We aren't afraid of the questions."

Unwin, 47, born in Manchester, was stunned by the religious expression, even aggression, he found in America when he moved here in 1984, first

as a minor diplomat, then to work for Batele Corp. in Columbus.

Some of Unwin's most ferocious critics have been proponents of intelligent design, demanding to know why it is absent from Unwin's equations. The author looks at the arguments and concludes that religion and science best occupy separate planes.

"To plagiarize and adapt from the best," Unwin writes, "render unto the physical world those things that are physical and render unto God those things that are God's."

Working the Bayesian theorem into his own spiritual life gives Unwin the pleasure that comes from clarity. It also helps when he calculates 40 years more of Sunday church attendance. It adds up to about 3,000 hours of one's life.

Unwin measures his personal sense of God at around 95 percent certainty. The 28 percent improvement over the mathematical probability is what Unwin calls his faith.

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