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▶ **The probability of God**

There is a 67 per cent likelihood of His existence, calculates theoretical physicist Stephen Unwin, giving a fresh fillip to the eternal debate

By Debashish Mukerji

"Everywhere you look," he instructed me, "there are these terrifically finely adjusted constants that have to be just what they are... and there's no intrinsic reason for those constants to be what they are, except to say God made them that way. God made Heaven and Earth. It's what science has come to. Believe me."

Roger's Version by John Updike



What the narrator in John Updike's novel is propounding is the anthropic principle that there are over a hundred unvarying aspects to this universe that would have made the very existence of life impossible, had they been even slightly different. Though the roots to this idea go back to various western philosophers, notably Leonard Lessius (1554-1623), and even to Prophet Mohammed, who disdained performing miracles arguing that the world itself was the ultimate miracle, it was first enunciated in its current form about two decades ago. It has since become the most quoted and strongest argument in favour of the theists.

Yet even this anthropic principle has not given the death blow to the atheists that it was expected to. The unbelievers continue to carp about suffering and evil, and why an omnipotent, benevolent God allowed these to exist and even proliferate. Their conclusion: no such Supreme Being exists. The atheistic tradition, too, goes back a long way, as the Greek philosopher Epicurus's words testify: Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?

Then He is not omnipotent.
 Is He able, but not willing?
 Then He is malevolent.
 Is He both able and willing?
 Then whence cometh evil?
 Is He neither able nor willing?
 Then why call him God?

The interaction between the theists and atheists-much like that between the secularists and nationalists in India today-has always been largely a dialogue of the deaf. Each side is hell-

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bent on refuting the other's arguments, rather than examining them dispassionately. But one man who seems to have listened closely to both sides is Stephen Unwin, whose recent book *The Probability of God: A Simple Calculation that Proves the Ultimate Truth* accumulates all the evidence about God's existence, both in favour and against, and then tries to decide whose case is stronger.



If you asked me personally what's the probability that God exists, I wouldn't say 67 per cent. I would give a number far closer to 100, says Stephen Unwin.

How does Unwin do that? By using the mathematics of probability, applying the 200-year-old Bayes' theory-usually employed to work out the probability of events occurring in future. A British-born, Ohio-based risk consultant, with a Ph.D in theoretical physics, Unwin started with the assumption that there was a 50:50 chance of God existing. He then fed in-in mathematical form-all the evidence which supported or opposed the proposition, and began to calculate. "I wanted to see how far the rational evidence would take me along the belief curve as far as God's existence is concerned," he said in a recent interview with blogcritics.org.

It took him to a figure of 67 per cent: that's the likelihood of God's existence. Using spreadsheets, graphs and loads of lucid commentary laced with humour, Unwin's book explains in detail how he arrived at the figure. "If you asked me personally what's the probability that God exists, I wouldn't say 67 per cent. I would give you a number that is far closer to 100 per cent," he added in the same interview. "That discrepancy between 67 per cent and 100 per cent is explicitly the role that faith plays." So he was on the side of the theists all along!

From miracles to earthquakes, Unwin claims to have worked them all into his formulations. But the key evidence, for and against, obviously remains the anthropic principle on the one hand, and the existence of wickedness and pain on the other. The anthropic principle, at first sight, appears unassailable: reversing the historical tendency to see science and religious belief as diametrically opposite, it uses science itself to affirm God's existence.

The data reeled out in its support, verified many times over, reads like an extended column of Ripley's *Believe It or Not*. The electromagnetic force is exactly 1,039 times stronger than the gravitational force: had it been a little weaker, say 1,033 times as strong, stars would have been a billion times less massive, and would have burnt a million times faster. Long before any of us-or our forefathers-were born, universal darkness would have buried all. If the difference between the mass of the proton and the neutron were not exactly what it is-roughly twice the mass of the electron-all neutrons would have become protons and matter as we know it would cease to exist! Water, almost alone among compounds, is lighter in its solid state than in its liquid state; ice floats. Had it not done so oceans would have frozen from the bottom up, and in time, the earth would have been entirely covered by ice!



The acquaintance with God is a matter of faith and a gift from God. He is everywhere, and in a special way in man. The revelation of God is in Jesus. Archbishop Vincent M. Concessao

The examples pile up one after the other, from several branches of science: physics, chemistry, astronomy and bio-technology. Could all this have happened by chance? Could it be that such a state of affairs always existed? Not so: most scientists agree that the universe had a beginning. The Big Bang theory, the knowledge that the universe is expanding, or that the sun is burning up hydrogen at a specified rate, all point to the fact that the processes must have begun at some point, however many million years ago. Some enormously intelligent and perspicacious Supreme Power must have got it all going!

And yet, not everyone, even among the believers, agrees with this interpretation, which, in theology, is the 'strong' variant of the anthropic principle. Unwin himself does not. "It is philosophically very unsatisfying to my mind," he said, "to say that somehow the laws of nature were specifically tuned and created to result ultimately in conditions that would be conducive to life." He preferred the 'weak' anthropic principle, which is the one he used in his calculations: "the universe we would see around us is inevitably the universe that would be conducive to life. For there to be a perceiver of the things around us, the world had to be just right to allow the perceiver to exist." Strong or weak, the anthropic principle is a tough argument to counter.

Rather than contest the anthropic principle, atheists today seek to draw it into their familiar terrain of evil and suffering: since both these proliferate in abundance in the world, God either doesn't exist, is not all powerful, or is not benevolent. "Anthropic coincidences prove that there is a malevolent creator of the universe," said Quentin Smith, professor of philosophy at Western Michigan University, in an article in Religious Studies. "A malevolent spirit would desire a universe with intelligent life no less than would a benevolent spirit.... A spirit cannot exercise its malevolence on inanimate matter but has abundant opportunity to be cruel if there are intelligent creatures capable of suffering harm and premature death."

The theists usually counter this with the free will argument: once human beings came to be, God invested them with free will, chose voluntarily to convert the world into an autonomous institution, to be run by humans, in which He would not interfere. "If you have no choice you have no free will," noted Unwin. "What does it mean to make good decisions in life, if you don't have the option of making bad ones?" This does explain away a great number of minor and major calamities which descend on us-from a road accident which takes away a beloved to a war which kills and maims thousands.

But it does make for a hard-hearted, remote, indifferent God. Why should the free will of one person-be it a callous driver, or a megalomaniacal national leader-be the cause of suffering of another innocent person(s)? Karen Armstrong in her *A History of God* quotes an eyewitness account from a Nazi concentration camp where a 10-year-old boy, "with the face of a sad-eyed angel", is publicly hanged, and another watching prisoner mutters quietly: "Where is God? Where is He?" So many appalling barbarities have visited so many people over the centuries, but God has done nothing to prevent them. "The idea of a personal God," Armstrong concludes, "is today fraught with difficulty."

I cannot describe my relationship with God as only He would be in a position to do that. A believer should be pure in his intentions.
Syed Ahmed Bukhari, Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid



Further, it is not as if all the suffering and evil in the world is man made. What about natural disasters? Why does God-if He exists-allow earthquakes, floods and typhoons to occur, bringing death and destruction in their wake? As for God's capacity for evil, Quentin Smith provides an example: "Psychoses come in two main types: schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (manic depression). Both are genetically inherited diseases.

Bipolar disorder is caused by a dominant gene in the X chromosome. Typically, a person with this gene does not have the disease from birth but develops it later in life. This is gratuitous natural evil." And God-if He is really up there-alone is responsible. Far better, say the atheists, to believe in a void beyond than in a God who inflicts such cruelties.

Both theism and atheism have long histories. "In the beginning, human beings created a God who was the First Cause of all things and Ruler of heaven and earth," wrote Armstrong. The idea of God is as old as the human race itself, though the concept of God has varied widely across the centuries, across cultures and classes. Similarly, materialistic philosophies-Epicureanism in Greece, the Carvaka stream of Hindu thought, even Buddhism-have either partly or completely denied the existence of God. But serious questioning of God's existence, and alongside, the use of reason and logic to justify-and modify-faith, seem to have begun only during the period of Enlightenment in Europe, growing louder and louder as years passed, especially in the last two centuries.

Thus, 350 years before Unwin, another, far better known mathe-matician was the first to work out a reasoned argument for supporting God's existence. Blaise Pascal pronounced his famous wager, pointing out why, though the chance of God's existence was just 50:50 (just like Unwin!), it was better to bet in His favour than against Him. Following close behind, Rene Descartes (of 'I think, therefore I am' fame) logically concluded that the human experience of doubt about God's existence itself confirmed that God was indeed out there! Voltaire, who almost symbolises the Enlighten-ment, sought a new religion based on reason, justice and tolerance, while Baruch Spinoza, ex-communicated by the Jews, regarded God as the principle of law, the sum of all eternal laws. Immanuel Kant declared that the only way to God was through practical reason.

Despite their doubts these men clung precariously to some idea of God, unwilling to jettison Him altogether. After them, however, came the great demolishers, who abandoned God altogether; they even mocked him, and were applauded for it: Georg Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Ludwig Fuerbach, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud. Hegel railed against orthodox Judaism and Christianity. Schopenhauer rejected the

western idea of God and the Absolute (though he was very respectful towards Hinduism and Buddhism). Feuerbach argued that God was just a human projection. Marx called religion the opiate of the masses. Darwin demolished the Book of Genesis. Nietzsche proclaimed that God was dead, and Freud theorised that the idea of God sprang from infantile yearnings for a protective father figure.

Yet God has survived his assassins. Every now and then-as with Unwin's contribution-the debate over His existence gets a fresh fillip. But His resilience, His continued presence in the minds and hearts of ordinary men and women, renders much of this debate superfluous.

Man cannot do without God. "The God-shaped hole in the universe"-Jean Paul Sartre's expression-cannot remain empty. Armstrong concluded: "Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning."

God, who?

By Debashish Mukerji

In the classic Hindu tradition nothing is compulsory and nothing is prohibited. If you call yourself a Hindu, you are one, no matter what you practise or believe. There are no uniformly accepted concepts, rituals or practices. You can believe in the existence of 330 million gods, or in just a few favourites, or even in a single, transcendent reality called Brahman, where everything in the universe is a manifestation of Brahman. Or, you need not believe in God at all!

In the west, atheism has always been seen as totally at odds with religion and spirituality. Not in ancient India. In Vedic times, there were a number of Hindu schools of thought-the Carvaka, the Samkhya, the Mimamsa, the Vaisheshika-in which atheism and spirituality were intimately related.

The best known and most radical among these was the Carvaka school, characterised by extreme hedonism and complete contempt for Brahmin priests, rituals and the caste system. Its name is said to be derived from a minor character in the Mahabharata, who survived the Kurukshetra war. Donning Brahmin attire to protect himself, he sneaked into Hastinapur in time for Yudhishtir's victorious entry, and cursed the Pandavas loud, shrieking profane and heretical slogans alongside. He was caught and killed but his name lived on in this most unexpected way.

The Carvaka school dismissed the Vedas as full of untruths, contradictions and tautologies, produced not by the gods themselves as claimed-since no such beings existed-but by knaves, buffoons and demons. It tartly noted that the sole objective of the elaborate sacrifice rituals prescribed by the Brahmins was to provide the Brahmins themselves with a lucrative source of livelihood. In A Sourcebook of Indian Philosophy, S. Radhakrishnan and Charles Moore quote from an ancient Carvaka text: "If the beast slain in a sacrifice goes straight to heaven, why doesn't the sacrificer offer his own father?"

The Carvakas also wholeheartedly endorsed the full enjoyment of worldly pleasures. In their view, nothing like the soul existed and life on earth was all human beings had, and it ought to be thoroughly enjoyed. Radhakrishnan and Moore quote: "Can begging, fasting, penance, exposure to the burning heat of the sun be compared to the ravishing embraces of women with large eyes, whose prominent breasts are compressed within one's arms?"

Buddhism, too, has a strong atheistic bent, but it differs starkly from the Carvaka school in its advocacy of the Middle Path, eschewing sensual excess. Instead of explicitly questioning God's existence, Buddhism virtually ignores it, maintaining that 'right living' was what mattered. 'Right Living' was what led to nirvana, which was a state higher than the gods. "When Buddhists experience bliss or transcendence by meditation," says Karen Armstrong, who has also written a biography of the Buddha, "they do not believe it comes from contact with a supernatural being. Such states are natural to humanity and can be achieved by anyone who tries."

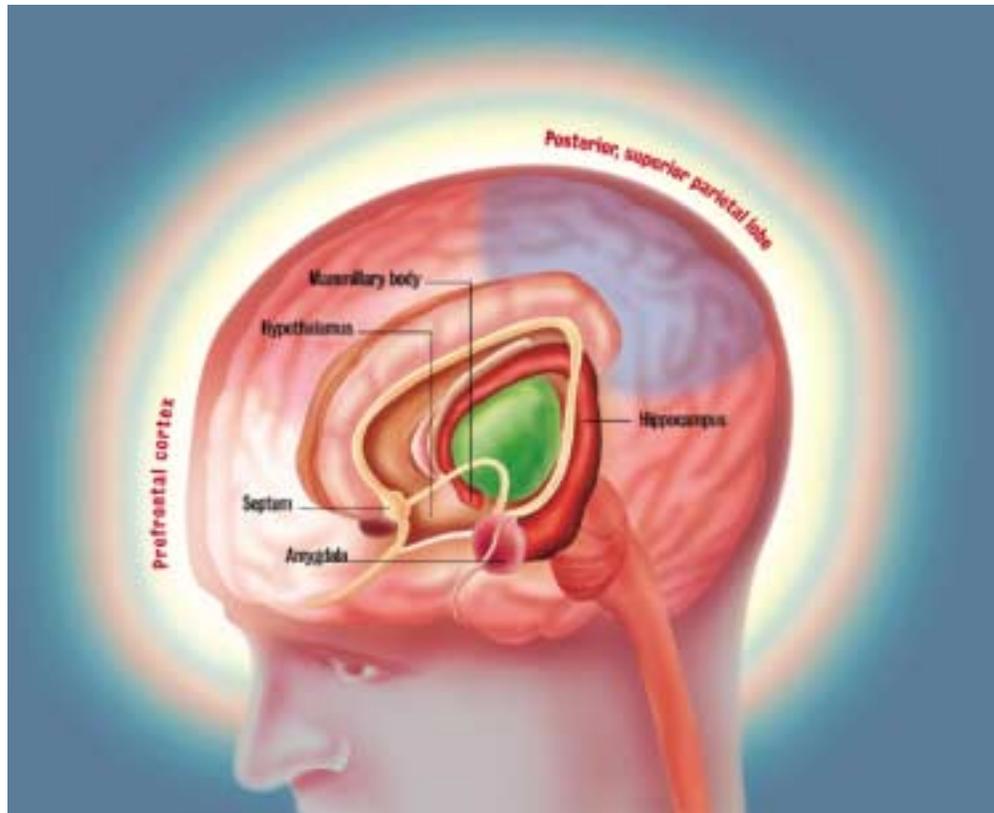
Since those ancient times, the atheistic tradition has virtually disappeared from Hindu thought. Hinduism has seen a long line of reformers down the ages but they all confined themselves to attacking various social and religious practices, or criticising the Brahmin priesthood for abusing its power. The only prominent atheists and agnostics this country has known since then have been those heavily influenced by western thought-be it Henry Derozio or Jawaharlal Nehru. The same holds for the dwindling tribe of communists and socialists who, while taking oath as ministers at the Centre or in the states, steadfastly

refuse to do so "in the name of God".

Perhaps atheism has little appeal in India because the problems of suffering and evil have never bothered Hindus as much as they do westerners. The Hindu does not hold God responsible for these: they are ascribed to karma, or the sum total of deeds in one's past lives. Failures, frustrations, betrayals, physical or emotional pain, all flow from actions in previous lives: God cannot be blamed for what happens to human beings.

God in the brain

In a research using single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT), Dr Andrew Newberg of University of Pennsylvania traced spiritual experiences to the way our brains are wired. He studied meditating Buddhist monks and Franciscan nuns in deep prayer. Though both groups described their experiences differently in religious terms, the scans showed similar activity in their brains.



Non-meditative brain

The grey matter is generally active throughout, especially in the posterior, superior parietal lobe-which controls one's relationship with the physical world-but a little less in the prefrontal cortex.

Meditative brain

At the peak of meditation, when the individual merges with the universe, the brain's posterior, superior parietal lobe becomes inactive because it is deprived of sensory data. The **prefrontal cortex** becomes extra-active; it helps the person to concentrate, and goads him to attain the high.

Power of mantras

Repetitive rhythms such as mantras create a sense of tranquility by triggering the **hypothalamus**.

Epilepsy and spirituality

Some patients with seizures in the limbic system-hippocampus, amygdala, septum, anterior thalamic nuclei, mammillary bodies and cingulate cortex-have been found to 'experience God' or feel a sense of enlightenment.

The limbic system deals with emotions and informations derived from events. Prof. V.S. Ramachandran, director of The Center for Brain and Cognition at University of California (San Diego), in his book *Phantoms in the Brain*, says that repeated bursts of nerve impulses in the limbic system may permanently open new pathways in a process called kindling, which might permanently alter the individual's emotional life.



Thank you, God Smriti Z. Iraani

I don't have a set pattern for praying though I have a special relationship with God. I belong to a Hindu family where puja is important.

As an individual I do my best and leave the rest to God. I fasted for 16 Mondays for a good husband. The man who became my husband met my parents and proposed marriage on the 17th Monday. He is a Zoroastrian and very supportive.

I don't believe in astrology because when I turned 18, an astrologer told my father that I would do nothing in life so he should just get me married. Every day I thank Him for my successes.

(TV star Smriti Z. Iraani is the BJP's candidate for the Chandni Chowk Lok Sabha seat from Delhi.)

As told to Kavita Bajeli-Datt

He controls my life Bharat Shah

I am a firm believer in God. He is the cause of the universe. I have been praying every morning since childhood. After that I feel relaxed, at peace with myself and the world. It was only because of God that I came out of jail unscathed. When my bail applications were being rejected, I felt dejected, but never lost faith in Him. He controls not only my life, but everything in the universe. God does not forget those who remember Him. Look at me...

(Diamond merchant Bharat Shah-in pic with film-maker Mahesh Bhatt-is Bollywood's top financier. He was jailed for alleged underworld links, and was later acquitted.)



As told to Quaid Najmi



Does He exist? Mahesh Jethmalani

I do believe in God, but want evidence for His existence. I also pray, but there are some experiences which make me wonder whether He really exists. For instance, during the Gujarat earthquake, in one Ahmedabad school, hundreds of children who had gone for a Republic Day parade were buried alive for hours and then they perished. Would God have really wanted this to happen if He was there?

Although the idea of God's existence is very comforting, I still feel that to a large extent we are all makers of our own destinies and in control of our lives. But if there is proof to show that it is God who controls our lives, it would make me feel very happy.

(Mahesh Jethmalani is a well-known lawyer, and son of former Union minister Ram Jethmalani.)

As told to Quaid Najmi

Very very spiritual V.V.S. Laxman

My father's father was a Bhagavad Gita teacher. When we were kids, he taught me and my brother the 12th chapter of the Gita and made us recite it every morning.

Krishna tells Arjuna that whether you are successful or not, it is because of God. It really helped me in my life. It taught me equanimity.

Cricket is a game where there are lots of ups and downs. One day you do well, the next day you don't. Sometimes you are lucky, sometimes very unlucky. Sometimes you receive praise, sometimes a lot of criticism.



After I became a middle-order batsman, I have been consistent but when I was opening the innings, there were ups and downs. I was branded unsuitable for one-dayers. It really helped during those times. When there was this big setback (when Laxman was dropped from the team for the South Africa World Cup), it helped me take it in a positive way.

There is a supernatural power which is controlling all of us. No one has seen it but I have been touched throughout my life by God, right from my childhood. I have had very low moments but then I would have this bright phase.

In our house, we do a puja in the morning after a shower. In the evening, before dinner, the entire family gets together for a puja. The basic idea of praying is not to ask anything from God but to thank Him for whatever He has given. He has really been kind to me and my family. Not every kid gets an opportunity to play for the country.

We are strong devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba and Lord Venkateswara. Every year, I visit Tirupati and Shirdi at least once. My grandfather has gifted a book, Spiritual Diary, by Paramhans Yogananda which I carry along with me wherever I go. I also carry Sai Satcharitra, stories of Shirdi Sai Baba, and an idol of Shirdi Sai Baba.

I have tried various methods to improve my game. There was a time when I did a lot of yoga and pranayama. I pray before going for my innings but once I am there, I just concentrate on the ball and allow my instincts to take over.

(V.V.S. Laxman is a leading Indian cricketer.)

As told to C. Sujit Chandra Kumar



I am confused Wing Commander Yogesh Suri

My grandfather was very religious. My father followed in his footsteps. But I am different. I don't have pictures of gods and goddesses at home. We worship during Diwali by folding our hands and closing our eyes. At that time I think about future.

I have had two near-death experiences. The first one was in 1973 while I was flying a Hunter. Three years later it happened again when I was flying a MiG-21. As I went down my entire life flashed before me. But I had no time to pray because I was trying to save myself. Maybe, I survived because God had other plans for me. I think there is a force, which controls all of us.

But I am confused. I used to visit the Shirdi Sai Baba temple in Lodi Colony every Thursday. Someone told me that if I offered money I would be selected to go to space. I offered Rs 1 lakh and one but was not selected. I stopped praying from that day. It is the weak who use God as a crutch.

(Yogesh Suri, or Yuri, was trained to go to space with Rakesh Sharma in the Indo-USSR Soyuz flight in 1984. After retirement the Delhi-based Suri switched to radio-jockeying.)

As told to Kavita Bajeli-Datt

Sai has never failed me Rajbir Singh

Once in 1991 when I was in pursuit of a criminal, my associate asked me to pray to Shirdi Sai Baba. I went to the temple in Lodhi Colony [in Delhi] and a few days later got the man. I go there every Thursday. I don't ask for anything but Sai has never failed me. I don't pray during an encounter because one is thinking more of saving one's life. We [his team at Delhi Police special cell] pray before we set out on a mission.

(Assistant Commissioner of Police Rajbir Singh is an encounter specialist. He has killed 50 gangsters and terrorists.)

As told to Kavita Bajeli-Datt



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