The Terrible Consequences of Bad Arguments and our Need to Learn to Think Straight

A few years ago a group calling themselves **The New Atheists** (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and others) sponsored the following advert on the side of London double-decker buses, **"There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life!"**

They claimed (or rather hoped) that belief in God had died out over 100 years ago. Richard Dawkins wrote a bestseller called **The God Delusion**.

Slowly in many Western countries atheism has become the default position for rational, sophisticated people with "brains". Why do they try and promote atheism? It is usually because they are tired of what they call 'Christian propaganda' and, as far as they are concerned the influence Christians still have in our society is far too strong.

An atheist is a person who believes that no God/gods or anything supernatural exists. There are lots of other things that don't exist – such as fairies, unicorns etc., but they are not upset about these things. This raises an interesting question concerning the connection between the non-existence of something and the emotional effect. So the atheists' claim is, "Since there is no God, don't worry and get on with your life. Do what you want to do!"

This is like saying, "There is probably no Loch Ness monster. So stop worrying and enjoy your life. Swim in Loch Ness or row your boat there if you want to – go ahead!"

Learning to think straight

I would like us to look together at 5 issues:

1. Is there any meaning to life?
2. Getting the message
3. What is a miracle?
4. Are we apes or angels?
5. The issue of suffering and belief in God

I qualified as an organic chemist with a PhD from Cambridge University Chemical Laboratories, but I found myself teaching in a biochemistry department in a medical school in the Middle East. During my professional life I have found a very common assumption that science and Christianity (in fact all religions) are at odds with each other. The basic reason for this is the common belief that the truth is found in science and not in religion. What is more, it is generally assumed that science challenges the beliefs of Christians.

In his book, **The Making of a Counter Culture**, Theodore Razack sums up the popular mood as follows. He asks the questions, **"What is reliable knowledge?** and **"How do we know it when we see it?"** Western culture gives the answer, **"Reliable knowledge is knowledge that is scientifically sound since it is to science that modern man refers for the definitive explanation of reality."** Indeed, at least in the West, modern man refers to science to get answers to many – perhaps most – of the issues of life.

I would like to argue that the idea that only science can give us the definitive explanation of reality is a piece of crooked thinking and we need to straighten it out! I would like to begin by telling you a story – a modern parable.

Imagine you are living in a pleasant seaside town with a long stretch of sandy beach. Imagine it is a lovely summer evening and is just beginning to grow dark. Two people are walking along the beach. Both have spotted a flashing light out to sea. One of these people is a retired professor of physics. He is the sort of person who thinks of nothing but physics. On seeing the flashing light on the horizon, he runs to his car where he keeps a collection of scientific equipment. He takes this out and with his

stopwatch he times the flashes of light. With his photometer he measures the brightness of the light. He notes the position of the light in regards to the stars near the horizon. As he drives home he does some triangulation.

When he arrives home his wife asks him, "Did you see anything interesting tonight dear?" He says, "Yes, I saw what I deduced to be a heated tungsten filament enclosed in a silica envelope emitting a regular pattern of visible flashes of radiation at an intensity of 2,500 lumens, at a distance of 180 metres offshore.

The other person walking alone on the beach was a teenager on his way home from Sea Scouts. He looked at the light for a moment or two and then rushed to the telephone box as fast as he could. When he got home, his mother said, "You look really excited, what happened?" He responded, "Out to sea I saw a ship signalling S.O.S. I phoned the coastguard and reported what I'd seen and they immediately sent out the lifeboat to see how they could help."

It is not hard to see the point, both people saw the same thing – the flashing light. One of them, the scientist, was so conditioned by a lifetime in science that he was only interested in **how** the flashes of light were being produced – i.e. the mechanisms that were involved in the event. The boy was interested in **why** the light was shining and all the flashes. He understood the meaning and he acted wisely on it.

This parable points to a major limitation in science. Early modern scientists were very clear about this. They set out to study only what could be quantified, what could be measured or weighed or counted. They set out to find the relationship between these quantities and how these relationships could be expressed in mathematical equations.

But in doing this they became increasingly aware that they were limiting science to the study of only a part of reality – the material part. They were aware they were limiting the kind of questions they could ask to this section of reality. They could only ask questions about **how** it worked. They ignored all questions of meaning and purpose as being beyond the competence of science. It wasn't because they thought these questions were unimportant or because they couldn't be answered, but they couldn't be answered by the techniques they were developing and the instruments they were using in science.

1. Is there any meaning to life?

Perhaps because of the phenomenal success of science in understanding the mechanisms of the physical world, many people, including scientists, have forgotten the limitations of a scientific approach to reality and come to believe that because science works so well in the area it has chosen to study, it must eventually be able to explain everything!

They forget that each scientist is studying in a narrow area of science and each one is asking a limited set of questions. If they assume science can answer all the questions and deal with everything then they are ignoring all questions of meaning and purpose or treating them as unreal or just as an illusion since science, by itself, cannot deal with them. The basic worldview of such people is that questions science cannot answer are illusionary or irrelevant.

Jacques Monod, a Nobel Laureate in molecular biology who I went to hear while I was a student in Cambridge, takes this view in his book **Chance and Necessity**. He writes, "***The cornerstone of the scientific method is the systematic denial that true knowledge can be reached by interpreting phenomena in terms of purpose***". Here he is claiming that science denies we can know anything about the purpose of events such as, "Why are we here?" "Why is there a universe?" or "Why is it the sort of universe that it is?" He states that science can never answer these sorts of questions. However, he is quite wrong in spite of being a Nobel prize-winning laureate.

It isn't science that denies this. It is Professor Jacques Monod! In his statement he isn't speaking as a scientist, although he probably thought he was. Rather, he is speaking as an amateur philosopher and a person greatly influenced by his good friend Albert Camus. Camus wrote a number of books

that have been translated into English. In 1948 he wrote a very interesting book called **The Plague**. It is a novel – a story about a great plague in Algeria (then a French colony). Thousands were dying in the plague. There was a Roman Catholic priest in Algiers at the time who was in great confusion about what he should do. Should he go out and help and comfort the dying or should he assume it was God's punishment and so he should just leave them to die and then bury them?

What Monod did was to replace the adjective 'scientific' with the adjective 'true'. In doing this, he changed the statement about the scientific method – which no philosopher would agree with – by a statement of his own philosophical position which assumes that only what science can study is real.

This kind of subtle shift in Monod's thinking is largely unnoticed by most people and so they get the impression that science denies the validity of all religious beliefs, when in fact it does not. It doesn't deny them at all. It ignores them. All that science does is to ignore the questions that religion deals with because they can't be investigated by scientific means. In fact, rather than being a rival view of the world, science and the Christian faith are complementary views.

A possible analogy is the set of drawings an architect uses. If you look at a set of drawings for an extension to a house, one will be the ground floor as if you were looking at the completed extension from above, but with no roof. Another will be of a side elevation and another of a front elevation. Then there will be drawings of the future plumbing, electric cables etc. If you don't know the purpose of the drawings or for someone who has never seen them before, he might think they are a lot of separate, incomprehensible drawings which bear no relationship to one another or that they appear to contradict one another and be altogether very confusing. In fact, all the drawings are needed to get an accurate idea of the extension to the house that the architect is planning. They must be studied and then put together in your mind to get a picture of what the three-dimensional extension will look like.

This is an analogy of the different views of the world you get from science and religion and from other disciplines like art and so on. I think this analogy is helpful, but it needs to be altered a little. The scientific views of reality and the Christian religious views of that same reality are of the same type. I think we could compare the scientific view to the architect's plans. But what analogy could we use to compare with the religious view? One possibility would be a great artist's impression in a painting of what the extension is really going to look like when it is finished and how much better it will be than the present house.

This 'artistic' view is what the Christian view contributes to our lives and the reality it contributes by providing us with an overall framework of meaning which makes sense of each of the other views including the views provided by the various scientists in order to get a co-ordinated, all embracing view of reality that answers the questions of meaning and purpose. We do have to accept what science teaches us, but we must not stop there! We must go beyond science to what the Christian faith has to teach us in providing the framework in which to understand our scientific knowledge.

2. Getting the message

I would like to illustrate how this Christian worldview can have an integrating function, giving an overall framework into which we can fit our knowledge of other areas – science, philosophy, religion, art etc. in order to make sense of it all.

If you ask a biochemist his view, as a biochemist, of human beings he will have to say that in biochemistry there is no such concept as a human being. It is a meaningless concept in biological terms. He is merely concerned about the chemical reactions that go on in living systems and basically these reactions are much the same in a yeast cell or in a human cell.

If you ask a biologist the same sort of question – 'What is a human being?' The answer will be that human beings are animals belonging to the class of mammals in the order of primates. Humans may be complex animals but there is nothing that makes the biologist deny that we are animals.

If you turn to a different area of science, for example, you might ask a psychologist for his account of human beings. He would agree that most people, worldwide, have a sort of 'God-consciousness' – a sense of accountability that shows itself in various ways. It may be related to a person's sense of security or perhaps to their feelings of guilt that are there even when no other person has been offended. It can also show itself in the desire to devote oneself to someone or something – a cause of some sort – as a way of finding personal integration or meaning in life. So a psychologist's account of human beings must include 'God-consciousness'.

It is interesting to note all the inter and intra religious wars currently going on in the world. In the Muslim World we see Sunni against Shia or between the Muslim Rohinga and the Buddhist Burmese on the border between Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma). These are just two clashes. You find inter-religious wars in Mindanao (southern Philippines) as well as in Sudan and many other areas of Africa and Asia and even in Europe.

Sociologists have realised that religion is a very potent force in society. It can undergird a society and give a rationale to its structure. It can be the basis for its laws and its public standards. The unity of many societies tends to be very much based on their common religion.

What are we to make of these different findings? On the one hand there are the biochemists, the biologists, the psychologists and so on together with the sociologists and others who believe that the only truth is scientific truth based on rigorous observation and experimentation. They are happy with what has been given as "scientific truth". But they often have a real problem when God and religion are brought into the discussion. They can't include God in their equations and so they do their best to explain away God and religion in naturalistic terms. Some will argue that human beings have a "God-consciousness" (which is almost universal) and this is seen as a wish fulfilment for insecure people who need a 'father figure' in their lives. The problem is that you could equally argue that those holding the view that religion is just 'wish fulfilment' do so because they are 'arrested adolescents' rebelling against any idea of parental control. So they are unwilling to consider the reality of "God-consciousness". There isn't much future in this kind of debate. It merely shows you have to look somewhere else to settle the issue. You can't do it on the grounds of psychology alone.

The same applies to the sociological evidence. Some have argued that religion is just a product of human society, an objectivisation of its structure and ideas. That is all very well until you seek to account for the religious idealists and prophetic voices that challenge the ideas of the society that produced them and, as a result, transform that society so it conforms to new religious ideals.

So the person who won't go beyond science must treat the evidence in the same way Procrastes did with his visitors in the old Greek legend. Procrastes was a robber chieftain who persuaded people travelling through his village to spend the night in his house. In his house he had a bedroom with a special bed. If they lay down on it and they were too short, he would stretch them so they fitted. If they lay down on the bed and they were too long, he chopped off their feet and the lower part of their legs until they did fit!

It seems to me that people who will only use the scientific evidence and not take any kind of other evidence into account, have done what Procrastes did and chopped off the evidence or at least some of it, seeking to stretch the evidence to fit their limited view of reality. To me, it is much more satisfying to look at all the evidence within a Biblical framework.

What about what I have written about human beings? The Bible endorses the view that we are animals. It makes clear that we, like the animals, were created by God out of 'the dust of the earth'. So we are not surprised at all that a biochemical unity exists or that there are other similarities between humans and animals. Moreover the Bible gives us the truth that there is a uniqueness about us as human beings. We alone are made in 'the image of God'. Now whatever else this means, it does mean that we are capable of having a personal relationship with God. The Bible tells us that we can only find truth and fulfilment in that relationship.

Our social nature is also part of the Biblical picture. It tells us we were created to live in societies and that society is based around the family group. God has given us guidelines that form the basis of how we are to treat one another in the family and in society. Social cohesion and stability is dependent on how well these guidelines are observed. So religion can be a strength, a unifying force in society. But, if a society's religion becomes warped, debased and perverted in various ways, then those living in that society and taking God's Law (Biblical values) seriously are in a position to challenge that society and seek to reform it. This Biblical framework should help us to understand societies, people groups and their religion, of which this is only a brief outline, in our culture and in all the different cultures all over the world. This is in contrast to the evidence of the 'science only' mould that insists that the belief that there is truth beyond scientific study is not true at all, but is some form of self-illusion. It is seen not just as wrong but as dangerous. It is dangerous because it denies there is any meaning behind any of the many areas of human experience.

I have concentrated on the area of religion, but the same is also true of morality, aesthetics and many other areas that require a value judgement that science cannot make. To deny the validity of these areas is to dehumanise ourselves. B. F. Skinner, a behavioural psychologist who takes the view that scientific truth is the only truth, wrote a number of books – **Science and Human Behaviour** (1953) and a more widely read book, **Beyond Freedom and Dignity** (1971). This book says, " '***Science***' (he should have said 'my scientific philosophy') ***is abolishing the autonomous man, the inner man, the possessing demon, the man defended by the literature of freedom and dignity to man <u>as man</u> and we must readily say 'good riddance' "***. Now this is really dehumanising! We are just robots. All of us, whether we are Christians or not, should protest at the view that all people are can be explained by the environment that has conditioned them.

The true measure of humanness is not the picture presented to us by the biologists or the psychologists or the sociologists or all three together! It is really and truly presented to us by a Roman provincial governor who didn't fully understand what he said. He pointed to the Lord Jesus and declared, ***"Behold the man!"*** (John 19:5)

So is scientific truth based on my multiple experiments the only real truth? No, it is wrong, but more than that, it is dangerous because it dehumanises us and denies us the opportunity to get answers to the questions about the meaning of life since these are the sort of questions that science cannot deal with because of the approach to truth it has adopted. Science deals with the mechanisms of things, how they happen, not their meaning and not why they happen, why the world exists and so on.

I would like to give you 3 lines of evidence that suggest there is meaning to be found in the purpose of life – why we are here – why there is a universe etc.

The three lines of evidence:

a) From science

b) From the concept of morality

c) From history

a) From science

I spent two years at the University of London (Barking Campus) studying biochemistry. One area of interest was the chemistry of vitamins – especially vitamin B_1 (thiamine). It is water-soluble and dissolves in various body fluids. Sources include whole-grain products, eggs, pork, nuts, liver and yeast. It acts as a co-enzyme for many different enzymes that break carbon-carbon bonds and are involved in carbohydrate metabolism of pyruvic acid to CO_2 and H_2O. It is essential to the synthesis of acetyl-choline. A deficiency of B_1 leads to beriberi and polyneuritis. To the extent that I could understand the chemistry of vitamin B_1, I was overawed by the elaborate and amazing way – in biochemical terms – the molecule exactly fits the role it plays in living cells.

I felt a bit like what I think David must have thought when he wrote Psalm 19:1, ***"The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the works of His hands."*** So changing David's verse, I said to myself, 'Vitamin B_1 declares the glory of God, and living cells proclaim the work of His hands!'

If an organic chemist today was asked to design a molecule to do what Vitamin B_1 does, he couldn't come up with a better answer. It is impossible to believe that B_1 arose by pure chance. I later found my knowledge of how the vitamins function was not much above kindergarten level!

This is the sort of consideration that has convinced many people from the old Hebrew poets like David, down to modern scientists like Professor Sir Fred Hoyle, who started as an atheist but came to believe that there was a 'mind' behind the universe, to explain the beauty and the harmony of the universe. So many people who see the universe from the very small (like vitamin B_1) to the huge galaxies are convinced it is the deliberate action of an infinite and rational God.

I'm not claiming that the beauty and harmony of nature has developed a watertight logical proof for the existence of God. I don't believe it has. But I do want to say that the character of the physical universe in which we live, at all levels – from the sub atomic particles to the vast galaxies – is such that belief in a rational creator is a live option. More than that, it suggests it is eminently reasonable.

So it is reasonable to believe that this universe is not the result of chance, but of an infinite mind that brought it into being. It is reasonable to expect that there is some meaning and purpose behind it, because minds usually do have a purpose in what they do if they are rational minds. It might be a meaning and purpose that we can understand and grasp.

b) From the concept of morality

This second line of evidence is that we have a sense of right and wrong – a sense of morality. This is one of the characteristics of being a human being. We all have this sense that some things ought to be done or ought not to be done. What is the basis of this "oughtness" that we have about things? What causes this moral sense? With the growth of anthropology – the study of different human societies – we have become increasingly aware that societies differ in their ideas of what is right and what is wrong. This has led to some people arguing that social values are determined by a particular society. They are simply the result of social conditioning so that each society develops its own set of values which, over time, give it stability. Now there is some truth in this argument.

There are at least two reasons I would like to give before going on to show that this argument is not a satisfactory or complete explanation of the origins of our moral sense.

Firstly, this sense that our morals are purely socially determined, over stresses the differences between the morality of different societies. Anthropologists point out that where there are considerable differences in practice between societies, there may still be agreement on principle with the difference being the way the principle is worked out in different ways. Some anthropologists have argued that there is almost universal agreement over the areas of life to which morality ought to be applied such as the family, property rights, the sanctity of life within the group etc. There are areas where all societies and cultures seem to agree that they should have a sense of right and wrong. All this may indicate that the relationship between social structures and morality is more complex than the claim that morality is only a result of social conditioning.

Secondly, the social conditioning theory of morality fails to explain how and why from time to time societies produce social reformers who challenge the standards their society has supposedly conditioned them to accept. What is the origin of this maverick moral conscience? Is it a sort of random psychological quirk? I think <u>you have to say</u> that it is, if morality is just socially conditioned. If it is a random psychological quirk then it has no rational basis and no moral justification. But might it not, on the other hand, be some sort of universal moral wisdom?

This second argument raises a general objection that all attempts to explain our moral sense as being determined by our social conditioning or psychological development or even as the outcome of our biological make-up. All these approaches claim that morality is merely a reflection of the way

things are. It is a reflection of our society. It is a reflection of our psychological make up. It is a reflection of our biology and that is all it is.

If this is so, it is hard to explain why discussions about morality become so heated that they so challenge our views and cut across our natural inclinations and run contrary to the way things are. Isn't this at the heart of what we mean by conscience – something that challenges us, that says to us, "You ought not to behave like that or think like that"? It challenges the way things are in our minds and/or in society.

It is this feature of morality that leads us to conclude that it can't really be explained without reference to something outside ourselves that says to us, "No! You must not do that!"

C.S. Lewis (who was for a while at Magdalene College, Cambridge where both I and my two sons gained our Ph.Ds.) said, **"If we are to continue to make moral judgements, then we must believe that the conscience of man is not the product of nature. It can only be valid if it is the offshoot of some absolute moral wisdom. This moral wisdom exists absolutely on its own and is not a product of a non-moral and non-rational nature."**

Of course C.S. Lewis was a Christian. However, Jean Paul Sartre, an atheistic philosopher, agrees with C.S. Lewis. Sartre himself quotes the Russian novelist Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky (1821-1881). He was very disturbed by all the endemic social evil in Russian lives – the poverty etc. Sartre quotes Dostoyevsky, "If God does not exist, everything would be permitted". "Just so" says Sartre. He goes on to say, **"The existentialist finds it expressly embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappeared with him all possibility of finding intelligible values in this world."** I think what Sartre is saying is that if there is no God, then there can be no morality and so there can be no meaning. This is the conclusion of an atheistic philosopher.

Now this is <u>not</u> a watertight, logical proof that God exists, but it does confront us with a choice. Either we, like Sartre, can reject God and opt for an amoral, unintelligible universe or we can seek to know God in order to discover a universal basis for morality and for meaning.

c) From history

Let us look at the historical evidence for there being meaning in the universe and therefore a God who has purposes for the human race.

About 2000 years ago a man was murdered. We know of his death because one of his contemporaries, who didn't see the event, wrote a letter about it which has survived. Two historians writing over 120 years later referred to this murder. On the basis of this evidence, flimsy though it may seem at first, no one doubts that Julius Caesar died March 15, 44 B.C. aged 55 of 25 stab wounds inflicted by Brutus, Cassius and others. The writer of this account was Cicero. The historians were Plutarch and Plutonium.

This is an example of the level of evidence modern historians of ancient times are normally happy to accept as the basis of their historical writings. I am more concerned with Jesus of Nazareth who was born about 40 years after the death of Julius Caesar. Of course, we know about His life and death from the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. All of these were written by eyewitnesses or based on eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life and death between 30-50 years after His death.

In addition, we can learn about the death of the Lord Jesus from the letters of Paul that were written 20-25 years after His death. In addition to this Christian witness/evidence there is non-Christian evidence that refers to the Lord Jesus. I will only mention some of this briefly. Books have been written about this issue – some within 100 years of His death. Here are a few examples:

- Thallus – possibly a Samaritan – who wrote about 50 A.D.
- Josephus the well-known Jewish historian who wrote about 70 yrs. after the death of Jesus.
- Three Roman witnesses – Tacitus, Suetonius and Pliny the younger – who all wrote within a 100 year period after the death of Jesus on the Cross. None of these were Christians.

So from this non-Christian evidence we learn that the Lord Jesus was a Jewish teacher, a miracle worker, that He had a brother called James, that He claimed to be the Jewish Messiah, that He was executed during the reign of Tiberius Caesar by Pontius Pilate the Roman procurator of Judaea. We also learn that not long after His death His followers claimed He had come back to life.

There are reasons to believe that none of these non-Christian writers had access to the four Gospels. So their evidence is quite independent of the Gospels, but does support the Gospel record. Michael Green wrote a good book on this called, **The Evidence for Jesus**. He looks at evidence from non-Christians in the first century as well as the Christian evidence.

I'm trying to show that the evidence we have concerning Jesus is much better than what professional historians commonly accept as adequate for evidence of events of that era – 1st century A.D. The reason I want to point to Jesus is that He claimed to show men and women the meaning of life. He said, ***"I am the way, the truth and the life"***. How could He make such a claim?

In his Gospel, John tells us why. He calls Jesus the *'Logos'*. This is a Greek word often translated 'word'. But it has a much richer meaning. Greek philosophers used *'logos'* for the divine reasoning they believed lay behind the world giving the world its coherence and meaning. John was a Jew and he knew that, as well as having this meaning for the Greeks, the word 'word' would remind Jews of the 'Word of God' that, according to the Old Testament, brought the whole world into being. It was also how God revealed Himself to His prophets and showed them the meaning of the historical events that were happening in His world. So when John says of Jesus, ***"The Logos became flesh"***, he is claiming that in Jesus we discover the true meaning of life in this world and we can do this because John said, ***"In the beginning was the Logos and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God."***

Here John claims that Jesus was not just another prophet or a philosopher or a religious leader. He was much more than that. In Him the divine nature became a human being in order to make the truth about God, the world and ourselves known to us in a way we can appreciate and understand.

It is impossible to summarise the teaching of the Lord Jesus in a paragraph. If I tried, I would certainly distort it! All I can do is urge you to read the Gospels regularly for yourself. Many have done so beginning with the thought that they were reading ancient Near East history. As you read them thoughtfully and often with an open mind, you see them as honest accounts by sincere men who were eyewitnesses of what Jesus said and did and the impact He made on them. That impact was so great that its effects in the world today are noticeable in millions of lives. A recent estimate suggests that about 33% of the current world population call themselves Christians ~ 2 billion people.

3. What is a miracle?

I read of many "miracles" that have happened as a result of prayer – often just a single prayer perhaps for healing or deliverance from a physical problem or a financial situation. Sometimes this happens when a group of believers pray for a spiritual breakthrough in a very difficult situation.

A "Christian" German theologian – Rudolf Bultmann – wrote this, **"You cannot use an electric light and a radio** (there was no TV in his day)**, call upon modern medicine in the care of illness and at the same time believe in the world of spirits and miracles of the New Testament."** He says he can't believe any more in miracles today! If you were to ask him why, his answer would be, "Because of modern science". Science presents us with a regular ordered world of cause and effect governed by natural laws. There is no room for miracles which violate natural laws.

Here are several areas of crooked thinking that need to be straightened out. Perhaps the best way to do this is to outline briefly the Biblical view of miracles. The Bible uses 3 terms to refer to the kind of events we usually call miracles. 'Miracle' is a Latin word, so you won't find it in the Bible. Words you do find in the Bible are:

- **'a sign'** – this is the most commonly used word
- **'wonder'** is also used
- **'a mighty work'** is a phrase used

The last two terms 'wonder' and 'a mighty work' refer to the fact that these events are out of the ordinary. They are unexpected and so attention catching. They cause wonder. But the Biblical emphasis is not on this aspect of 'wonder', but much more on the word 'sign'. The Biblical writers want to stress that these events are unexpected and unusual, but they are also saying something else. They are significant. They reveal something about God, His nature and His purposes.

With our scientific cultural background we tend to ask questions such as, "How did that happen?" "How can we reproduce that result regularly?" "What are the scientific laws of nature behind it?" If you say, "It was a miracle" you will cause a great deal of contempt. It is an a priori principle that miracles don't happen.

Now in some cases, a natural explanation of a miracle is hinted at. One of the most important miracles of the Old Testament is the People of Israel crossing the "Red Sea" (Ex. 14:21-22) in their escape from slavery in Egypt. On that occasion we are told that a very strong east wind – i.e. coming across from what is now the Saudi Arabian desert and the Sinai desert – blew and God used that wind to drive back the waters.

When they were digging the Suez Canal in the 19th century this same wind blew and it dried up one of the Bitter Lakes through which the Suez Canal was meant to flow. In Arabic it is called the "Khamzin" wind. When living as a family in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, we experienced this wind and found it very dehydrating.

So maybe God sometimes uses natural causes – in the above case a meteorological feature on the crossing of the Red Sea that wasn't understood at the time. There are events in the Bible that are referred to as 'signs' where natural explanations are possible.

In Joshua 3 there is an account of the miracle of Joshua and the 12 tribes of the Jewish people crossing from the East Bank of the Jordan River to the West Bank on dry land. This occurred some time in April/May when the river was in flood from melting snows of Mount Hermon in the North.

At least twice in the last 50 years the River Jordan has stopped flowing in the region of Jericho. The Jordan Valley is a rift valley where earthquakes are fairly common. Both times the earth tremors were recorded and these caused the banks of the Jordan to collapse and block the flow of the river upstream – often for several hours.

But there are other 'signs' in the Bible where apparently there is no natural explanation and it is these 'signs' that cause people to raise their eyebrows and respond with. "I don't believe that" because they appear to violate the laws of nature.

So our idea of the whole concept of miracles depends on our presuppositions about the world. For an atheist the ultimate reality is the world of matter, scientific laws, how we describe what we observe about matter and how it behaves and the ways different forms of matter interact. And since matter is the ultimate reality if you are an atheist, the atheist has to assume that provided these laws have been properly researched, they are statements of the unchanging nature of ultimate reality. So it is inconceivable to the atheist that these laws could be violated or suspended. So an atheist cannot believe in miracles because it goes against the whole basis of his/her thinking about reality. If you ask atheists to believe in miracles, you are asking them to be untrue to the very basis/core of their worldview. So it is a philosophical position and not from science itself.

So what does science say about the laws of science that have so far been discovered? At present there is considerable debate about this among the philosophers of science, but two points are generally agreed:

1. Scientific laws are no more and no less than descriptions of observed regularities in nature. The scientist observes nature and detects certain regularities. So these "laws" are descriptions of what we have observed to happen, but they cannot be made a basis of what must happen. They can only say what has happened. They can't be made a basis of what will happen in the future, but only what has happened in the past. The only way we can make sense of these predictions of

what will happen is that we bring some philosophical presuppositions. This is the important point. This is where the scientist usually goes beyond science to a philosophical presupposition.

2. There is such a philosophical presupposition that every scientist uses as a daily working assumption and that is the uniformity of nature. This is an essential principle. Scientists believe that nature is uniform in both space and time. We assume that the laws of nature discovered in the past that are observed with great regularity, don't only hold true on planet earth, but they hold true throughout the universe. It is to ascertain the truth of this that so much has been spent on space programmes.

   This assumption has so far worked as far as we have tested it. This is a philosophical assumption. We also assume that these "laws" that held true yesterday and that regularly hold true will also hold true today and into the future. But we need to be clear that this is an assumption!

   The principle of the uniformity of nature is believed because it seems to work, but its truth cannot be proved scientifically. However it is a working assumption of all scientists.

We will come back to this later on. It is an important, but little recognised, fact that both the concept of natural law and the principle of the uniformity of nature arose out of Christian beliefs and the presuppositions of the early modern scientists. From Kepler to Newton and beyond there is evidence in their writings of their complete confidence in the uniformity of nature based on the belief that the universe is the creation of a God who is both rational and faithful. Because God is rational they believed that the universe is an orderly universe. So it is worth looking for regularities. They believed that because God is faithful He would sustain these regularities in operation in normal circumstances and therefore they could frame the laws of science.

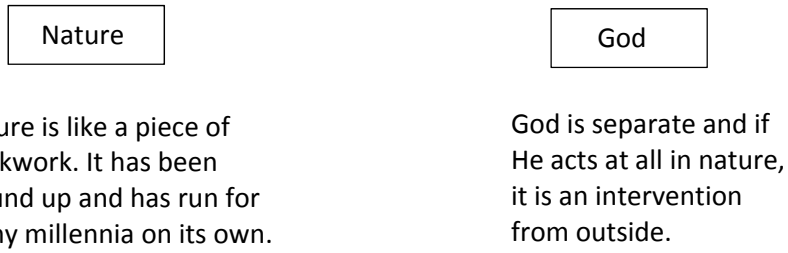
In the writings of western scholars there is little or no evidence of the concept of "natural law" until the 17th century. As we live now in the 21st century this is so obvious to us in our scientific culture. We assume that at least all Europeans have always believed in "natural laws". But 17th century scientific culture began to arise, post-Reformation, when it was thought that scientific laws were probably very similar to the Biblical, God-given moral laws. So scientists drew a parallel. If God was the Lord of all humanity, then there was a possibility that the Lord of Creation had given humanity moral laws. God was also the Lord of all physical creation and so there were probably physical laws. They noted that in the Bible it says that God, ***"Set the bounds to the sea"*** (Prov. 30:4) and God promised to send seed time and harvest in a regular pattern year after year. ***"As long as the earth endures, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease."*** (Gen. 4:22) So by analogy, they had the confidence that there would be natural laws they could discover.

So the basis of the uniformity of nature and the belief that there were natural laws to be found arose out of the Christian belief system of the early 'modern' scientists. So if one accepts a Biblical worldview of God's relationship with nature, there is no contradiction between believing in miracles and also accepting the scientific account of the world based on the assumption of the uniformity of nature. The Bible teaches that God is both the Creator and the Sustainer of the universe. He brought it into being and He keeps it in being. This leads us to think of nature with its laws as an expression of God's ongoing activity in sustaining creation. Why are there natural scientific laws? Why is there a continuing uniformity? It is because God is continually at work, sustaining His creation by ensuring that the laws He has made work continuously.

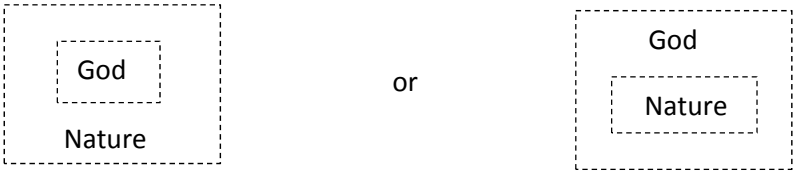
So the laws of nature are God's normal way of carrying out His purposes through the physical world. God's purposes for this world are not only carried out through people like us, they are also carried out through the physical world by God giving the world regular patterns that are designed to maintain a balance. Global warming, that we are so concerned about, shows that we have disturbed the balance with potentially catastrophic consequences in the future. Another example would be the amount of polystyrene pellets found in fish and marine animals in oceans around the world.

So ‘miracles’ are special acts of God, but they are not necessarily interventions by God in this world. Because God is always present and always active in this world, He doesn’t have to intervene. From a Biblical perspective, a ‘miracle’ is a change in God’s method of working. It isn’t that one moment He is not there and the next moment He intervenes with a miracle. He is always there, but on a particular occasion He may change His way of working from the regular pattern.

A common problem is that nature is thought of by many people as being independent of God.



But the Biblical view is very different. Nature is not independent of God.



The world of nature is not seen as independent of God but as one aspect of God’s ongoing activity in working out His purposes. Occasionally, in pursuit of His purpose, God acts in a special way. As we have seen, some of these actions mean a departure from His normal pattern of working. This is what we used to call a ‘miracle’ – the normal laws/patterns are suspended by God for a particular reason. But many of the special acts of God are not of the same character as when He uses the natural laws to carry out His purposes. So the two boxes above overlap to some extent because some of the ‘miracles’ have a ‘natural’ explanation. In Biblical terms they are still ‘signs’. They are special acts of God that draw our attention in a particular way.

So, are they miracles? Many non-Christian philosophers have written about miracles in recent years and some have accepted that if one believes in a God of the kind represented in the Bible (in contrast to the many Indian gods/goddesses or gods that are often tribal found among Africans), belief in miracles is reasonable. But they raise the question. “How can a miracle be identified? Can we ever give a confident affirmation that it is a miracle?” These philosophers often agree that what past generations explained as miracles, can now be explained by scientific, and therefore natural, processes. If this is true, then we can be sure that what we label as a miracle today may turn out later to have purely natural causes. Perhaps in a hundred years what we now call a miracle will be normal medical practice.

Of course, the answer is that we can’t be absolutely sure what happened and why an event happened. But from a Biblical perspective this doesn’t matter. Remember, the Bible is concerned about miracles as <u>signs</u>. The Bible doesn’t give an exact description of how God does a miracle. It may be through a natural process or not. It may be a violation of the law of nature or it may be what we would call a coincidence. In any event it is <u>a sign from God</u> in the context of what has happened. So for the Christian believer a miracle is an unusual, unexpected (but prayed for) event whatever its mechanism. It fits into the pattern of what God is seeking to do in the world and it speaks to us about God in a special way.

The Bible clearly shows us that the Lord Jesus had compassion on the sick and the suffering. Healing was part of His ministry. The Bible also tells us that healing is something about which we can prayerfully seek God’s will. Sometimes His will is that person should be healed.

There is also a third factor that of believing Christians involved prayerfully in seeking God's will in a particular critical situation. So in this case, when there is a 'miracle' it is a sign from God that He cares for that person and for those who prayed for him/her.

Of course a determined sceptic will never be convinced that a particular event is a miracle. The sceptic can always say, "It was a remarkable coincidence and one day in the future science will be able to explain it!" He may also say, "I just don't believe it!"

But for a believing Christian, the eyes of faith can usually discern gracious signs from God in the unexpected event. In this way God seeks to confirm our faith and challenge us to grow in faith.

4. Are we apes or angels?

People are a paradox. We are capable of great courage, generosity and self-sacrifice, but we are also capable of great callousness, cruelty and self-centredness. This is confirmed by the news we constantly see on TV and read in the newspapers. We are a very strange mixture of good and evil. Each one of us knows this as we examine our thought life. Within ourselves there is good and there is evil. How are we to explain this?

I will try to show you that the Biblical teaching about human nature fits the paradoxical nature of our personhood far better than any attempts to explain it from an atheistic perspective.

What kind of explanations have atheists given? From roughly 1848 until ~ 1945 the dominant mood among non-Christian philosophers with regards to human nature was one of optimism. They built the idea of biological evolution. They argued that homo sapiens was bound to go on getting better and better in every way. They saw evolution as a process of ascent – as progress – and so they thought we must be getting better generation by generation. It was argued that we could accelerate this process by advances in science and technology, by means of universal education, by improving healthcare and housing and by helping with other social conditions. It is true that great strides have been made in various ways in the last 60 years. But the results, as far as human behaviour is concerned, are disappointing. We don't seem to have got any better than we were in 1845. Indeed any mood of optimism has largely disappeared.

There was an English professor called C.E.M. Joad who used to speak from time to time on BBC radio. He was initially an atheist who shared this great optimism, but in the early 1950s he wrote, **"A shallow optimism as regards to human nature led us to think the 'millennium' was around the corner waiting to be introduced. But because we rejected the doctrine of original sin, we have always been disappointed by the refusal of people to be reasonable; disappointed by the subservience of the intellect to emotion, disappointed by the fact that true socialism has failed to arrive. We are disappointed by our own politicians in their behaviour and equally disappointed in other nations and their politicians and above all, by the recurrent fact of war in so many areas of the world."**

This takes us to the heart of the matter. Optimistic humanists failed to recognise the deep-rootedness of evil in our human personalities. At best they saw it as a minor aberration that could be removed by improving people's social environment and above all by improving their minds through education. But this hasn't worked! Better education and more science training have just led to much bigger and more devastating wars as the weaponry has improved. The first and second world wars shattered a great deal of that optimism and we have lived with this now for over 70 years.

So perhaps it is not surprising that non-Christian thinking adopts a view that is ultimately very pessimistic with regards to human nature. It denies that there is any explanation of human nature other than a purely materialistic one. When I was a student in London in the 1960s the thoughts of Chairman Mao of China were popular on many university campuses. In his thoughts he said this, **"There is nothing in the universe but matter and motion. There is no God. There is no soul. There is no spirit. There is nothing but matter and motion. Therefore you are an animal."** Perhaps it was because he saw people just as animals with no special value that he could go on living with himself even when

he knew his policies caused the death of so many millions of people during his "Great Leap Forward" campaign and then during the Cultural Revolution.

Some Western scientists have agreed with Chairman Mao that people are just animals but have pushed this idea further. B.F. Skinner, a well-known behavioural psychologist, assumes we are just animals. He goes on to claim that an animal's behaviour is conditioned by its environment. You will have heard about Pavlov's dogs. Pavlov rang a bell whenever he brought them their food and found that if he didn't bring food but still rang the bell, they still produced saliva because they had been conditioned how to respond to the sound of a bell. Skinner then argued that this must be true of human behaviour as well. He said, **"A person does not act upon the world. The world acts upon him."** So we are just conditioned by our environment and therefore not responsible for our behaviour. We can't help it if we have been conditioned to act in this way.

At first this sounds great, because if we are conditioned to behave in the way we do, then we can use those words that are sometimes heard in court, "My Lord, it is my genes, my environment, my parents … I can't help it!" This is followed by pleas of mitigation because of the bad circumstances in which the person was brought up and is currently living.

But there is another side to this if we say that all the wrong we do is as a result of our environment, we must face the other side of the issue. If this is true, what can we do to improve our lot? The answer of many is to improve our environment so that it is good and stops us from doing negative things – i.e. doing evil. Many optimistic humanists used to think this. But there is a problem. How can we who have been conditioned to do evil, suddenly start doing good? And in doing good can we improve our environment? When we have tried this the usual result has been to create further problems so the situation gets worse. Many people in the UK will say that this is what we have done since World War II. So it has become a vicious circle. There seems to be no hope. The environment has made us bad and now we are bad, so how can we improve our environment? How do we make ourselves better?

But it is worse than this. If I am a product of environmental conditioning, even the good I do has been conditioned, so I can't claim any credit for it. I couldn't help doing it! In fact a materialistic worldview has destroyed my freedom and my responsibility completely. This means it has also destroyed morality. We no longer do things because they are good or evil. We do them because we have been conditioned to do so. So good or evil mean nothing. They are not meaningful categories. We are just a bundle of conditioned reflexes.

The irony of this is that materialists like Skinner ought to go a bit further than they do. They ought to believe that their own belief in materialism is a conditioned belief, that the way they have been brought up, their environment, has conditioned them to believe that materialism is right. If others believe differently, then they too have been conditioned, but just conditioned to believe the opposite so neither of them can help believing as they do.

So not only is morality abolished, truth is also abolished. In fact, all beliefs are nonsense! There is no rational meaning in them. It is no coincidence that Skinner chose as the title of his best known book, **"Beyond Freedom and Dignity"**. This says our concepts are so conditioned by our environment that these concepts are meaningless. He should have added 'beyond truth' also. But if he had done so, there would have been no reason to publish the book!

It is a great relief to turn from this pessimistic view to the Biblical view of human nature. In the story of Creation in Genesis 1, we are told that people are made in the image of God and that our human nature reflects something of the nature of the God who created us. This is true to the situation as we see it. Think of some of the characteristics of human personality. Think of imagination. It is something we take for granted, so we don't stop and reflect on its significance. Consider the power of imagination. By it we are able to escape from the world of actuality. In imagination, we don't just think of what actually exists but of what could, but does not yet, exist. We can think not only about the past but about the future – not only what we have done, but what we could do. In this way we

can transcend nature that Skinner and others say conditions us and so imprisons us. I think this is an amazing thing! If I have been conditioned by my environment, how can my imagination transcend it? This is a reflection of the nature of God who transcends the nature of all that He has created.

Then there is our desire for meaning and purpose in life. It is not only a thorough-going behaviourist like Skinner who <u>really</u> lives out his belief system. He still publishes his scientific papers and his books as if they did say something significant and meaningful to his readers.

So inherently we think there is meaning and purpose in life and that we are not a joke of our environment, but rather we are created by a purposeful Creator God who has put this desire for meaning and purpose in us.

We have seen how very difficult this is for atheists who have a hard time explaining the origins of morality and for people like Skinner who have no place for morality. But in every culture, people prefer to believe in right and wrong, in good and bad. Might not this be a reflection on the nature of God – that God is a moral being who has given us moral sense?

Finally, there is the self-giving love that we all recognise as one of the highest of the human virtues. The Bible tells us that God is love and even more, He is self-giving love. He has given Himself for His world. In all these ways and in others we can suggest that human nature, at its best, reflects the image and character of the God who made us. But if we are made in the image of God, why do we do evil? Of course the answer in the Bible is the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. There we are told that God gave them freedom to choose whether to obey Him or rebel against Him. A freedom without morality would be meaningless. They chose to rebel and disobey God.

As a result, the Bible teaches us that human nature has been warped and twisted by evil and so we find ourselves paradoxical creatures. The image of God in us has not been entirely wiped out. It is still there, but it is marred and scarred by evil. So from this marred and scarred personality of ours, flows a mixture of good and evil.

At first glance the Biblical picture might seem as deeply pessimistic as that of the materialist. If our nature is so twisted by evil, what can we do about it? If we find we can't "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps", what can we do? The answer is that we can't do anything about our state, but God can! And He does so. Look at these amazing words from 2 Cor. 5:17-18, ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us a ministry of reconciliation."***

So if we are "in Christ", we are a new creation. We have been made 'anew' by the Creator who made human personality in the first place. All this is possible through the Lord Jesus, because of what God has done through Christ. So what has He done? First of all, He has given us an example of human life that does reflect the image of God as it should be. In the Lord Jesus, we are told that we see the image of God the Father. We see what our lives ought to have been – free from the warping and twisting of sin. So we have a perfect example to follow.

But God has also shown us that He takes our wrongdoing very seriously! But He has dealt with it at the Cross. As a parent, I know that if I want my 3 children to grow up with moral standards as moral beings, I have to take their wrongdoing seriously and not turn a blind eye to it otherwise I just encourage them to go on doing it. In one way or another I have to put sanctions on them saying, "That sort of behaviour is unacceptable in our home and in this world".

Well, God has done that to us in the Cross. On the Cross, the Lord Jesus said those awful words, ***"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"*** The Bible tells us this is what all people deserve as human beings who have rebelled against God and disobeyed Him. We deserve to be God-forsaken for all eternity. But the Lord Jesus lived a perfect human life. Why did He experience that God-forsakeness? It was because He stood in the place of all humanity as He hung on the Cross. There He experienced what we ought to experience – being forsaken. But in the Lord Jesus, God was taking upon Himself the consequences of the world's sin. In doing so He was saying, "I take your wrongdoing very seriously.

I have not turned a blind eye to it. I have dealt with it on the Cross. I have taken all the consequences of your sin upon Myself!"

So, as Paul says, God holds out to us reconciliation – the hand of friendship. He says, "I will receive you back. I will remake our relationship that was broken by your disobedience." All we have to do is accept that reconciling hand of friendship in repentance and faith.

Then God gives us the Spirit of the Lord Jesus to recreate our personality. It isn't enough to have a great example, because we can't follow it. Have you ever tried to live out the example of the Lord Jesus? Very quickly you discover you can't do it! It's like asking how long have you managed to keep your New Year's resolution – a week – a month? If you kept it for a week you have done well!

So God doesn't just say to us, "I have forgiven you and now here is the example you must follow." He gives us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, within us to be able to follow His example. He is the one who will begin to recreate your personality. Paul writes, ***"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being <u>transformed into His likeness</u> with ever increasing glory which comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."*** (2 Cor. 3:18) So as we fix our eyes daily on the Lord Jesus, we will be transformed into His likeness. It is a gradual process, but when God gives us His Spirit He begins the process of re-creation, of restoring the image of Our Creator in our personality. It is a gradual process but a sure one!

So here in this Biblical teaching is a sure explanation of the paradox of being a person who takes very seriously our paradoxical personhood in that it is both good and evil and does not deny either. This rings true and it gives us hope that this paradox will be resolved if we give ourselves back to Our Maker through the Lord Jesus and accept His re-creating work in us.

So we are not animals like some sort of advanced ape, because there is something about us that is ***"made in the image of God***". Neither are we angels always doing the will of God. We are human beings with very great potential of enjoying an eternity with God in heaven.

5. The issue of suffering and the belief in God

Belief in God in a world of suffering has perplexed believers in God in all eras. The Old Testament Psalms are full of the cries of perplexed sufferers. The Book of Job in the Old Testament grapples with this issue at great length. With their usual clarity of thought, Greek philosophers of the few centuries before Christ, set out the problem as a logical conundrum that has kept philosophers busy ever since. They said that if God is good, He will not permit evil. If God is all-powerful, He can prevent evil. But evil exists. Therefore either God is not good or He is not all-powerful.

To this the modern atheists add that it is a lot simpler not to believe in God at all. This solves the problem and the consequence is that we just have to accept suffering as one of the brute facts of this world in which we have to live.

What are Christians to say in response to this? It is not an easy problem to solve! There are no simple or slick answers to the problem of suffering if one believes in a good and all-powerful God.

Here are some suggestions that may point towards an answer. We will start with <u>the matter of God's goodness</u>. Here we must stop and make sure we are thinking straight. As Christians, we do believe that God is perfect goodness, but what do we mean by that? And is this 'straight thinking' just to go on and claim that God is perfectly good and so He would want to prevent all suffering?

We often think of God in pictures and by analogy. The Lord Jesus use one such analogy – that of a very good parent. No good parent wants his child to suffer, but sometimes the parent chooses not to step in and prevent suffering. This is because the parent knows that if children are to grow to maturity they must find out things for themselves. They must learn to make their own decisions and their own choices. Sometimes their mistakes will lead to suffering of one kind or another. But the parent judges that the good of the ultimate outcome in a child who is mature, outweighs the immediate suffering.

Now Christians believe that God acts in a similar way. I think a lot of people – both Christians and non-Christians – have the wrong idea here. They assume that God intended to create the world as "a paradise for pampered pets". But there is nothing in the Bible to support this idea. There is plenty of evidence that God created the world as a sort of "school" for His children to grow up in. It would be impossible to grow to maturity if the world never challenged us with difficult experiences. In this process of maturing we will sometimes suffer, because the world gives us hard knocks. The Bible assures us that if we respond to these knocks positively and learn from them, the outcome will be a mature personality and it will all seem to have been worthwhile. The Bible adds that the whole process is preparing us for a life to come in eternity that will vastly outweigh any suffering we may have incurred in this life.

We must move on from God's goodness to the issue of God's powerfulness. The sceptic might argue that, unlike human parents, God is supposed to be all-powerful and so surely He can achieve His purpose of producing a mature person without letting him/her suffer at all. Again we need to be sure we are thinking straight about what it means to say God is all-powerful. It doesn't mean God can do anything whatever it is with no limits at all. For example, the Bible tells us in several places that God cannot tell a lie. Lying is impossible for God. He is a good God. It is contrary to the heart of His nature to say something and not mean it or, in fact, to mean the opposite. The God of the Bible will not and cannot contradict Himself. So He is limited by His essential nature to do what is good.

But there is another type of limitation that becomes clearer when we ask the question, 'Could God create a square circle?' 'Could He create an impersonal person?' The answer to this sort of question by Christians is always going to be "No" because a square circle or an impersonal person is a contradiction in terms. It is a piece of literal nonsense. God can be expected to do miracles, but not to do nonsense! This is not a quibble about words. Most philosophers and psychologists would agree that the concept of a person, especially a moral person, is nonsense unless that person has the ability, given the opportunity, to exercise their God-given gifts, their freewill and to make moral choices. Psychologists would go on to say that maturity can only be gained by experience, by facing experiences that require moral choices.

So Christian theologians have argued that, as originally created by God, Adam and Eve were morally innocent not morally mature and it was God's intention for them to grow into maturity by having opportunities to exercise their wills through having to make moral choices. This meant that they had to have the opportunity to make the wrong choice.

In Hebrews there is a striking verse about the Lord Jesus as a human person in which we find these words, ***"Although He was a son, He learned obedience from what He suffered and once made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him."*** (Heb. 5:8-9)

Here the writer is saying that the Lord Jesus was made perfect through suffering. He is not implying that He was ever imperfect. This word 'perfect' apparently could equally be translated 'mature'. So this passage is saying that the Lord Jesus was born as a baby and had to develop into a fully grown man. This came about through the experiences of suffering during His life.

If the personhood of the Lord Jesus grew into maturity through suffering, how much more is this going to be true of us! The same type of reasoning applies to other aspects of our being such as our capacity to love other people. We know very well that genuine love must be freely given. It is not something that can be coerced. God couldn't have made us so that we had to love Him because then it would not be genuine love.

So it is from these forms of consideration that, as Christians, we believe that God created moral beings capable of having a love relationship with Himself. He had to give us the opportunity to spurn Him and disobey Him in spite of whatever negative consequences may follow.

So we can see that much of the world's suffering is due to the misuse of human freedom and the failure of human love. Faced with this sort of argument, the sceptic will ask, "Why doesn't God end it all? Why didn't He cut it short in the Garden of Eden? Is our freedom really worth it?"

I have three answers to this. None of them is fully satisfactory:

a. The first answer is to turn the question back to the sceptic and ask if he thinks it is worth it in personal terms. “Do you prefer existing even in a suffering world to not existing at all?” The great majority of people seem to cling on to life and this suggests that they do believe it is worth it spite of the hardships, pain and suffering in the world.

b. The second response to the sceptic is to point out that the full answer to, “Is it worth it?” can’t be given yet. We must wait and see what God has in store for His children in the life to come! All the evidence is not in yet.

c. The third response is that clearly God thinks that it is worthwhile and I trust Him and His judgement.

This appeal to “trust in God” is not just a copout. I believe the basic answer the Bible gives is, “Trust God”. According to the Bible God is personal. We all know and have experienced that other people do all sorts of things for all sorts of reasons that are hidden from us, but when they are explained to us, we think they are perfectly reasonable. The way we react to someone who has done something we can’t immediately understand usually depends on our degree of trust in them. If a friend of mine asks to borrow my car because he needs to go to a rugby match since he is a medical doctor who must attend rugby matches, then I might say, “Yes, take it, but I must have it back by 7 pm as I have an appointment to see someone at 7:30 pm.”

So my friend goes off in my car. It comes to 7 pm and there is no car at my house. How am I going to react? I know my friend is a person who keeps his word when he gives it. I know that he wouldn’t willingly make me late for an appointment since he knows that I don’t like being late. So my first assumption is that something has gone wrong that was beyond his control. The possibilities are many. Perhaps he had to take someone to the hospital. Perhaps there was a road accident and the traffic was held up. So I will try and wait with some degree of patience and charity (believing the best) in my heart because I trust him.

On the other hand, there have been a few people I’ve known that I would not trust to drive my car at all. I would not have the same degree of patience, because they have let me down frequently in the past.

So our reactions to this kind of situation depend on our degree of trust in the people involved. As Christians, we claim that we know enough about God to trust God in what He does when He allows things to happen that perplex our human minds.

So what is the basis of the claim that we believe God is completely trustworthy? To begin with, there is the revelation of God in nature. I believe that nature witnesses to God’s wisdom and God’s power. This was the revelation God gave to Job at the end of a time of great personal suffering. God reminded him of the wisdom of His creation and the order of His creation.

From a study of biology, chemistry and physics I am led to conclude that the suffering that arises in the realm of nature (and a great deal of suffering does arise in nature that is not from human wickedness) must exist for some good reason in God’s overall purposes because He is a wise God. All that I can see in creation causes me to trust in the Creator for the things I cannot see. We can discern some of the consequences of human beings causing things like the shrinkage of the ozone layer, global warming, reduction of fish stocks in the ocean because of tiny bits of plastic etc. For the rest, I am motivated to trust God for all that I do not understand about His creation.

Then there is the revelation of God’s character in the historical parts of the Old Testament in the history of Israel. We can see His continuing love for His people and His faithfulness to them even when they were unfaithful to Him. We see His great wisdom in dealing with them. This has helped me to build up my trust in God.

We also see the revelation of God in the Lord Jesus. In the character of the Lord Jesus we see someone who is utterly good, someone who is loving and caring in His dealings with people,

someone who doesn't delight in suffering, but rather is moved into action when He sees a leper or the sick or even the dead or even a corrupt government official who wanted to see Him. He was moved to tears when faced with the tears of a friend over the death of her brother. He was someone who had a passionate desire to alleviate suffering in all the ways that He could. The Bible tells us that God's character is revealed in the Lord Jesus. This is what God is like! Above all we see in the Lord Jesus that He was willing to accept Himself the terrible suffering of death on the Cross in order to overcome the power of evil in us and for us.

So I can trust in God for the things I don't understand. Most important of all is the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. From the disciples' perspective, Good Friday seemed like a catastrophic soul-destroying period of suffering and an end of all their hopes and expectations. But on Easter Day, it became clear that "Friday" had been transformed into an absolutely glorious day of triumph over evil. This is the confidence that a Christian has, that God will take the suffering of this world and transform it into all that is glorious in terms of revealing how God works.

So we have thought about God's goodness and God's powerfulness. We have thought about the grounds we have to trust this great God of ours. I would just like to make one last point – another reason for trusting God when faced with suffering. It is that as Christians, God will use us in the midst of suffering. We have only looked at rational arguments about suffering and although these are important they generally "cut no ice" when we are actually experiencing suffering! Then what is needed is something much deeper.

When you go to visit someone who is suffering, you will usually find the most important thing to have is not a reasoned explanation of their suffering or even practical help that they may need, but simply the assurance that there is someone who sympathises by being with them in their suffering and it is this that so many Christians have experienced to be true of God. God does sympathise with us in our suffering. Much more than that, He can give us His help and strength to deal with our suffering. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the Lord Jesus in the following way, ***"We have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we have, yet without sin. Let us approach the throne of grace with confidence so we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need"***. (Heb. 4:14-16)