

Chapter One

Did We Invent God?

There is no doubt that human beings are endowed with minds that take on a life of their own irrespective of survival or evolutionary dictates. Whatever evolutionary forces were at work ensuring the survival of the fittest in their respective environments and according to their specific traits, in the case of humans something very unusual happened with the brain.

Evolution works to ensure physical survival. Those who cannot adapt to their environment, especially as it changes over time, do not survive. Those who are the product of a genetic mutation that confers on them a special adaptability survive and pass it on to their offspring. Intelligence, the ability to think things out, to observe and deal with different environments, to plan ahead, to make tools, to know and decide which of alternatives courses is more probably the route to success: all these mental abilities were very useful, in fact essential, for Homo sapiens. What is mysterious is whether these mental abilities necessarily had to come with a “surplus of mental activity” which often creates more problems than it solves and in this sense is “counter-evolutionary.”

Right at the outset there is this question, that of the mystery of the human mind, which seems to far exceed what is required for mere physical survival even in the harshest climates and conditions. Evolution tends to be proportional to what is needed; excess brings problems of adaptability. Therefore the question of whether the “excess mental ability” humans have is a necessary concomitant of the mental development that was necessary only for physical survival is probably the first thing that we should ask. One could simply say that it is, that all the thinking and worrying we do is just part of our evolutionary package, but then, another person could retort, That is your belief, you have no proof. Why we think so much remains a mystery. Less mysterious is the fact that we have many ways to try to drown out our thinking, and that without sleep, our active minds can derail.

There is no doubt that the concept of God is one of the results of our mental activity which seems excessive. When animals are afraid, they flee, or fight, or may become paralyzed. It is hard to imagine they turn to God. But humans can think and project, and early on they had no trouble reifying what was on their mind into a power outside of themselves who had influence

over the world, whom they could hardly flee from, but whom they could appease and later manipulate. The power was viewed as human or suprahuman, usually; it would have to be “better,” more grandiose, than a mere human. Therefore the personification of this entity, and my use of the personal pronoun “whom.”

It is easy to adduce many psychological reasons which prepared this turn to divinity. The infant has a long period of dependence on the mother and the father, and later interacts and learns from them. He or she can learn to fear the parent, or love him or her, to see and idolize the parent as wise and powerful, etc. Thus grows the concept of a superior being who has great power, who can even do what may seem impossible, that is, can perform miracles. Then there is also the attachment which occurs between human beings, which persists after death. That is, the same thoughts and feelings which existed between living persons persist after the death of one who was beloved or admired, less often one who was only feared or hated.

Thus it is easy to suppose that the origins of religious belief and practise lie in psychological mechanisms which the mind develops to relieve stress or conflict, or even to soothe itself with pleasant memories. Perhaps in a great thunderstorm connections were made between the natural phenomena and the attributes of a venerable ancestor, and by accretion and custom and with time, identifications and other reifications took place, and finally there was a deity, or a supernatural force who was personified and who could be addressed, appeased, and so forth; in short, turned to for help much as an infant turned to its mother or father.

In this view, religion is all in the mind, a human construct which came out of the excess mental activity –fear, projection, dealing with this fear, constructing a deity– which accompanied evolution, a development as ambivalent as the very excess mental activity was for mere physical survival. And thus religion, in the broad sense of human turning to one or more deities, brought not only solace and comfort, but became part of human culture used by humans for their own often selfish and destructive purposes. But the question remains, Is it all in the mind, or, Did we invent God?

The penumbra of mystery regarding God thus starts from the beginning. We can posit all the reasons why the human mind would invent deities, but the fact that it does is somewhat mysterious in that it does not seem to correspond to an evolutionary need of physical survival. Or perhaps it does: one can argue that the excess mental activity which results as a necessary concomitant of evolutionary development and causes specifically human fears and anxiety is

relieved by an equally evolutionary development of the idea of a deity that can help or make things right, better. And yet, the decision that humans invent the deity because they happen to have this excess mental activity is not based on complete evidence; it is an interpretation of what occurs in the mind and an extrapolation that concludes that the deity is a projection or invention.

Because the opposing argument can be made that the “excess mental activity” which characterizes the human mind is precisely for the purpose of positing the God-question, and not just an unfortunate evolutionary side effect. And then the conclusion can be logically drawn that we are wired to believe in a deity because it is not only essentially good for us (it relieves stress, gives hope and confidence, etc.), but because the deity wired us that way. In more traditional terms, the human mind is what it is so that it can think of a deity and relate to it. This would explain why the capabilities of the human mind seem to go so far beyond what is required for physical survival, and in fact may seriously interfere with human –or, for that matter, even planetary– survival.

The God-question is *ab initio* surrounded by mystery. One cannot prove that the deity – let’s just use the word God for the deity whether it is conceived of in a polytheistic, monotheistic or Trinitarian manner, or any variation thereof– is merely a human invention that does not exist outside the mind, nor can one prove that God exists. It is particularly puzzling or striking that such an apparently all-important issue: is there a God, or are we all alone in the universe, is one seemingly unsusceptible of ultimate proof or refutation. Some like Stephen Hawking have claimed to prove that God doesn’t exist, but I think most people would conclude that his proof is as unconvincing as the medieval proofs of God’s existence by St. Anselm or St. Thomas Aquinas.

The great Pascal may have had it right: deciding to believe in God, or not, is like a wager, we just cannot know the result. In Pascal’s case, he decided that the cost-benefit analysis of wagering that God existed merited his decision to believe in God: the cost of believing in God was little enough, and following a “Godly” life came with sufficient benefits, to outweigh the benefits and costs of not believing. In the end, for Pascal, the two costs and benefits were so similar, when balanced, that the wage was decided in favor of the existence of God. Little was lost, and much could be gained, especially in the afterlife. This is certainly at least an illustration of how the whole issue of God is a personal, not a scientific or logical decision, ultimately. It is simply

removed from human capacity for evidence gathering such as to arrive at a final, irrefutable proof.

But some would argue that our knowledge cannot all be based only on irrefutable proof. We must decide many things by circumstantial evidence, by probabilities. The evidence for what the mind creates is enormous; surely one can very reasonably and safely conclude that the human mind, especially in its more primitive incarnations, simply created the concept of God. But the retort would be that great minds have opted just as reasonably, and perhaps more profitably, for the existence of God, a belief which it seems will not go away, and which is not limited to only suspect intellects. The *argumentum ad hominem*, arguing based on the prestige of those who uphold your position, is inherently weak. Throughout history prominent men have been wrong. But the God-issue is one which simply will not go away.

And so at the root of human existence is this reference to one or more deities, to “God.” Rare is the person who does not invoke God in extreme circumstances of danger or desperation. This is no absolute argument that God exists, but it does illustrate that recourse to this higher power seems to be innate and universal. For some, this is an argument that our old brain needs to be known and guarded against, as it is given to escapism, superstition and abuse of the psychological defense mechanisms. For others, it further buttresses the mystery surrounding God, an entity totally hidden and yet apparently everywhere, and thus seemingly quite unique. God and mystery go hand in hand: Rudolf Otto called the numinous a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Mystery can be seen as hocus-pocus, as the cop-out of those who have no proof or real explanations which convince. Or it is that area, that realm, where even the over-active human intellect cannot fully penetrate, a region whose depth and breadth far exceeds human capacity.

It would thus seem that when one begins to explore the God-question, one embarks on an intellectual quest analogous to explorations into the intergalactic as well as the subatomic: these are such vast areas that any knowledge of them inspires awe and a feeling of inadequacy, or at least of much unfinished business. We are always discovering new things, and at times even whole paradigms of knowledge shift. For some “bold spirits,” these are only great challenges; for the “God-fearing,” they are constant reminders that humans are not ultimately in control, at least not nearly as much as many would like. All would agree that many things are out of our hands; believers in God would see this as an invitation to faith, but others who do not believe may also recommend a positive, hopeful, confident attitude, much akin to religious faith. The main point

of difference is: is the source of faith simply within ourselves, or does it correspond to an outside power we call God?

For some, the question is moot and cannot be decided, and ultimately makes no difference. We need to have faith in order to live well, and it can be faith in ourselves or in the essential goodness of all creation or the basic good-will of our fellow human beings. It need not be faith in God, which in any case is unacceptable or impossible for many persons, and is thus not an option, some would say. But clearly “faith in yourself” and in creation and in humanity has much more evident marks of concocted thinking than even faith in God. Clearly we choose to believe our spouse is good despite contrary evidence, or that “yes we can” do it, or that ‘most people are basically good’, because it produces good results, or tends to, and not because we have real evidence. It is simply better to live that way.

The concept of God, on the other hand, is quite unique, in that it does not depend on true or false evidence (such as my spouse is faithful, most humans are good and honest, there is a hidden wisdom in creation despite storms, etc.), but it depends inherently *on faith*: there can never be proof that God exists, and this is admitted at the outset. God is outside of ourselves and even of creation; God can only be known and related to by faith. All the hints that God exists, or doesn’t –and they seem to never be more than just hints– are put together in different ways by believers and nonbelievers alike, to convince themselves that God does or does not exist. But strangely, *faith* is at the root of each position, and Pascal’s wager seems now to more starkly reveal how much of a bet it is, whose final result is unknown. It can only be hoped for, or believed.

And so the question remains: do humans invent God, is God a human construct and only that? And the ultimate answer is that all we have is circumstantial evidence pro and con, and we choose to adopt one or the other position (and sometimes alternately!) filling up with faith what is left empty by the lack of positive, final, irrefutable evidence. Regarding many things, not having irrefutable proof one way or another is unimportant; who was the greatest chess player ever, or the most beautiful actress, is not provable, and this fact is of little consequence. Some might argue that whether God exists or doesn’t is also of little consequence, it makes little difference: those who believe will continue to do so, those who don’t won’t. But the question as regards to God is interesting, in that it implies that it is of great moment: wouldn’t you like to

know who your grandfather or some great ancestor was, whether it was really him that did this or that? But it is also a unique question that, in my view, can never be proven one way or another.

Some might say the question is moot or unimportant: many Buddhists, for example. We should not be concerned about what is unknowable. In many matters, trying to know the unknowable seems to be futile and inadvisable. But as regards God, it seems to be an important question if one wants to have faith; it would be difficult to have faith, to believe in God, if one doubted that God existed. But one can have faith in God and accept the fact that he or she cannot know for sure that God exists, that God may be all in the human mind. This serves to make the whole God-issue wholly one about faith, seemingly in a very unique way amongst all other issues. It seems that when one gets down to it, God, if he exists, is totally hidden from view and only accessible through faith, which interprets things and deduces conclusions, without proof, there being reasons to argue with the same evidence but with a different interpretation that God does not exist.

So we can conclude that humans invented “God,” without irrefutable proof that this is so, so that it is possible that God exists as a real “being” outside of the human mind. Attempts to prove or disprove God’s existence must be found wanting. It seems to be a human decision whether to believe that we invented God or that God invented us, that is, who created whom. The dilemma seems unique among human conundrums. It points to the uniqueness of the concept of God, but this does not necessarily foster the argument for God’s existence; it can likewise provide fodder for the argument that the concept of God provides a unique interpretative and culturally-useful tool for human beings. This we shall explore in the next chapter.