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## Intelligence & Unbelief

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(Illustration by Cherie Fruehan)

## Irreligiosity Is Not Intellect's Guiding Light, Great Minds Prove

What role does intelligence play in religiosity? Is it the case that those of higher intelligence are irreligious because of their intelligence? This claim is made so routinely and publicly that its ubiquity can safely be taken for granted.

The logic goes something like this: Religion is irrational; people of higher intelligence are capable of higher levels of reason; therefore, their intelligence allows them to see the irrationality of religion; thus, intelligence causes irreligiosity. I want to challenge this notion and, hopefully, provide perspectives on the issue that seem to be in desperate need of representation.

For the sake of argument, if intelligence really were the causal force behind people being irreligious, what indications of that relationship would we expect to see? Sir Austin Bradford Hill, the famed late epidemiologist and statistician, proposed nine litmus tests to ferret out a causal relationship between a presumed cause and observed effect. The tests are commonly referred to as the Bradford Hill criteria and have been a reliable tool in statistical analysis since their initial publication in 1965.<sup>1</sup> One of his criteria is something called the dose-response relationship.<sup>2</sup> If  $x$  causes  $y$ , it follows that the more of  $x$  you have, the more  $y$  it will cause.

In our situation, one would expect that if those of higher intelligence can understand the irrationality of religion, then those at the most profound levels of intelligence should be almost entirely irreligious. In other words, if people of above-average intelligence are said to be able to understand the irrationality of religiosity, then how much more completely would the irrationality be understood by those of the highest levels of intelligence? I believe we can make a good start to answering this question by considering people throughout history who had undoubtedly profound intelligence and investigating whether they conform to this expectation. For the purposes of this exercise,

I am going to limit religiosity to one's belief in a god, because it's a simple binary with readily available data. After establishing the beliefs, we'll then discuss the implications.

Take Aristotle, the father of natural science and giant of philosophy; surely no one would argue his profound intelligence. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle writes,

If, then, God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better [state] this compels it yet more. And God is in a better state. And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's self-dependent actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this *is* God.<sup>3</sup>

While Aristotle didn't belong to any particular religion, his work was used as the framework of those who did. St. Thomas Aquinas is perhaps the most famous Aristotelian theologian, whose seminal work, the *Summa Theologica*, is widely considered among the greatest of medieval philosophy.<sup>4</sup> People today take for granted that St. Thomas Aquinas was a theist and, consequently, discount him in the balance of great theistic minds. However, regardless of whether you agree with his writings, no one can seriously argue against his profound intelligence. Furthermore, to discount him and other philosophical giants, such as St. Augustine and St. Albert the Great, would be commensurate to discounting Stephen Hawking in the camp of atheists.

Fortunately, there are bountiful examples of non-theologians who don't present such a problem, such as René Descartes. Like Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, Descartes does not assert God as a premise but argues for his existence using what he called methodological skepticism, in which he denies anything that can be denied

and accepts only that which can be rationally proven.<sup>5</sup> It is through this reduction that he arrived at his famous conclusion, “*Cogito, ergo sum.*” (“I think, therefore I am.”)

It would be an uphill battle, indeed, to argue that Descartes was not profoundly intelligent, even if one did not agree with his philosophy. Concerning God, Descartes writes in *Meditations on First Philosophy*,

And thus I very clearly see that the certitude and truth of all science depends on the knowledge alone of the true God, insomuch that, before I knew him, I could have no perfect knowledge of any other thing. And now that I know him, I possess the means of acquiring a perfect knowledge respecting innumerable matters, as well relative to God himself and other intellectual objects....<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, the father of the scientific method, Francis Bacon, was, without a doubt, a man of profound intelligence. He writes,

The glory of God is to conceal a thing, but the glory of the king is to find it out; as if, according to the innocent play of children, the Divine Majesty took delight to hide his works, to the end to have them found out; and as if kings could not obtain a greater honour than to be God’s playfellows in that game, considering the great commandment of wits and means, whereby nothing needeth to be hidden from them.<sup>7</sup>

Isaac Newton, one of the greatest scientists and mathematicians in recorded history, failed to find disbelief. From his masterwork, the *Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, we read,

He endures always and is present everywhere, and by existing always and everywhere he constitutes duration and space. Since each and every particle of space is always, and each and every

indivisible moment of duration is everywhere, certainly the maker and lord of all things will not be never or nowhere.... God is one and the same God always and everywhere. He is omnipresent not only virtually but also substantially; for active power cannot subsist without substance.<sup>8</sup>

Some argue that, had these men, geniuses though they were, been given the scientific knowledge of today, surely they would not have been theists. However, while these men were not aware of all of the scientific advances today, their belief in God was not predicated on scientific principles that have since been proven wrong. Moreover, our modern scientific era has highly intelligent scientists who believe in God, not in spite of but in concert with modern science.

Consider Robert Millikan, elementary particle physicist who won the 1923 Nobel Prize for his work on the measurement of charged particles.<sup>9</sup> Millikan wrote *Evolution in Science and Religion*, in which he argues for the non-contradictory nature of the two disciplines.<sup>10</sup> Max Born, who was influential in the development of quantum mechanics and shared the 1954 Nobel Prize in physics,<sup>11</sup> famously said that “the dance of atoms, electrons, and nuclei, which, in all its fury, is subject to God’s eternal laws.”<sup>12</sup> Michael Faraday, known for his unification of electricity and magnetism, when asked to speculate on life after death, said, “Speculations? I have none. I am resting on certainties. I know in whom I have belief and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.”

Even the great Werner Heisenberg, known for his fundamental work in quantum mechanics,<sup>13</sup> including the uncertainty principle, wrote in *Scientific Truth and Religious Truth*,

In the history of science, ever since the famous trial of Galileo, it has repeatedly been claimed that scientific truth cannot be reconciled with the religious

interpretation of the world. Although I am now convinced that scientific truth is unassailable in its own field, I have never found it possible to dismiss the content of religious thinking as simply part of an outmoded phase in the consciousness of mankind, a part we shall have to give up from now on. Thus, in the course of my life I have repeatedly been compelled to ponder on the relationship of these two regions of thought, for I have never been able to doubt the reality of that to which they point.<sup>14</sup>

Yet another pioneer of quantum physics, Erwin Schrödinger,<sup>15</sup> rebuts the notion that science is inherently anti-theistic. In Paul Halpern's 2015 book, *Einstein's Dice and Schrödinger's Cat: How Two Great Minds Battled Quantum Randomness to Create a Unified Theory of Physics*, Schrödinger is quoted as saying, "A personal God cannot be encountered in a world picture that becomes accessible only at the price that everything personal is excluded from it"; and further, "We know that whenever God is experienced, it is an experience exactly as real as a direct sense impression, as real as one's own personality."<sup>16</sup>

Then there is astrophysicist Joseph Hooton Taylor Jr., co-winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in physics for discovering the first binary pulsar and opening the door to new studies in gravitational physics.<sup>17</sup> Tihomir Dimitrov's *50 Nobel Laureates Who Believe in God* quotes Taylor with "A scientific discovery is also a religious discovery" and "There is no conflict between science and religion. Our knowledge of God is made larger with every discovery we make about the world."<sup>18</sup>

Baruch Aba Shalev is a geneticist and author who compiled data on Nobel Prize winners from 1901 to 2000 and presented it in his book, *100 Years of Nobel Prizes*.<sup>19</sup> According to Shalev, only 11% of Nobel laureates claimed to be atheists or agnostics; interestingly, this was more weighted toward awards for literature (35%) than

it was toward chemistry (7%), physics (5%), or medicine (9%).<sup>20</sup>

While 11% claimed agnosticism or atheism, only 65% made a positive claim of believing in God.<sup>21</sup> And this figure might be understated, says John Lennox, professor of mathematics at Oxford University, internationally renowned speaker, and author of several books on the interface of science, philosophy, and religion, who points out that just over 65% of respondents claimed to be Christian, 20% claimed to be Jewish, and 1% claimed to be Muslim.<sup>22</sup>

So, what is irrational about a belief in God that these people of profound intelligence seemed to miss? What specifically about believing in God does not follow strict logic? It's easy to say no rational person would believe in God, but it's much more difficult to provide what about God's existence necessitates irrationality. It's an absolute philosophical fact that one cannot prove that God does not exist. That does not mean that God necessarily exists, but it does mean that providing a specific object of irrationality in one's belief in God is tenuous, at best.

At a granular level, claims of irrationality come down to which premises people are willing to accept and which they are not. These premises are not so much in the domain of the intellect as they are the will. For example, Aristotle's logic in his proof of God is unassailable, and his conclusion follows necessarily. So, if one wants to reject God's existence in the face of that argument, they are left rejecting his premise: That every effect has a cause.

The reason people of profound intelligence don't always find theism to be irrational is because there is nothing inherently irrational about it. There are perfectly rational proofs for God, but those who are capable of understanding the logic don't have to accept the conclusions if they simply reject the premises. I think one's belief in God and religion lies mostly at the nexus of which premises individuals are willing to accept and which they are not. Even the best proof must

have a premise that must be accepted outright. Accepting a premise is a choice, and whether one wants to accept the logical conclusion of a premise can affect whether that person accepts the premise at all. Is there such a thing as objective reality? Must all effect have a cause? Is it possible for atoms to form a structure and self-animate through a series of random arrangements? How much order can randomness produce without necessitating design?

It's neither correct nor helpful to frame theism and atheism into a paradigm of intelligence

values. It shows an ignorance of religions and of those who believe in them—and those who don't—and seeks to absolve people of their beliefs by reducing their choices through determinism. Intelligence doesn't confer prudence, wisdom, or infallibility, as hard of a truth as that is to accept for those of us who have been blessed with it. No, in the end, intelligence only allows us to process information more effectively, and it is our will that determines what our mind is given to process.

## NOTES.....

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“I would rather live my life  
as if there is a God  
and die to find out there isn’t,  
than live as if there isn’t  
and die to find out that there is.”  
—Albert Camus