

Cologne Letters

An old man's musings on Christian perspectives

January 2015

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In Cologne Letters 3 I promised to write something about the relation between the “God of Abraham and Isaac” and the “God of philosophers”, a distinction coined by Blaise Pascal. And also something in defence of a “populist Church of customly-folkloristic piety” (Tomáš Halík’s “lidová církev zvykově-folklorní zbožnosti” applied to Slovak, in distinction to Czech, Catholicism). Perhaps I should also write something about the sad similarities between the uncritical admirers of the Pope Benedict-defiant ex-Archbishop Robert Bezák and the equally uncritical admirers of the Pope-Francis-defiant Cardinal Raymond Burke. This’ll have to wait for Cologne Letters 6.

Then two topics — the political and economic crises in Europe triggered by the Kiew Maidan (exploited by extra-European interests), and the inter-Catholic controversies around the 2014 and 2015 Synods on Family (and even the Pope himself) — came into the foreground of my concerns. So I devoted Cologne Letters 4 (as well as Kolínske listy 39) to these more urgent themes. In the meantime, I was heavily engaged in online discussions on some basic world view matters, so I thought it worthwhile to summarise some of the challenges and my reactions here. Perhaps more for the benefit of my own records than in a hope that somebody will actually read through these 11 pages of partly rather abstract arguments. Unfortunately, this fragmented compilation of my ideas, rather than a more comprehensive book on the subject, is all I can offer.

Debating atheists/agnostics

Z: *How do you know the Christian God is the true God?*

The question is rather, how do you know that the way Christians see God (Trinity, Incarnation, etc) is better than how others see Him. This is much more complicated than the question of how do you know that the way Einstein saw gravitation was an improvement on how Newton saw it.

Z: *Why should we believe in a book written, and re-written, by fellow humans?*

You would not be able to use, for instance, e.g. a computer if generations of scientists and engineers have not believed in things written by other humans and sought their own explanations/interpretations of them.

H: *I can't help feeling a little sorry for those who need the crutch of belief in the man made invention of some supreme being, for their lives to have meaning.*

Indeed, the same as some of us might feel sorry for those who describe as “the crutch of belief in the man made invention of some supreme being” world-views that are “beyond their ken”:

True, human beings may abound
Who growl at things beyond their ken,
Mocking the beautiful and good,
And all they haven't understood ...

(J. W. Goethe, Faust)

H: *I also feel a little sorry for those who are so lacking in the ability to form their own opinions, they chose to quote the opinions of others, often long dead, as if they were their own.*

So you must be sorry for very many people, because the majority build their understanding of the world on the achievements and wisdom — sometimes expressed in quotable bits — of earlier generations. Otherwise there would be no, among other things, science and technology, including your computer and the internet you use to communicate with us. Indeed, natural scientists do not scrap everything earlier generations achieved but build on them, revaluing, re-interpreting, re-explaining them. Perhaps other thinkers and activists should do the same.

B: *George tells me that I am a Christian because I was baptised as a baby.*

Where did I tell you that? Besides, (assuming you were born in Australia) you are an Australian by birth, although you never chose to be born there, and if you even grew up in Australia, it will show, whether you like it or not. That is one way of defining what it means to be an Australian. Another way is by citizenship. Although you became automatically an Australian citizen by virtue of your birth, you can relinquish your citizenship. And there are many Australians, i.e. Australian citizens, who were not born there.

I am sure you can work out the analogy with different definitions of being a Christian, by baptism, by membership of a Church, by beliefs/convictions, by a life actively and consciously following what are considered Christian tenets and values. And by some hybrid of the above.

On reality, mind and science

S: *You're implying an objective stance for the observer in that he may 'sometimes' utilise language from a qualitative remove—that the mind (which is what?) may 'use' words 'remotely' as tools.*

You are probably reacting to my earlier suggestion that words are “not always” reliable signifiers. I presumed you had in mind what in philosophy of science they call *adequate representations*. [If you subscribe to scientific realism you would add *of reality* with an explicit reference to reality independent of the observer. If you subscribe to *Bas van Fraassen's* constructive empiricism you would mean just *empirically adequate* without explicit reference to such reality.] Whichever your take, I just wanted to stress that not all representations are adequate (“not all theories are true” in the “naive”, i.e. pre-scientific and pre-philosophical, language).

Your question about what is mind, brings to my mind Augustine's reaction to the question what is time: If you don't ask me I know, if you ask me I don't know. Besides, German does not, have a word for “mind” (Russian does) so it might not be such a universally used term.

S: *The implication being that mind/brain is 'independent', rather than epiphenomenal, or programmed/constructed by the host culture's conceptual universe.*

Rather than implication, this is the co-assumption of (natural) science, namely that the observer is independent of the observed. However, there is also something called [second order sci-](#)

[ence](#) (science as understood above is then first order): rather than being in *opposition* to first order science by claiming that the observer always constructs (parts of) what he/she observes (as is the case in constructivist views of science), second order science offers an *extension* of the first order by adding insights coming from treating the observer as *a priori* involved with the observed, (i.e. by assuming that mind is epiphenomenal in your words) without dismissing insights obtained by first order science or philosophy. This extension seems to be useful (and meaningful?) more for social sciences than for natural sciences.

If I may sidetrack, it is like I do not see my world-view as being in *opposition* to atheist (unless anti-theist) approaches to philosophy but rather as an *extension* (by assuming a dimension of reality they find superfluous). Or, like in physics, Einstein could explain everything that Newton could, and in addition also phenomena that Newton could not. Of course, the spiritual or transcendent (meaning, that which cannot be investigated/known using methods of natural science) does not deal with phenomena.

S: *My own conviction is that 'potentially' the mind 'is' at least somewhat free to discriminate, but in that case we must account for it, and that's the problem.*

Well, I presume this is the reason why they thought of a second order science without dismissing the classical, first order; perhaps not to solve this problem but to gain new insights.

S: *As a Christian this is assumedly not a problem for you as you believe in an essential entity — a soul?*

Soul is a word coming from religion, mind is something philosophers ponder over, and consciousness is something that is an enigma to scientists, but essentially all three concepts describe a quality that distinguishes us humans from other living organisms/beings. The philosophical problem that you touched upon is the same for Christian, atheist or other philosophers, and is non-existent for philosophically unsophisticated Christians or atheists or what you have. However, you are right that assuming a dimension of reality that natural science has no access to (and not only Christians have this belief) is related to this problem.

Besides, soul or mind as an entity, able to exist independently of the “host”, is a rather naive un-

derstanding (c.f. Cartesian Dualism); software running the hardware/host is perhaps a better metaphor, but still just a metaphor. (c.f. the “natural body” replaced by “spiritual body” after death in 1 Cor 15, 44).

S: *This means I am not a ‘radical constructivist’, though I cannot deny that apart from genetic disposition, logic dictates that we are programmed from birth.*

From this perspective it is then amazing that first order (natural) science, where the observer is assumed as not being part of what is being observed, has been so successful. The same for classical (first order?) epistemology where the subject is seen as strictly separate from the object of knowledge.

S: *I think scientific realists overestimate its ‘adequacy’.*

You misunderstood my use of “adequacy”, and it is my fault: it was *not* to refer to philosophy of science’s basic views — scientific realism vs van Fraassen’s constructive empiricism — but to *representations* (e.g. physical theories, mathematical models) that claim to explain and predict phenomena.

Van Fraassen describes his approach as taking “empirical sciences as a paradigm of rational enquiry, and resisting the demands for further explanation that lead to metaphysical extensions of the sciences” and he uses the term “empirical adequacy” to describe acceptance or usefulness of a representation. I happened to have used exactly the same term, “adequacy” in a paper (in Slovak) based on scientific realism I wrote some 45 years ago (“On the epistemic meaning of mathematical models”). That is one reason why van Fraassen’s approach called my attention, but at the same time I should have realised that it is not a commonly used term to describe the “truthfulness” of theories, etc.

Also, I should have noted that in this context the word science means implicitly natural science, whereas the creators of second order science apparently have in mind the broader meaning of science, like the German *Wissenschaft* including also e.g. philosophy or theology.

S: *I am not an idealist, and certainly accept the reality of the phenomenal universe.*

I think the difference between scientific realists and constructive empiricists is not about accept-

ing reality of the phenomenal (physical) universe (i.e. not being a solipsist?) but about the (epistemic) approach to it. I think the same holds about first and second order science.

S: *Our minds are ideologically diverted (not constructed).*

I agree, although I would prefer “culturally influenced” of which ideological diversion is just a special case; the former is mostly given and one can do very little about it, not so the latter: you cannot change the culture you were born into and educated in, but you can strive to free yourself of the influence of harmful, in whatever sense, ideologies.

On the soul and afterlife

S: *The difference between ‘soul’ and the others is ‘immortality’ is it not?*

Again, immortality comes from religion (with a pre-scientific and non-philosophical understanding of time) so it is usually not applied to mind or consciousness. I am not a Bible specialist but afterlife sometimes means that your beloved deceased ones live in Heaven and pray for you, and sometimes, they are asleep waiting for resurrection, both interpretations based on a pre-science understanding of time and space, categories that do not make sense outside the phenomenal. Some people need these interpretations of their belief. I prefer not to seek naïve interpretations that cannot enhance my world view and/or faith.

B: *George ... invalidates the idea on scientific grounds.*

I am certainly not aware of ever having “invalidated” any *religious* idea on *scientific* grounds.

If you believe in the possibility of you somehow existing after you died, then you can try to find a scientific interpretation of your belief that does not violate known physical laws. However, I find it pointless — others don’t — to speculate, especially with the use of science, on this “somehow”.

This does not work the other way around: you cannot find in science, be it Quantum Field Theory or what, “evidence” for your “belief in afterlife” since this belief by its definition refers to a dimension of reality that is outside the reach of science.

Another possibility, of course, is to interpret this

belief by referring to e.g. the Bible, and this is what Christians usually do when talking about heaven, afterlife, immortality etc.

“The more I know, the more nearly is my faith that of the Breton peasant. Could I but know all I would have the faith of a Breton peasant woman.”

(Louis Pasteur)

P: *Pascal says something about true wisdom being reached when one embraces a childlike state.*

I don't know about Pascal, but this is what I copied many years ago from a wall on the Evans (Mathematics) building at the UC Berkeley campus:

“If you would know TRUTH be not therefore a solver of riddles. Rather look about you and you will see HIM playing with your children.”

(Khalil Gibran).

S: *The time of simple faith is long gone and we've created our own earthly responsibilities.*

I think these quotes are not about the *time* but *state* of simple faith. If anything, it does not precede but coexists with an awareness of one's earthly responsibilities. When Pasteur wrote that confession he was not abandoning his responsibilities as a pioneering microbiologist.

Similar insights are in the Bible, in Lao-tzu's Tao Te Ching. Or the Buddhist wisdom:

“before you study Zen, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; while you are studying Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers; but once you have had enlightenment, mountains are once again mountains and rivers again rivers”.

[This I sometimes "westernise" as

“before you study philosophy (of science and of religion), the concepts and propositions of your Christian beliefs have absolute validity; while you are studying philosophy (of science and of religion), the concepts and propositions of Christian beliefs are losing their validity; but once you have had enlightenment (through faith-inspired philosophy), they regain their validity as symbols modelling reality underlying your faith],

and elsewhere.

B: *There is no evidence that "belief in afterlife" refers to some "dimension of reality" as you state it does.*

“Belief in afterlife” : note that I used quotation marks to indicate that it is a state of mind (that you obviously don't share) and not something there can be a (scientific) evidence for, or a (scientific) theory explaining it that can be objectively scrutinised. Also, since you do not accept that reality could have a dimension that is out of reach of (natural) science by its very definition, afterlife obviously does not make sense to you, evidence or not.

B: *I don't think a pair of quotation marks is good enough explanation.*

It was not meant as an explanation since I do not see what is there to explain if one does not believe in the spiritual/divine dimension of reality that cannot be subjected to scientific investigation. ... You cannot “learn faith” like you can learn a foreign language, though even then you would have to start from scratch.

Those who believe in afterlife (ok, without quotation marks) believe in that extra dimension also of their own existence (independent of the physical, hence space and time) and interpret or try to interpret this belief differently, based on the Bible or other Sacred text or cultural (e.g. Christian) tradition, and some, as I mentioned, seek also scientific interpretations. Like you can visualise a photon only as a tiny ball or a wave, which it is neither, so the believer can “visualise” this state, or dimension of his/her identity, only as something he/she will experience “after” he/she dies.

Whether we like it or not, there is no satisfactory explanation of afterlife beyond these various interpretations, so one has to either believe or not, and settle in the ensuing world-view orientation.

Christianity, religion and history

S: *Jesus was indeed radical, if the Gospels are testament, but I'm afraid it ended there and then. When the Catholic church had the running Christianity was used to engorge the coffers and empower it. It's certainly true that the current Pope offers hope that Christ's radicalism survives ... The Buddha saw human existence as unsatisfactory and irredeemable, though suffering could be mediated and enlightenment attained once we see through the illusions that enmesh us. The*

world is real and indifferent and the illusion only obtains at the level of socially-mediated desire—if the Buddha's teachings ever really took hold it's doubtful capitalism could survive, but alas they too are corrupted.

Christianity, building on Judaism and Hellenism, gave rise to what we call the West with its emphasis on “knowing the world you live in”. Historically, it complements the Eastern religions represented by Buddhism with their emphasis on “knowing the world within yourself”. Because of globalisation, this complementarity is becoming a dialectic of perspectives, if you like: depending on where you come from, the one is the thesis, the other the antithesis leading to a synthesis, hopefully incorporating the positive sides of both the perspectives. [Here a pessimist might replace “positive” by “negative”.]

As you suggest, Buddhism on its own, (without the West/Christianity) would not have led to capitalism, but neither would it have led to scientific and technological achievements that we all enjoy.

S: *It's a nice idea seeing these traditions in dialectical terms, but such grand narratives are old fashioned and even meaningless on the ground. Realistically, the human race is just a violent rabble, reading all sorts of historical trends into its ethnocentricities, powerplays, genocides and shuffling borders. Even were it so, 'twere a happy accident, rather than any manifold destiny.*

But it isn't so. If anything I agree with Adorno and his 'negative dialectic,' ... Man's problem is we leave our destiny to 'cosmic forces' — God, Enlightenment, progressivism, free markets, dialectics or what-have-you — but nothing is deliberated, planned, sustainable, congenial, ethical, 'self-directed'.

This is the next stage if there's any progressive hope for the human race. But it's not gong to just happen, certainly not as a hybrid religion! This is just more examining of cosmic entrails that have no rhyme or reason except in the mind's eye. Meaning and destiny are imaginary products of hindsight. Only the future can bestow meaning on the past.

I agree that dialectics as a grand narrative is old-fashioned, and I attached it with the proviso “if you like” assuming it was a language you would prefer, since I associated you somehow with the *Frankfurt School* (c.f. your reference to *Adorno*). My emphasis was more on the concept of complementarity, *yin-yang*, again if you like: it is a

way of reading cultures (civilisations) — and other realms of human enquiry outside natural science — which others might or might not share.

Another perspective is your “the human race is just a violent rabble etc” which does not negate the legitimacy of other insights, other, less pessimistic readings of history and philosophy in general.

You mention God in a context, where I have to agree with you, that “nothing is deliberated, planned, sustainable, congenial, ethical ...” although that is not the context of my understanding of God. Meaning (like other concepts) are indeed “imaginative products” of human mind, and when applied to history, of hindsight.

Some people think that higher mathematics is also just a product of the mind, nevertheless it has been shown that it can — not all of it, there is also useless mathematics — be useful for understanding the physical world. Why not accept that religion, with its psychological, sociological even metaphysical dimensions, can also be useful by giving meaning to human experience, to individual or collective self-understanding — again, not all religions, not even all forms of one religion, and of course not to all individuals?

There is mathematics that is beyond the comprehension of people who do not have the “insider knowledge”, and there are ways of living and understanding faith that are beyond the comprehension of people who do not have the “insider experience”. And there are people who need to rationalise their lack of insider understanding of the one or the other. At least, this has been my experience in both cases.

S: *You asked “Why not accept that religion, with its psychological, sociological even metaphysical dimensions, can also be useful by giving meaning to human experience, to individual or collective self-understanding...”*

It's a good question and argument, that in the circumstances of the human condition we are entitled to find solace where we may?

If arithmetics made sense only in counting apples and oranges it would not be very useful. Neither would religion if it functioned only as a source for finding solace. Therefore I like the metaphor of the elephant and the six blind men — a psychologist, an anthropologist, a sociolo-

gist, an evolutionist, a philosopher (metaphysicist), an ethicist, a historian (sorry, that makes seven) — to point to religion's multifunctionality.

S: *I would answer a) this has a history of mutating into self-affirmation, complacency, intolerance and rationalisation of current evils;*

Agreed. You could similarly point to negative mutations, cul-de-sacs, of many achievements of human endeavour. After all, evolution of anything is usually not a straightforward sequence of gradual improvements but a tree.

S: *b) if our object as a species/race is to prosper and reproduce ourselves—not merely for the sake of it, or eudaimonia, or Buddhist renunciation, but genuine progressivism defined as sustainable, praiseworthy and teleological, in earthly terms—then the logic is counter-productive, settling for contrived meaning in the circumstances over realistic aspiration (when modernity finally makes the possibility plausible!);*

I decipher this as a critique of progressivism, Marxist or not, couched in dialectical language or not, and I agree. You and I can, and perhaps should, strive for something; humanity as such cannot strive.

S: *c) the very consolation of contrived/finite meaning carries an implicit denial of the transcendent, amounting to existential affectation, à la Sartre.*

I would rather say that the a priori denial of the Transcendent — more often than the seeking of consolation in meaning, contrived or not — amounts to existential affectation `à la Sartre.

S: *Whereas I gather you're positing an affected metaphysics, or speculation for its therapeutic effects? my metaphysical speculation is predicated on the provisional 'acknowledgement' of religious/mystical experience, which I'm not prepared to consign necessarily to the unconscious, or any other trendy repository for what's arbitrarily designated by materialists as delusion.*

There is a tendency to reductionism on all sides that's hasty and unjustified.

The metaphysics a Christian intellectual posits might look affected to an outsider, and its possible therapeutic affects intended by the subject. However, if you believe in God, your faith sees these affects as “intended by God” and this faith influences also the metaphysics a (philosophical-

ly concerned) Christian posits.

I find the rest of your post very insightful. What you call “provisional 'acknowledgement' of religious/mystical experience” does not stand in contradiction to what a philosophically savvy Christian believes.

S: *A central point I've tried to make above is that time is past where we can take a passive stance apropos our condition, which is what religion does.*

Christianity, when it actively shaped the culture of the West, hardly took a passive stance on what it was shaping, and today I doubt you could accuse Islam (that inspires e.g. the Islamists) of taking a passive stance on the world around them. On the other hand, admittedly, contemporary educated Christians might not be as eager to engage in military or ideological fights as they were in the past. However, exercising and advising caution before swinging from one extreme to another, does not necessarily mean taking a “passive stance apropos our condition”.

S: *I'm saying individuals should quit navel gazing, and that humanity should put its efforts and faith in a noble and achievable future.*

Many political actions started as a few persons' brain activity, call it navel gazing or not. However, what I meant was that you and I can will, humanity — or a nation — cannot. Society defends itself by punishing individuals who voluntarily do things that go against its interests but one does not, or should not, punish nations. For the same reasons an individual can strive, not a nation or even humanity, as I said above.

Humanity cannot put its efforts to anything unless individual humans do it (voluntarily or not), although if there is a general agreement on what that is, we might say that humanity strives, or should strive, for it.

S: *I'm concerned that the therapeutic effects of religion are more a sedative and diversion than a positive plan for humanity.*

Religion as humanity's opiate is a standard Marxian cliché. It is true in the sense that the sedative, especially “pain-killing”, effect of religion is just one of its many functions, which in some situations can prevail over others, in other situations is practically absent (Islam has hardly a sedative effect on suicidal islamist terrorists).

God, religion and Bertalanffy's systems theory

C: *In my view there is essentially no difference between science and religion. They both arise from the human mind's drive to find explanations and both have gone through enormously many iterations to become sophisticated and complex. ... Wherever scientific endeavour has flourished there has already existed a religious tradition from which the science has sprung to explain gaps in the religious explanation.*

One thing that religion offers as an integral part of the package that science doesn't necessarily do well is a moral framework, whatever you might think of the specificity of any given framework based on your position within or without its boundaries. Ethics has been the secular attempt to do that and it has, to a very large extent, merely reframed what religion had already constructed.

In fact, systems theory, games theory and complex behaviourist models allow us to think about our observations of things which are not obviously deterministic, which is the role that God has played in religious models.

As humans, we occupy a unique position in the system of the world, which is that we are the only participants which are able to conscientiously make choices about our behaviours based on reasons other than simple stimuli-response, yet few of us ever really do so.

There is an old phrase which goes along the lines of "there are none so blind as those who will not see". It's an interesting phrase and it's by no means trite; in fact it underlies the empiricism which is at the heart of the scientific process.

It implies something very profound about the nature of observation, which is that in order for us to make any observation, we first have to come to the view that the observation may be possible to make. It seems reasonable in that case that if someone claims to have made such an observation, then either it is possible to make, or they are dishonest. If it is possible to make the observation, then either they have correctly interpreted their observation, or they are mistaken in some way. If they are mistaken, then there is some other explanation, which must do at least as good a job of explaining the observation or it is incomplete and hence may be mistaken.

To reject something merely because you have not personally observed it is fundamentally anti-scientific and is a classic sign of "scientism", in my view anyway. Rejecting out of hand what we don't understand is simple

stimulus-response, more fit for a talking parrot than a human

Perhaps, instead of assuming that the religious are somehow acting in bad faith or are defective, you (or any of us) might simply accept that to date you have not observed what they say they have observed and then put your mind to a way in which you might be able to. That would be the scientific approach.

The great religious texts have all focussed on defining how individuals should behave (limit possible choices). The great religious upheavals have all been driven by some individual or small group behaving in some way that was not defined, usually in response to a numinous experience that they felt allowed them to redefine righteousness.

The God of Abraham is perhaps the shining example of this, whereby the outcomes for the group are clearly linked to the behaviour of individuals. The God of the philosophers is a god of those who have to make decisions in the absence of the numinous. That God wants us all to make rightful choices because we are able to define what is right from within ourselves. It's still defined by boundary conditions, but they are often poorly defined. The human sciences have lagged the natural ones quite badly, but they are catching up, hence my suggested reading list.

I find your observations re God of Abraham vs God of the philosophers insightful. The difference between us is, I think, that when discussing these concepts from within philosophy, I tacitly assumed metaphysics and/or epistemology whereas you ethics. And, of course I agree, that the idea of God as understood by philosophers (defined roughly only as the Ultimate cause and purpose) is not as simple as the God preached about from the pulpit.

I have never heard of applying game theory (or systems theory) to the interaction of religions, if that is what you mean, but it could be very interesting.

C: *Perhaps we differ less than you might think vis a vis philosophy vs religion. It seems to me that the epistemology/metaphysics is inherent in a systems view. In other words, what has traditionally been ascribed to God is the same thing as might more usefully perhaps be described as an emergent property of a complex system.*

This somehow reminds me of what Hawking-Mlodinow (authors of "The Grand Design", Ban-

tam 2012) have been accused of — not without justification, in my opinion. Namely, that what has traditionally been ascribed to God they explain by gravitation.

I think the concept of God (for a Christian) is more fundamental, and at the same time more philosophically subtle, than gravitation or any emergent property of a complex system studied by *Ludwig Bertalanffy*. Scientific theories, including systems theory, serve us to have a better understanding of the world of phenomena, whatever world-view we subscribe to. In addition, for those who believe in God, these theories can also serve — through a suitable interpretation — to rationally underpin their faith; *not* to replace or explain it away.

Religion (usually, though not necessarily, involving belief in God) is a very complex phenomenon. I have been looking at it from a philosophical perspective. Systems theory, even Bayes's theorem, might be useful when looking at its sociological function interacting with the psychological (see my metaphor above, with the elephant and the blind men).

C: *The interesting thing about these theories is that they don't require complex mathematics at any point and yet complexity emerges. Everything from group theory to quantum mechanics falls out, including, in my opinion, religious doctrinal underpinnings.*

The last sentence is rather sweeping, though it depends on what you mean by “falling out”. To avoid misunderstandings, this is the definition:

“Systems theory is the trans-disciplinary study of the abstract organisation of phenomena, independent of their substance, type, or spatial or temporal scale of existence. It investigates both the principles common to all complex entities, and the (usually mathematical) models which can be used to describe them.”

In my opinion, this implies that it can model many situations indeed, but whether it can lead to useful insights, even making predictions (like scientific theories are supposed to be able to) is a different matter.

C: *Religion, like mathematics, is a human construct and like mathematics it is an approach to organising a systemic understanding of the world. The context is different, but the purpose is the same. In fact, as you would no doubt be aware, some of the great mathemat-*

ical ideas have come to people seemingly in inexplicable ways and have then taken great trouble to prove, which is not unlike the efforts of theology to prove the reality of some of the great revelatory insights driving religion, albeit within different contexts.

God is an idea to explain those phenomena which cannot be otherwise easily explained, including the internal interplay of emotion, perception and cognition that is a numinous experience. That is the very nature of emergence in complex dynamical systems.

General systems theory is important to this discussion precisely because it is, to use Wilson's expression, consilient; it is not a model of a specific system, but can be applied to analyse any system holistically. Game theory is important for the same reason, but unlike GST it approaches the problem of a system from the bottom, at the level of individual interaction (reductionism). The top-down approach of systems theory along with the bottom-up approach of game theory is essentially the same as the theological approach, replacing an inherently mysterious God, with a potentially understandable emergence from complexity.

Also, like organised religion, this approach is entirely behaviourist, and behaviours are ultimately explicable, which is why I mentioned Deutsch's CT, which is nothing less than an attempt to redefine physics, the ultimate reductionist science.

Before scientific theories can make predictions they have to be able to explain observations.

there was one thing I should have said further. I am not seeking to replace or explain away faith in any way. I think faith is a fundamental need of humans. The question is though, what is it?

In my opinion it is a willingness to hold to, express and act on a belief when one is unable to provide evidence of the validity of that belief which will satisfy others. However, there is another side, which is often ignored, which is that faith must be tested and tested and tested again. If I cannot find evidence for myself that will satisfy me, then I have nothing but a superstition, or worse, a delusion. In some ways, it's a scientific endeavour!

The history of Man has been littered with the corpses of believers, literally and figuratively. Sometimes they have been vindicated, showing their personal tests were good. Faith is something of a two-edged sword. It needs to be balanced with understanding and the right context or the consequences can be disastrous.

Thanks for the mini-essay that made me think about my Christian approach to the idea of God and the multifaceted function of religion more than the usual atheist arguments frequented e.g. by *Richard Dawkins* and his followers.

Nevertheless, let me comment on some of your claims.

I agree that both religion and mathematics are human constructs if you mean they are not objects or phenomena assumed independent of the mind. Mathematics can be used to model parts of physical reality and one of the functions of religion is to “model” human experience and for the believer also to “model” the transcendent, spiritual, divine, or what you might call aspects of reality that are outside the reach of science. An atheist is a person who does not believe in the latter, hence for him/her there is nothing to model.

I am not going to give a definition of mathematics, but as for religion, my favourite is *Clifford Geertz's* anthropological definition:

“(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books 1973/2000 p. 90).

This does not show much similarity with mathematics.

On the other hand, we have *Ian Barbour's* “Myths, Models and Paradigms: The Nature of Scientific and Religious Language” (SCM Press 1974), where he finds similarities between models in science (where mathematics plays a crucial role), and models in religion (at both metaphysical and human experience levels). This book had very much influenced the way I think about these matters.

Your “God is an idea to explain those phenomena which cannot be otherwise easily explained” sounds like the discredited idea of God of the gaps, which is not what I, and most educated Christians, believe in.

The same about your explanation of faith. Faith, I think, is more than just belief in a God whose independent (of mind) existence cannot

be verified through a generally convincing evidence.

To explain is only one of the functions of the idea of God, namely on the psychological level, and it says nothing about God’s “existence” or not outside our mind (compare existence of phlogiston and gravitation, both ideas aimed at explaining certain phenomena).

Stephen Barr in “Modern Physics and Ancient faith” (Notre Dame Press, 2006) wrote:

“Paley finds a watch and asks how such a thing could have come to be there by chance. Dawkins finds an immense automated factory that blindly constructs watches, and feels that he has completely answered Paley’s point.”

Cannot this objection to the all-explanatory claims of Darwinism be applied also to Systems Theory?

C: *Seeking to explain the workings of the brain/body system does not diminish the wonder of the mind. Seeking to pretend that it is impossible to do so, does.*

Seeking to understand what religious doctrine has been based on does not diminish the numinous experience of the religious faithful. Seeking to pretend it can't be understood reduces it to the level of delusion.

This depends on what you call explanation, understanding. If you believe that the workings of the brain/body system can be explained to the same satisfaction of everybody as Kepler and Newton explained the movements of planets, then I lack that belief.

Of course, I am aware that one feature of my belief in God is a belief in this irreducibility of mind to its physical carrier (brain) or manifestations, but I fail to see how this diminishes the wonder of the mind.

C: *George thank you too, for helping me test my own understanding.*

I think Geertz's description of religion as given in your piece fits mathematics perfectly! I also like Barbour's ideas, which I hadn't encountered before.

There is no denying that the spiritual and transcendent exists. I would be dishonest in the extreme to try, because I have certainly had experiences which cannot be characterised any other way. However, it does not necessarily follow that this implies divinity must exist, per se, but saying that does not imply that it must not.

The gratitude is mutual. In my view, Geertz's definition fits mathematics only as far as it speaks of a "system of symbols". There are no mathematical models useful in religion (except perhaps in its sociological manifestations), and no mythological symbols useful in (contemporary) science.

I think I should have pointed to the four steps, stages or levels of what I believe about Ultimate Reality. Briefly, Step 1 is a belief in a dimension of reality that is beyond the reach of sciences, physical or social, called the supernatural, divine etc dimension of reality. At this level I share my beliefs with Einstein and Spinoza and if I understood you properly, also with you.

Step 2 is a belief — shared by all Abrahamic religions — that this divine dimension is best modelled or represented by the concept of a personal God. (Step 3 refers to Christian specifics of this model, and Step 4 to the Roman Catholic version of these specifics).

In everyday language we say that God (or divinity in your language) is a person in the same way as we say that our planet is a rotational ellipsoid (without reference to modelling or representation) although in fact we do not mean that God is a person like you and I, neither that our planet is a mathematical entity. So "our planet is an ellipsoid" is an abbreviated way of saying that "its shape is best modelled by a mathematical entity called rotational ellipsoid". Similarly for "God is a person".

In everyday language, God either does or does not exist. Like horses exist, unicorns don't, or more abstractly, gravitation does, phlogiston does not. On an even more abstract level of contemporary, often still speculative, theoretical physics it becomes more confusing to decide which of our concepts and ideas exist, i.e. refer to something out there, and which do not (e.g. are just a necessary pure-mathematical ballast in the model of physical reality). I tried to explain these things in my article "[The Nature of Reality](#)", where I also confessed my inclination towards *Bas van Fraassen's* constructive empiricism.

So if the nature of physical reality is not at all clear (in spite of what physicists thought just a hundred years ago and laymen still do) then even more so should be the nature — modelled by

philosophy and religion — of the Ultimate Reality, i.e. going beyond the physical, if one believes in such Reality, i.e. accepts my Step 1.

C: *Barr does not understand the idea of self-organising systems, so he ridicules it.*

I don't think he, a physicist himself, ridicules any scientific theory — be it neo-darwinism or self-organising systems or what — but Dawkins' belief that you can answer a philosophical question — like decide about the existence or non-existence of God, whatever way you understand the concept — from within science, using scientific methods.

C: *You have a religio-cultural perspective and I have a psycho-scientific one. The subject is the same, but the explanatory narrative is different.*

The question of religion and God cannot be tackled from this or that explanatory narrative *only* (c.f. only one blind man deciding about what is an elephant). Faith can — does not have to — find its rational justification only from the multiplicity of these different explanatory narratives.

What I believe is that there are going to be more and more satisfactory explanations of the workings of the brain/mind relationship and consciousness, like there are going to be more and more satisfactory cosmological explanations. This is different from "knowing the truth" about these things from within sciences (natural or human), the truth that the more and more satisfactory explanations only *converge* to. Like the sequence $\{1/n\}$ cannot reach zero, that it converges to, from within the interval $(0, 1]$. You can reach it if you *close* your interval. I shall leave it at that, without speculating in what sense religious faith can be seen as "closing" an epistemologically open "scientific world-view".

Life's purpose

P: *Does life have a purpose?*

I think this question does not make much sense. I can only ask and try to answer the question "Does *my* life have a purpose for *me*?", i.e. "Do I see a purpose in *my* life?" with a YES or NO, eventually with qualifications. An answer to "Do I see a purpose in *your* life?" is irrelevant even inconsiderate or worse, although I might be able to ask (but not answer for you) the question "Do *you* see a purpose in *your* life?"

Nobody can tell you what you see as the purpose of your life, (including the claim, should you make it, that you see your life as lacking any purpose).

People could speak of what *should* be the purpose of a person's life. That, however, sounds like giving advice, even preaching, and its acceptance depends on how close are the world-views, (e.g. morals), of the giver and the receiver of the advice. Thus the impersonal version of the question doesn't make much sense, that is, unless one accepts a "meta-personal" source of reference, namely God.

The Concept of God

D: *The concept of God is now regarded as valid by only a small minority of philosophers and scientists.*

I don't understand what is the difference between valid and invalid notions, though I agree that in natural science there is no place for the concept of God, whatever some philosophers and other thinkers mean by it.

You cannot define the concept of God like, for instance, you cannot define that of a set in abstract mathematics, although I am old enough to have known a professor of mathematics who had no use of the concept of set, probably because he did not understand where and how it was used in "modern" mathematics.

D: *The concept of God is not for me to define since I do not contend any such entity exists.*

Sorry, so read it as "One cannot define the concept of God like, for instance, one cannot define that of a set in mathematics". It was not meant personally, I know you do not have a need for that concept. Also, I never thought of looking in the Bible for a formal definition of God only for His representation as a person. You can only have an *understanding* of what is meant by God in everyday language, the same as you can have an understanding of what is meant by a set of objects.

D: *A set is amenable to reason. God is not.*

Both the concepts of God (assumed as amenable to reason by philosophies that all contemporary

ones are built on) and reason itself preexist that of a set as understood by us since *Georg Cantor*. As I said, most people do not need to use the concept of set in that abstraction, although they understand the concept of a set of objects. The same as some people do not need the concept or idea of God, in whatever sense, in their world-view. I understand that they consider that concept superfluous. However, I do not understand why they would need to kidnap the concept of reason to justify their world-view preferences. The same as I do not agree with those believers who claim only their world-view is "amenable to reason", whereas an atheist's beliefs or world-view must go against reason, just because a believer cannot accept the presuppositions that an atheist world-view is built on.

I agree that today the majority of scientists and philosophers would not know what to do with the idea of God — even less how to relate it to the biblical representation of Him, see the disputes about the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" versus the "God of philosophers" as Pascal put it. Like e.g. the scientist EO Wilson probably would not have a use for Cantor's theory of sets (see my article [Mathematically semiliterate scientists?](#)).

D: *I am sure you take your religion seriously.*

I am not sure what this means. I take the worldwide phenomenon of religion seriously and believe that a sense for it — or a replica of it, say "atheist spirituality" — is built into our brains.

Like the need to copulate is built into our nature and those who cannot have it, who don't have a *partner*, have an urge to masturbate, so a very superficial view of "atheist spirituality" — lacking a "*Partner*" — would be to see it as a sort of "spiritual masturbation".

I namely like to speak about "horizontal love" that sex has something to do with, and "vertical love" (of God) that religion is about.

On the other hand, you are right that I take my *faith* — containing assumptions about the nature of reality on which all my world view is built — very seriously.