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## *Our very strange situation*

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Belief in some kind of divine being is normal. Throughout human history nearly all societies have claimed to relate to one or more gods. Only modern Europe, from the seventeenth century onwards, has produced societies that treat belief in the divine as a dispensable option, and only in the last century have other parts of the world imported the idea.

Atheism appeals to science. Characteristically, it claims that scientific facts describe the real nature of the world, and are therefore the key to progress, while values and religious beliefs are mere human inventions – at best unnecessary options but perhaps harmful superstitions.

This story jars with most people. Successive governments try to persuade more students to study science, but students persist in wanting to study the humanities. Far more people read novels than science books, and far more television viewers watch soap operas than documentaries on new technology. In public we may go along with the secular picture, but most of us live as though we do not want to live in a world like that. Why?

The scientific facts, the ‘how’ questions, are important for some people at some times, but the ‘why’ questions are important to all of us. Scientists believe the universe began with a Big Bang. Most of us do not need to know how it began; but most of us, at some stage in our lives, will be in a state of utter despair and will ask questions like ‘Why does it have to be like this?’

Other societies take the ‘why’ questions seriously, and integrate them with the ‘how’ questions. The normal way to explore them is through stories. Many of these stories have been dismissed by modern westerners as ‘myths’, as though they were just bad science, but this

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is to misunderstand them. Like our novels and soap operas, they help people explore what happens in life, how to evaluate it, and how to respond. In response to some things it is appropriate to have a good cry, in response to others it is appropriate to be astonished. Some things are to be resisted, others accepted. We learn appropriate responses through stories.

One example is bereavement. Suppose the person you love most of all dies. The doctor comes, you burst into tears, and you say 'Why?' It would be a crass doctor indeed who said, 'I can tell you why. The heart stopped beating and the lungs stopped breathing.' That would not help at all.

Rather more helpful would be an ancient Hittite myth about a goddess who was preparing for battle and asked a human man for help. (Part of the story has been lost, so I am depending on a reconstruction.) The man consented, on condition that he could spend the night with her. She agreed. He ended up moving in with her. However, she laid down one rule: he was never under any circumstances to look out of the window. One day temptation got the better of him, he looked out of the window, and there he saw his wife and children. He begged for permission to return to them. He went back to his family and thereby lost the chance of immortality.<sup>1</sup>

This story, much like a good novel or play, faces the listener with an inescapable question: 'Which would I have chosen? Would I rather live in a land where people live for ever and nobody is ever young, or would I rather live for a limited time, in a land with babies, children and families, and let them succeed me when I am old and nothing is new or exciting for me any more?' By reflecting on these questions we are helped to appreciate that there is indeed a proper time for death. Although we are upset to lose our loved ones, life without death would not be better.

All over the world there are traditional stories like this, reflecting on the big questions. Where do I come from? Where does my family, or village, come from? Why do people die? Are animals the same as us, or different? Why is childbirth so painful? Why do we find some things funny? Why do we get so much pleasure from sex? Why do people kill each other? Characteristically they combine what we would now call the scientific answers, the 'how', with the value answers, the

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‘why’. If we treat them purely as science of course we now have more accurate answers, but they were more than this.

We should not imagine that everybody believed every detail of those stories; after all, good stories survive outside their original settings.

They do however show how, in order to reflect on the ‘why’ questions, we need to assume the existence of real values transcending our own minds. The reason why these traditional

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stories usually refer to one or more divine beings is that if we are to justify our feelings and values we need to ground them in something bigger than ourselves. Feelings and values only exist where there are minds capable of feeling and evaluating. We shall explore this further in Chapter 3.

## *Medieval debates*

Why did Europeans end up excluding the divine from their explanations of ordinary life? I shall begin the story in the Middle Ages, because this is the time when European society first debated the relationship between reason and God as an issue in its own right. Before then, in the ancient Roman Empire some Christians had denounced mere human reason in the interests of divine revelation, but without producing theories about reason itself; they had merely done what people do when they are losing an argument. Otherwise, throughout the ancient era Christians used every rational tool at their disposal in intense, centuries-long debates about theological issues like the Trinity and how Jesus could be both God and human. From the sixth century to the tenth, educational standards in western Europe were low; and because it was the monasteries which preserved ancient knowledge, church leaders came to be the leading authorities on learning in general. They normally allowed new ideas unless they contradicted what had been inherited from the ancients, especially the Bible. This became the conservative position against which scholars reacted when educational standards began to rise again.

With the revival, new questions arose. Genesis 1.7 says God put water above the sky. In the twelfth century William of Conches denied

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that there was any such water, and thereby inflamed debate about the Bible's authority. A power struggle developed in the places of learning. Theologians continued to work within the integrated view of reality, expecting traditional beliefs about God and the Bible to contribute to developing theories about the world. Some, however, were so committed to defending the Bible that they refused to accept any new idea that contradicted a biblical text. Recently atheist campaigners have often exaggerated this opposition and accused the Church of opposing science. In fact the question at issue was how to balance the different authorities against each other when they disagreed, in an age which had not yet established the principle of seeking answers by conducting experiments. In retrospect we can now say that sometimes the new ideas were right and the biblical texts were wrong, but sometimes it was the other way round; for example, many researchers accepted Aristotle's view that the world had existed from eternity, while the Church taught that it had come into existence at a point in time.

Another issue was the use of logic in theology. Medieval education emphasized logic so much that early scholastics hoped it could prove the truth of Christian doctrines. In the eleventh century Anselm thought he could logically prove that God exists, that God is a Trinity, and that God had to become a human. Later scholastics were more sceptical and increasingly concluded that these doctrines must have been directly revealed to the Church by God.<sup>2</sup> In fact they had been hammered out in centuries of debate in the early Church; but the later medievals treated them as direct divine revelation.

These issues led to a dualistic theory of knowledge. According to the theory there are two ways of knowing things: physical matter is observable and can be studied by reason, while spiritual things are not observable so the only way we can know about them is by direct revelation from God through the Bible and the Church's teaching. This separation meant late medieval theologians could study spiritual matters while natural philosophers – the forerunners of modern scientists – could study physical matters, without either side encroaching on the other.

This dualism permitted researchers to develop theories about the world even when they contradicted a biblical text. Far from denying God, they were merely appealing to God's gift of reason as opposed to that other gift, revelation. While the study of the physical world was thus freed from church censorship it was also limited, especially by the principle of observability. Whatever could not be observed was counted as spiritual, not physical, and therefore was in the domain of the Church's teaching. Most medievals believed the world was full of invisible angels and demons, self-willed beings going about their business in ways that affected humans and therefore made the physical world unpredictable. This would have made science impossible; at that stage it was essential to reject anything that could not be observed. Scientists today, however, believe in many unobservables, from subatomic particles to dark matter.<sup>3</sup>

While late medieval dualism had unforeseen effects on science, the idea that all spiritual knowledge is contained within divine revelation had a disastrous effect on religious belief. First, it meant that any new spiritual idea is by definition wrong because everything we can possibly know is already in the Bible. This gave western Christianity that backward-looking character which it often has today, for example in debates about women and gays. Second, because all spiritual truth was to be found in the Bible there was no point in dialogue with other faiths. They were all just plain wrong. Again, this idea remains popular in many Christian circles today. Third, it meant that knowledge of spiritual matters, being a direct product of divine revelation, was absolutely certain to be true. Whenever a biblical teaching seemed impossible, immoral or contradictory, it revealed the limits not of the Bible but of human reason. Nobody had any business doubting or questioning any item of revelation. This idea is echoed today by those Christians who are quick to denounce 'human reason'. Finally, it gave immense power to church leaders. They became the gatekeepers of all spiritual knowledge. Today this feature is most obvious in the case of Roman Catholicism, but it remains common among Protestants too.

Thus late medieval dualism changed the nature of western Christianity. Instead of the rich proliferation of ideas that had characterized its earlier phases, it came to seem that Christians ought to agree with each other on all spiritual matters. Such an idea seemed possible when

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the papacy could be accepted as the unchallenged authority on biblical interpretation. Soon the Reformation blew it open. Protestants and Catholics disagreed about what divine revelation is and who its gatekeepers are. To make matters worse, both sides believed that revelation is to be accepted without question, as superior to all human reason, and this left them without any way to resolve their disagreements. The theoretical crisis generated two centuries of religious wars, and still produces sectarian disputes today.

### *Enlightenment reason*

Eventually reason had to make a comeback. The Enlightenment, often called the Age of Reason, was mainly provoked by the religious wars. Enlightenment accounts of reason are broadly of two types, a wider one and a narrower one. According to the wider account the human mind has many different processes. This was the view held by Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages and in the Enlightenment by the Cambridge Platonists and Joseph Butler. Today philosophers and psychologists continue to analyse how we come to know things; a typical list would include the evidence of our senses, rational deduction, instinct, intuition and memory. These processes do not produce absolute certainty: we think we know things, but we may be wrong.

For some this was inadequate. The early Enlightenment philosophers wanted to show how reason could bring the religious wars to an end. They could see that people kept fighting because each side claimed absolute certainty for its own views. Enlightenment philosophers therefore presented reason as a better way to establish certainty. To do this they limited reason to logic and the evidence of the senses.

René Descartes proposed to base all knowledge on a self-evident starting point, his 'I think, therefore I am'. From this certainty he proceeded to deduce, as also certain, the existence of God and the physical world. Philosophers describe his system as 'rationalism': here reason is about analytical thinking, deducing.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas medieval dualism had been about two ways of knowing things, Descartes turned it into two distinct realms of reality, one physical and the other spiritual. The physical one is observable and deterministic, nothing but atoms pushing each other according to

laws of nature. The spiritual one is where the human soul relates to God. This separation of the spiritual from the material set God at a distance from the world and presented the human being as basically a soul which happens to have a body.

The other main element in the narrow account of reason is information from the senses, 'empiricism'. John Locke believed the human mind has only three faculties: it is aware of its own inner states and operations, it receives information through the five senses and it can make logical deductions. Nothing else. These, he believed, are the processes on which all knowledge is built.<sup>5</sup> More ambitious than the medieval dualists, he set out to show that even his narrow reason, limited to the evidence of the senses and logical deduction, could still establish the truth of the Christian faith.

Central to his argument was the evidence from miracles. Today miracles are usually understood as events which break the laws of nature. Science works by gathering data and generalizing from it to establish regularities. If the study of physical processes had not discovered regularities we would not be able to explain how things work or make predictions. Science, therefore, is only possible because we can explain the processes of nature in terms of regularities. We call these regularities the laws of nature.

Most religions today affirm and value this ability to establish laws of nature; we shall explore the reasons later. Before the rise of modern science Jews, Christians and Muslims believed that God is in control of the way the world works, so a term like 'laws of nature' could only mean that God does most things regularly and a 'miracle', as its derivation from the Latin *miraculum* implies, was something to be wondered at – usually because it meant God had done something irregularly. As Augustine wrote,

We say, as a matter of course, that all portents are contrary to nature. But they are not. For how can an event be contrary to nature when it happens by the will of God, since the will of the great Creator assuredly is the nature of every created thing? A portent, therefore, does not occur contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known of nature.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the tensions between the claims of 'faith' and 'reason', as described above, early modern scientists tended to treat the laws of

nature as real powers. As a result they came to understand miracles differently, as events that break the laws of nature. Locke used this idea in his argument for the truth of Christianity. His argument ran: the Bible records miracles, only God can perform miracles, so the events described in the Bible must have been performed by God. God, he believed, performed them in order to reveal that Christianity is the true religion.<sup>7</sup>

It is a bad argument. We can be confident that a brilliant mind like Locke's would not have used it if a better one had been available. Fifty years later David Hume turned it on its head: the Bible records miracles, miracles cannot happen because they break the laws of nature, so the Bible contains falsehoods. Miracles, he says,

are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors ... When we peruse the first histories of all nations, we are apt to imagine ourselves transported into some new world; where the whole frame of nature is disjointed, and every element performs its operations in a different manner, from what it does at present ... *It is strange*, a judicious reader is apt to say, upon the perusal of these wonderful historians, *that such prodigious events never happen in our days.*<sup>8</sup>

What Locke and Hume had in common was the conviction that the laws of nature are real powers, normally unbreakable. They disagreed about whether God had the power to break them. Their disagreement remains part of religious debate today; conservative Christians often imagine that Christians have always believed what Locke believed, while their atheist counterparts imagine that Hume has refuted religious belief in general. In fact the authors of the Bible and earlier Christians did not share Locke's understanding of miracles. Nor

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do philosophers of science today. Although scientists have established many laws of nature, in each case what has been established is a regular process of the type 'when x happens, y happens'; in other words the laws of nature are observed regularities, not forces. What makes them happen is another matter, to which we shall return in Chapter 7.