

SHARPENING THINKING SKILLS

Does God exist? An example of openness in discussion

(Chapter 5 p. 88)

Here's an example of a conversation which isn't acrimonious or point-scoring over the other, but nevertheless hard-hitting. It could help both people to grow in understanding:

The conversation in the pub got on to the question of God. An atheist (A) says "I don't believe in God" and a Christian (C) says "I do". That looks to be a straight contradiction, until perhaps the Christian asks:

(C) "Why don't you believe in God?"

(A) "Well, you can't prove God exists."

(C) "Of course you can't - the God I believe in is the creator of everything that exists, so how can such a God be provable?"

(A) "You are assuming that there is a God. But we should not do that unless reason shows it is at least highly likely, if not actually provable."

(C) "Why do you put reason on such a pedestal?"

(A) "Because it's the most effective safeguard against error - against being taken in by emotions."

(C) "But to reason you have to start somewhere - where do you find your starting-points?"

(A) "Through ordinary experience of life"

(C) "Yes, which is more than reason - it means using imagination, empathy, that sort of thing like how you get to know other people. You see I believe that God meets us - it's not just us working things out on our own."

(A) "Yes that's your imagination at work! You're just imagining that God meets us - really it's only an idea in your head."

(C) "I know what you mean - it IS possible I could be mistaken and am just imagining things, and I agree experience can play tricks. But when I coldly and calmly look at the evidence, I find it convincing to say God meets us. Here's a piece of evidence for example. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh was converted from atheism by the sense of the presence of Christ standing by him as he read the first few Chapters of Mark's gospel. If this was just his imagination it's hard to believe - because he never wavered in his faith throughout an exceptionally long and varied life suggesting he was far from being a psychological misfit - he was amongst other things a medical doctor and a Resistance worker in Paris during the war".

(A) "Yes, but it's still possible that he was wrong."

(C) "Just because something can be doubted, it doesn't mean we MUST doubt it"

(A) "But we shouldn't believe anything unless we've got sufficient evidence for it."

(C) "Well, what do you mean by sufficient evidence? Everything can be challenged except the most ordinary and trite things, such as humans have five toes to each foot!. And if you go in for doubt all the time, you'll never know anything worthwhile because doubt will get in the way".

(A) "How do you mean?"

(C) "How could we ever get to know another person on the basis of doubting them all the time? Don't we actually have to do the opposite - trust them unless they later prove untrustworthy? So just because it is POSSIBLE that Anthony of Sourozh was wrong doesn't mean that therefore we MUST doubt his experience - which in effect is presuming he's wrong."

(A) "Well I suppose that's right, but there still remains the possibility he's wrong".

(C) "Yes I agree we can't have that absolute proof we would all like that we are right and can never be mistaken. Come to think of it, this desire to be right and avoid ever admitting that we might be mistaken is part of what religious people mean by maybe what the story of Adam and Eve was about - they wanted to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

(A) "Not much wrong with that one might say - shouldn't we know about good and evil?"

(C) "But there was something else at work here - wanting to have that absolute knowledge such as "I can't possibly be wrong" - wanting to possess the truth as mine. And it was that that was forbidden."

(A) "Well a whole lot of religious people do just that, which is why they're so dogmatic and go in for persecution and violence"

(C) "I do so agree - it's a real temptation for religious people - but it is for everyone. What about folk like Richard Dawkins? He's terribly sure he's right! But the real point is that religious people who go around presuming they've got this hot-line to God are really a million miles away from true religion. For no-one can have really absolute certainty beyond the possibility of making a mistake."

(A)"Well, I guess we do agree on something!"

Viewers may like to try continuing the conversation.