
God (1)

“In the beginning, God” (Genesis 1:1)

Apostles Creed (c. 5th century AD)

“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.”

Nicene Creed (325AD)

“We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.”

Assemblies of God

“We believe in one eternal God who is the Creator of all things. He exists in three Persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. He is totally loving and completely holy.”

Baptist

“We believe in the great biblical truth of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

1. God's Existence

By definition, theology starts with *theos*, or God.

Can we “prove” God's existence? Do we need to?

“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:14)

The Bible assumes God's existence. It does not speculate about how the knowledge of God came to our minds.

The Psalmist scorns the person who says there is no God (Psalm 53:1, 2). The Bible does not attempt forensic “proofs”.

However, there are arguments we can consider, and appeal to, in discussions with other people.

1. Creator - Cosmological. Everything has a cause. The universe is not self-existent. Creation demands a creator. Some of the ancients believed the earth was supported by an elephant, a fish, or a super-hero (Atlas). The Bible teaches that God alone created what exists, *ex nihilo*, ie “from nothing”.
2. Design - Teleological. The universe was intelligently designed and is governed by order, not chaos. There is no chance it could have made/regulated itself.

3. Anthropological - the nature of man, eg conscience, awareness of God's existence, hunger for God (Ps 42:2).
 - Karl Jung: "Man is incurably religious". Created in the image of God, with the capacity to know and worship Him (cows do not worship).

The religious impulse is not just an intellectual thing; the need for something to worship is an indelible unavoidable part of human nature.

 - We cannot deny God without denying our nature.
 - The concept of "justice" is also instructive: "laws" demand a law-giver; a "judge of all the earth"; otherwise we have no standard and no "right" or "wrong", simply "social averages".
 - Francis Schaeffer (1914-1984) argued (eg *The God Who is There*) that taking God out of the equation leads to the "death of hope".
4. Universal belief - Common assent. Belief in God is the single most important shared faith premise in the world.
5. History - Providence. "Why doesn't God do something?" is a common complaint. God does get involved in human affairs, eg "For this purpose I made (Pharaoh)", Romans 9:17. Some theologians point to the emergence of modern Israel. Events in peoples' lives can indicate a higher hand.

What about unbelief? When people negate the existence and role of God He gives them over to unbelief (Romans 1:21, 22, 24a, 26a). Unbelief does not negate truth, cf Rom 3:3, 4. Unbelievers "do not know God" (Gal 4:8).

2. How Many Gods?

- Atheism
 - A belief system
 - Indifference to God; live as though He does not exist
 - Dogmatic - atheists declare He does not/cannot exist; unaware of the underlying hopelessness of their position - Eph 2:12, 13 "a-theos"
 - Live by principles that are inconsistent with the existence of God
- Agnosticism (coined by Thomas Huxley, British scientist in 1869; "God cannot be proved")
- Deism
- Pantheism
- Animism
- Polytheism - worship of many gods
 - Hinduism is an example of polytheism; in ancient times it was believed that there were 330 million living beings; this gave rise to the idea of 330 million deities
- Materialism - matter is all that exists; we are animals
- Monotheism - belief in One God is the basis of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

“Religion” has a strong tendency to divide people, to lead to superiority, caricatures, marginalisation, dehumanisation, oppression and violence.

The Bible and the Christian message are based on a claim of “exclusivity” about God, revelation, miracles. Christian does not allow any room for pluralism.

Ravi Zacharias has written useful works about the human quest for god in a pluralistic world.

3. Knowing God

God wants us to know Him:

“This is what the LORD says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,’ declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24 NIV)

Secular world views about God

| | |
|-----------|---|
| Plato | The eternal mind, the cause of good in nature |
| Aristotle | The first ground of all being |
| Spinoza | The absolute, universal Substance, the real Cause of all existence |
| Leibniz | The final reason of things |
| Kant | A being who has all rights and no duties the moral author of the world |
| Fichte | The moral order of the universe who actually operates in life |
| Hegel | The absolute spirit, but without consciousness except in the reason and thoughts of man |
| Strauss | The <i>Universum</i> (a philosophical term for the universe) |
| Comte | Humanity |
| Arnold | The “Stream of Tendency that Makes for Righteousness” |
| Mather | A spiritual power eminent in the universe and involved in the hazard of his creation |
| Ames | The idea of the personalised, idealised whole of eternity that is growing and finite |

These all suggest an idea rather than a “person”.

No one has ever seen God (John 1:18). Muslims believe He is unknowable. Paul stated that He dwells in “unapproachable light” (1 Timothy 6:16). How do we know what he is really like - except through human pictures (which are limited at best)?

4. The Nature of God

What is God like? Ancient Greeks/Romans described their gods according to their hierarchy and functions. Various contemporary religions do the same (emphasis on personal gods).

4.a God’s Nature is Revealed in His Names

Our names have meanings. The ancient Hebrews deliberately chose names based on interpretations. These days we do not emphasise.

Examples of the use of names in Scripture to express character or prophecy:

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Abram > Abraham | Multitude of Nations |
| Sarai > Sarah | Princess |
| Joseph | Deceiver |
| | became Israel = strives with God and prevails |
| Joshua (Heb.) > Jesus (Gk.) | Saviour |
| Messiah (Heb.) > Christ (Gk.) | Anointed |

God’s names reveal His character. To take His name in vain was forbidden (Exodus 20:7).

God stands by His name (1 Samuel 12:22). It is our “strong tower” (Proverbs 18:10) and we are called to sanctify (hallow) it, cf Matthew 6:9.

1. El = God Creator, omnipotent
El appears more than 250 times in the Old Testament. Plural form = Elohim in Genesis indicated plurality (more than 2,310 other times) > Trinity

Elyon = Most High, Exalted God (Genesis 14:17-20, Isaiah 14:13-14). God is transcendent over man and the universe, not subject to them (the ancient Greeks played with and manipulated their gods). This contrasts with the folly of idolatry, where people make gods and worship them.

El Shaddai = God Almighty; All Sufficient One (Genesis 17:1, Exodus 6:3, Psalm 91:1)

El Olam = Everlasting God (Genesis 21:33; Isaiah 40:28-31)

El-Roi = “The strong one who sees” (Genesis 16:13)

2. Jehovah = Lord

Covenant name. First used in Genesis (written by Moses, cf Exodus 2 account).

“To Be” = all existent, all sufficient
Without tense (was, is, is to come)

7,000+ times in the Old Testament. Often expressed as LORD in English.

Tetragrammaton JHWH. Jews refused to pronounce. Ritually bathed before writing the name in scrolls.

Discussion - Should we call God Jehovah?

The key to understanding the names of God is Jesus Christ.

Jehovah-Mekadish-Kem.....Exodus 31:13 "The Lord your sanctifier" We rest in His redemptive work to make us whole, by His work in us (Hebrews 4:9, 10).

Jehovah-Ra'ah.....Psalm 23:1 "The Lord is my shepherd". Jesus is our Good Shepherd (John 10; 1 Peter 5:4).

Jehovah-Shammah.....Ezekiel 48:35 - "The Lord who is present". Jesus is with us, Matthew 28:20 (cf Matthew 18:20) The Holy Spirit abides with us continually.

Jehovah-Rapha.....Exodus 15:26 - "The Lord our healer". Healing in redemption.

Jehovah-Tsidkenu.....Jeremiah 23:5, 6; 33:15-16 - "the Lord our righteousness" Jesus is our righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:26; 1 Corinthians 1:30).

Jehovah-Jireh.....Genesis 22:13-14 - "The Lord will provide" God provided the lamb (Jesus); many other examples of provision: manna, oil, meat, water, cf Philipians 4:19.

Jehovah-Nissi.....Exodus 17:15 - "The Lord our banner". God fights against our enemies; we lift up His name as our banner.

Jehovah-Shalom.....Judges 6:24 - "The Lord is peace" - He is our peace; we have peace with God (Romans 5:1).

Jehovah-Sabaoth.....Isaiah 1:9; 6:1-3 - "The Lord of Hosts", cf Romans 9:29; James 5:4.

Jehovah Yasha-Gaal = the Lord our Saviour and Redeemer (Isaiah 49:26; 60:16).

3. Adonai.....Exodus 23:17, Isaiah 10:16, 33; Malachi 1:6 - "Lord", a reference to the Lordship of God.

Father - Old and New Testaments

Creator and sustainer - we are all God's offspring (Acts 17:28)

- By re-birth (John 1:12-13)
- "Our father in heaven" (Matthew 6:6, 9)
- As a Father, God provides for us (Luke 11:13); guides, disciplines (Hebrews 12:7-11)

4. Theos - God (Greek (in Septuagint and New Testament)

Used by Greeks to describe their gods (Acts 14:11; 19:26)

Only one God (Mark 12:29; 1 Corinthians 8:4; 1 Timothy 2:5)

Theos = Jesus cf John 1:14-18. Jehovah's Witnesses misunderstand.

4.b Knowing God Through His Attributes

The Apostle Paul's goal was: "that I may know Him" (Philippians 3:10). It is God's desire that we know Him personally and understand His character. Think about the "Heroes of the Faith" in Hebrews 11, who did not see Him but "saw Him who is invisible" (Hebrews 11:27).

Eternal

God exists forever, he has no beginning or end (cf. Psalm 90:2; 1 Timothy 1:17). He has always existed in the same way: fully and completely as God. (Revelation 4:8)

Self-existent

God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything.

Self-sufficient

God does not need anything that we need.

God's names tell us about His being. The Bible also describes His nature and character.

His Inner Nature

God is a Spirit

John 4:24. Important in the way we worship Him. He is invisible, not physical (He created everything that is physical), although He took on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:15, 1 Timothy 1:17). Those who lived in the Old Testament; learned the problems of limiting worship to the physical realm (Micah 6:6-8). God is knowable.

God has "Personality"

God is not an idea, force or power, but a person, with personal faculties. The Bible often uses human-like descriptions ("anthropomorphisms") to convey the idea of His personality. God:

| | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| speaks | Genesis 1:3 |
| laughs | Psalm 2:4 |
| hates | Jeremiah 44:4 |
| sees | Genesis 11:5 |
| hears | Psalm 94:9 |
| gets angry | Deuteronomy 1:37; Psalm 2:4 |
| walks | Genesis 3:8 |
| changes His mind - or so it seems | Genesis 6:6 |
| is self-conscious - "I Am that I Am" | Exodus 3:14 |
| can become jealous | Exodus 20:5; Isaiah 42:8 |
| checks things out | Genesis 11:5 |
| has a will | Psalm 115:3 |
| tests peoples' heart attitudes | various |
| is described as having a mouth, arm, palms, eyes and as sitting | various |

Inanimate objects or concepts can do none of the above.

Implications: As a Christian I can have a relationship with a real "person", who sees me, walks with me, talks to me, listens to me, is able and willing to guide me and encourage/correct me.

God is ONE

Exodus 20:3. The Egyptians, Canaanites, Greeks, Romans and practically everybody else worshipped a pantheon of gods, cf Joshua 24:14-15. God is unique (Deuteronomy 4:35, Isaiah 43:10, 44:6, Exodus 9:14)

Source of All Life

Creator (Acts 14:15); upholder (Isaiah 9:6); ruler (Psalm 75:6, 7); sustainer (Psalm 104:27-30; Hebrews 1:3).

God is Unchanging (Immutable)

Infinite as to time (He is eternal: Exodus 15:18, Deuteronomy 33:27, 1 Timothy 1:17, Nehemiah 9:5, Psalm 90:2, Jeremiah 10:10, Revelation 4:8-10)

God never changes (who he is, or His promises (cf. Psalm 102:26, 27, Malachi 3:6; James 1:17; Hebrews 1:2, 6:17; 13:8, James 1:17). He can neither increase nor decrease. His character will never change. We change, but God's feelings do not fluctuate. He does not have mood swings.

Omnipotent = All-powerful

Genesis 1:1, Revelation 19:6

God exercises dominion over the entire universe, carrying out His wisdom, governing the hearts of people, and creating things out of nothing. He is all-powerful to act in accordance with His nature and will. He is majestic (Psalm 93:1).

Implications: He can be strong for us (Genesis 18:14; Job 26:14; Psalm 62:11; Isaiah 26:4; Colossians 1:11). With God all things are possible. He is able to save us, supply our every need, deliver us from temptations, keep us from falling, make us blameless; surpass our expectations, raise us up in the resurrection in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Omniscient = All-knowing

God knows all things - 1 John 3:20; Psalm 147:5; Hebrews 4:13. He understands all things. Nothing is "news" to Him (including past, present & future. He knows what will/could happen. "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" (Romans 11:34).

Implications: Matthew 6:8, Luke 12:32. He knows our future. We can go to Him with our questions and problems, because he knows about them already (Job 42:2; Psalm 139:3; Romans 8:27, Hebrews 4:13)

Omnipresent = Everywhere-present

God is everywhere - Jeremiah 23:24; Psalm 139:7-10; 1 Kings 8:27. He fills the universe. No one can hide from Him. Nothing escapes His notice. He is able to be present in every circumstance of our lives. He has time for us. We are never outside of His sight or care (Psalm 139:3, 7-10; Proverbs 15:3). He chooses to make His dwelling in our hearts. He will not abandon us.

Implications: we should live as though we are *always* in God's presence.

God is Infinite

He is not subject to any of the limitations of humanity or his creation. Check out Acts 17:24-25. Infinite as to space (2 Chronicles 6:18-21; Psalm 139:7-10).

All-wise

Psalm 104:24. God is not capricious. He has all wisdom. He is the great designer. He works everything out for the good of his people. He never fails, never lacks foresight. He knows all and plans all, with the end in sight.

Implications: we can trust God's will and direction for our lives; we can also ask Him for wisdom when we need it (James 1:5).

Sovereign

God does what he pleases (Daniel 4:34-35). His will is above every other will. He is creator, king and ruler. He assigns places and functions to all creation, within certain freedoms and laws. Revelation 4:11; Colossians 1:17; Acts 17:26. He rules over all (Psalm 103:19).

Implications: If we know God is sovereign, we can trust He knows what is best and "rest" in His goodness and will (Psalm 46:10; 97:1; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Jude 25).

His Moral Character

"And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.' " (Exodus 34:6, 7 NIV)

Holy

God is eternally distinct from impurity. The Hebrew term "holiness" includes separation, uniqueness. He cannot abide sin in His presence. "Sanctify yourselves" (Leviticus 20:7)

Implications: we cannot live in His presence without being justified. We should shun sin and live as though we belong to Him.

Righteous

God is perfect. His ways and plan are perfect (Romans 1:17). It is impossible for Him to do anything wrong. People sometimes "blame" God for events and circumstances, but He is forever guiltless. He is righteous in His person (James 1:17; 1 John 1:5; Romans 3:25-26).

Implications: If God can never make a mistake in His dealings with us, we can trust Him and be thankful in all things (Genesis 18:25; Psalm 11:7; 71:24; 111:3; Jeremiah 23:6)

Jealous

Joshua 24:19; Nahum 1:2; Isaiah 42:8.

Faithful

God keeps His promises (Hebrews 10:23; 11:11)

Good

Only God is good (Matthew 19:17). Evil exists because human beings choose the way of sin.

Love

God is the personification of love (1 John 4:8, 16). His love is perfect and unconditional. He does not love us because of who we are, but because of who He is. The love of God involves sacrificial giving (John 3:16; leads to 1 John 3:16). He is the initiator (Romans 5:8). He is impartial (Matthew 5:45). God does not take pleasure in human suffering or condemnation. He seeks the best for us, and offered up his Son in unconditional love as a substitution for our sin.

Implications: we love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). We must reflect His love.

Gracious

We are saved by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:7-8). God's Riches At Christ's Expense. God loves to give us what we don't deserve. He loves to pardon sin and lavish us with his goodness. He takes pleasure in giving gifts to people to display His resourcefulness, patience, and mercy.

Implications: the grace of God should inform the way we live and relate to others. Consider Titus 2:11-14 NIV):

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.”

True

He is the Truth (Psalm 33:4). God cannot lie. His revelation is true. His promises are sure.

Implications: we can pray in faith, with thanksgiving, because God is always true (Numbers 23:19; Psalm 57:3; 100:5; 119:160)

Merciful

God shows his mercy by not giving us the punishment we deserve. Mercy as used in the Bible frequently has a much wider sense which may be translated “loyal love”.

Implications: We should show mercy to others.

Longsuffering

Numbers 14:18; Micah 7:18, 19

Implications: God is patient with us, working with us to bring about His plan for our lives.

Just

God's ways are always just. Deuteronomy 32:4. It is impossible for Him to do anything "unfair" (Isaiah 30:8). He has given us laws, which we have broken. His righteous laws demand that disobedience be punished. Jesus took that punishment when He was made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Justice and love come together in Jesus (cf Psalm 85:10). Because He is just, He will also reward those who do right (Matthew 5:45; 1 Peter 1:17; James 3:17).

Implications: God will be always treat is impartially and justly; we can trust He will do the right thing by us, even when we do not understand circumstances we are going through. We should approach those around us in the same way.

5. The Folly of Idolatry

Against the background of all of the above, consider again Paul's experience in Athens (Acts 17). The people of Athens were very "religious", lit. "superstitious". They even had an altar to an "unknown god".

1. Idols are no gods (Jeremiah 2:11; 16:20; Galatians 4:8)
2. Idols are made with human hands and are useless (Deuteronomy 4:28; Psalm 115:4-8; Isaiah 40:20; Jeremiah 10:5; Acts 17:29)
3. Have no powers in and of themselves.
4. Are often associated with, and inhabited by demonic powers (1 Corinthians 10:19, 20).
5. Idolatry only leads to frustration and uncertainty (cf Elijah on Mt Carmel, 1 Kings 18).

God is real. It is possible to know Him. "I am here to declare Him to you" (Acts 17:23).

It is not enough to know *about* God:

- through creation (His works)
- through conscience (His laws imprinted on our hearts)
- through His interventions in history
- through universal belief, or common consent
- through human religion or philosophy
- by the revelation of His Word
- in the life of Jesus Christ - on an intellectual level

Many in the Bible knew about Jehovah, saw His acts and believed He would come and redeem them. Made efforts to live in a way that would please Him. What was missing were the illumination and application, the work of the Holy Spirit, opening up their hearts to allow Christ to enter their lives. If we are to touch peoples' lives, we need to help them know God. This is the essence of life (John 17:3)

God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, has shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

The Economist - Millennium issue

God

After a lengthy career, the Almighty recently passed into history. Or did he?

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WHEN your friends start looking for proofs of your existence, you're heading for trouble. That was God's situation as the millennium got into its stride.

Few ordinary folk, though they had different names for him, doubted the reality of God. He was up there somewhere (up, not down; in his long career, no one ever located him on the seabed), always had been, always would be. Yet not quite so far up, in the churches and monasteries of Europe, many of its cleverest men would soon be racking their brains for ways of proving it.

Anselm, for instance, and others centuries later, such as Descartes, reckoned if you could think of God, then there must be a God to think of. Thomas Aquinas saw everything in motion, so there must be someone to give the first push. Others felt that a universe so elegantly designed as ours plainly must have a designer. And so on, and ingeniously on.

Yet why bother with proof, if everyone knew it anyway? One, because great brains are like that; two, because not everyone did. Out there were the gentiles, Saracens and such. But did not they too say, "There is no God but God"? Yes, but they didn't mean what good Christians meant. They must be taught better. And there God's troubles began.

He let Hindus paint him as what, to others, looked like a blue-faced flute-player with an interest in dairy-farming

They were largely his own fault. Like many great personalities, he had countless admirers who detested each other—and he let them do so. For one of infinite knowledge, he was strangely careless how he spread what bits of it to whom. To some he dictated the Bible; to Muhammad the Koran. He was much concerned with the diet of Jews. He let Hindus paint him as what, to others, looked like a blue-faced flute-player with an interest in dairy-farming. Each set of believers had its version of what he was like and what he had said. No wonder cynics began to hint that, if believers differed so widely, belief might be a mistake.

The believers then made things worse. For soon it was not sets but sub-sets. Christians nationalised God, as Jews had long since, like some coal mine. He's on our side, the English told the French. No, ours, Joan of Arc hit back. Next, the Reformers privatised him: **unser Gott**, fine, yet not the king's or the church's, but each man's own. From this umpteen versions of what "he" might amount to, or think, were apt to spring, and did. Close kin could disagree. As late as 1829, a bishop warned Britain's House of Lords of divine retribution if it granted civic rights to Jews; happily, their lordships, aware that stupidity thrived in God's house as in their own, took the risk. In the 1840s American Methodism split, north against south, arguing whether his word condemned slavery or justified it.

Nor did the rivals seem even to believe their own versions. The Christians turned not cheeks but swords against Muslims, Jews and each other. Muslims, while averring that "in religion there is no compulsion", did the like to them and to Hindus, and put to death apostates from Islam. For centuries, such rivalries led to torrents of blood. Was this a good God at work? **Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum**, the Roman poet Lucretius had written: that's where superstition leads. It was no disproof of clerical logic, but it was a reasonable point.

And in time reason began to take a hand. God, OK, but less mumbo-jumbo, said a platoon of English “deists” in the early 18th century; we can reach him without revelation, let alone incense. This was a risky step, as French and German thinkers were soon to prove. If human reason was so powerful, did man need God? No, said Enlightened men like Diderot (to be silenced, but not convinced, when the mathematician Euler told him “ $a + b^n$ over $n = x$, **donc Dieu existe**”). The French revolution buried God, albeit Napoleon soon dug him out.

Darwin did not help, blowing apart the first book of the Bible

Darwin did not help, blowing apart the first book of the Bible. Nor did critical 19th-century German micro-examination of what was left. Still less did men like Marx, who saw the close links between the ruling class and the ruling churches, and was eager to blow up both; come the 20th century, the Soviet Union did so, literally. Religion was the opium of the people, give them the adrenalin of communism instead. God was dead, as Nietzsche had announced; and even if the superman Nietzsche envisaged to replace him somehow never got born, communist man could do it.

Trouble was, communist man didn't; the people did not agree; and the corpse just wouldn't lie down. He popped up in the oddest places. “You don't find many atheists in a landing-craft heading for Normandy,” recorded a padre aboard one such in June 1944; even though the Almighty was about to let many of their joint flock be turned into fish-food. A French journalist, no less, was ready in the 1960s with the best possible evidence, if it was true: a book entitled “God exists, I have met him”. (Or could it have been “her”, as even the current pope was heard to hint recently?)

And this was in the cynical, questioning, anti-authoritarian West. Ever fewer westerners share the church's—or the synagogue's—beliefs, and far fewer still attend their services. Yet outside the rarefied world of thinkers, remarkably few deny the possibility of a supreme being; less than 10% of Americans. In Muslim and Hindu societies, the thought is barely heard.

The test will come on Judgment Day, when man, we are told, will meet his maker. Or will it be God meeting his?

In 2009 the writer of this piece, John Micklethiwaite updated his thesis with an acknowledgement that faith-based systems, in particular Christianity, have grown in the intervening period. The title of his book: “God is Back”.