

Revelations

by Robert Jameson

An Intelligent Analysis of Religious Beliefs

Are you irritated by dogmatic religious belief on the one hand and by close-minded, pompous atheism (of the angry Richard Dawkins variety) on the other? Would you be interested in a more intelligent perspective on religious ideas?

Intelligent people often find themselves in a dilemma regarding religion. They may be interested in religious concepts and keen to explore issues of purpose and meaning, but are repelled by the sort of unthinking, ritual-obsessed brands of religion that many people seem to follow.

This book considers a selection of religious and atheist ideas and beliefs and asks how an intelligent person, unencumbered by religious or atheist dogma, might view them.

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by Robert Jameson
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Warning/Disclaimer

This book celebrates freedom of speech and is a book entirely of opinion. Nothing in this book is intended to be taken as a statement of fact. Even if a statement of fact appears to be being made, it should be remembered that it is only being offered as a mere opinion - albeit, hopefully, an intelligent one!

The process of thinking intelligently about religious ideas will naturally require us to question those ideas and to make a fresh assessment as to whether or not they are good ideas. This process, in itself, might be deemed offensive to many people who may believe that certain religious ideas should never be questioned and that it is an offence against God to do so. For this and other reasons, this book doubtless contains material that may offend many people. Therefore, it should be noted that anyone choosing to read this book does so entirely at their own risk.

Contents

	Page
1. Introduction	5
2. Being Religious	8
3. Does God Exist	10
4. Creation	12
5. Sacred Texts	19
6. Rituals	23
7. Worship	26
8. Blasphemy	27
9. Heaven and Hell	31
10. Capitalism	34
11. Atheism	38
12. Prejudice	42
13. How and Why	45
14. Limitations	48
15. Atoms	50
16. Faith	54
17. Chicken and Egg	57
18. God and Suffering	58
19. Oblivion	61
20. Body and Soul	62
21. Philosophy	65
22. Indoctrination	69
23. Brand Names	74
24. The Intelligence Key	75
25. Kindness	77
26. And Last	79

Introduction

Religion is a matter of great importance. This is obviously true for a religious person since, for them, their religious ideas are fundamentally intertwined with their notions of why they are alive and what their purpose in life is. Even for 'non-believers,' however, it would be foolish to ignore the impact that religion has on all our lives.

In writing this book, I wanted to offer an intelligent view on religion and on some key religious ideas.

Whether or not one would consider oneself to be religious - to be 'a believer' - an intelligent person will probably accept that the world's religions contain many important and intelligent ideas. Even a staunchly anti-religious person would be hard-pressed to argue that religious beliefs and texts contain no wisdom at all!

However, there are many people whose religious views might not appear to be very intelligent - by which I mean that these people have often failed to carefully consider their views using the power of reason. Some religious beliefs and practices themselves might appear to many people to be inherently at odds with any intelligent viewpoint.

Indeed, many people appear to hold religious views which cause them to frown upon the very idea of thinking intelligently about religious issues at all - as if to actually think about such issues rather than blindly accepting what it says in some sacred text or other were in itself an offence against God.

Thus it seems to me that many intelligent people will find themselves in a dilemma regarding religion. They will recognise the importance and

wisdom of many religious ideas. At the same time, however, they will feel uneasy both about some religious ideas themselves and about the willingness of many people to slavishly accept and follow religious ideas without first examining them intelligently.

Similarly, an intelligent person will recognise and respect the compassion, good intent, good deeds and dedication of many religious people, whilst also recognising the harm and suffering that religions and religious people sometimes contribute to - for example, when differing religious beliefs and allegiances lead to war and violence.

So if a person were to think intelligently (and, with at least a reasonable degree of independence and open-mindedness) about the role of religion and about key religious ideas, what ideas might they have to offer?

My analysis will include consideration of some of the ideas currently being heavily pushed by some very prominent atheists.

As an intelligent person, I share many of the concerns that some atheists have about people who blindly follow religious doctrines without questioning them.

However, the ideas of many prominent atheists - from eminent professors to 'intellectual' comedians - are frequently nowhere near as intelligent and intellectual as they would like to believe. It is ironic that many of them have become, in their own way, just as 'religious' and fanatical as the people they most love to criticise and scorn.

My intention here is to follow a more genuinely intellectual and intelligent path that many of these people have carelessly abandoned. You may think it presumptuous of me to suppose I can achieve

this - but, frankly, the bar isn't very high and I hope you will be kind enough to reserve judgement at least until you have finished reading this book!

In applying rational thinking to religious ideas, I accept that there may be a limit to what rational analysis can tell us about religion and religious issues - I am not going to arrogantly assume that there is nothing in the universe capable of defying rational explanation or analysis.

However, I think rational analysis can still tell us quite a lot! In particular, rational thinking can tell us a great deal about what we don't know - by pointing out the logical flaws in what some people consider to be entirely rational ideas.

In this book, I'm not, however, going to be attempting to analyse a comprehensive set of religious ideas and issues and I will not be delving into every matter in forensic detail or to exacting academic standards.

What I do hope to do is to analyse a selection of ideas and issues that happen to come to mind. I hope to give a sense of my intellectual approach to religion and of how I think religion can be intelligently viewed.

I am not intent on pushing any particular beliefs, theories or conclusions about religion. I'm hoping, however, that my ideas might encourage people to see beyond the rather anti-intellectual arguments most commonly publicised in the media and thus be better able to intelligently explore religious ideas for themselves.

Being Religious

We would probably describe someone as 'religious' if they were a Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Sikh, a Jew or a Buddhist. There are arguments, of course, as to what exactly you must believe in or do in order to count yourself as, for example, a Christian or a Muslim. Nevertheless, people who follow a large proportion of the teachings and practices associated with any of these religions might well be described as 'religious.'

However, what about people from less well-known religions? At the extreme, what about someone who is the only member of their particular religion - the only person following a particular set of beliefs and practices? Surely they can still be religious? The fact that their religion is not a popular one is not a valid reason for saying they are not religious at all!

Perhaps 'religious' people merely need to have thought about and have some sort of beliefs about the big questions of existence. Perhaps they merely have to believe that life has some sort of meaning and purpose - whatever the particular meaning or purpose they believe in, and even if they are unsure about what that meaning or purpose is. They may not follow any sort of 'branded' religion at all.

Often, however, the term 'religious' is used to refer to people who do follow one of the major religions, but who have barely ever really thought about the big questions of existence at all and are not at all sure what they actually believe in!

Many people, for example, who claim to be Christian, may be largely unable to describe, even

in fairly general terms, what it is they believe in. They may base their self-description merely on the fact that they occasionally attend a church.

Many people who describe themselves as 'Muslim' are very unclear about what it is they believe in. They may be able to describe the 'duties' of a Muslim - e.g. praying five times a day - but this is not the same as being able to describe their fundamental values and principles. Are most such people merely inarticulate - or is it rather that they don't really know what they believe in?

Thus we are left with a situation where 'religious' may describe two very different types of people - on the one hand, people who take an interest in and have views on important issues of meaning and existence and, on the other hand, people who take almost no interest in such issues at all and who use religious institutions to help them actively avoid thinking about such things.

If an atheist wants to describe this latter group of people as 'morons,' I would not particularly wish to take issue with them. There are, however, more intelligent ways of 'being religious' - and it is not very intelligent of some atheists when they refuse to acknowledge this.

When we learn that someone is 'religious,' we might very well imagine that they are a devout follower of one of the most well-known religions. We might do well, however, to be a little more open-minded and remember that 'being religious' could refer to a much wider range of possibilities.

Does God Exist?

Most people associate being religious with a belief in God, and it is true that, for many religious people, the concept of 'God' is at the very centre of their belief system. Some religions have many gods, most of the more popular ones today have only one God, but not all religions have a god at all. Buddhism, for example, doesn't seem to have a 'god' - at least, not in the same sense as the other main religions. So, is there a God?

Sorry to sound pedantic, but the answer may naturally depend on how you define 'God' in the first place. What is utterly absurd and profoundly unintelligent is when people enter into long and heated arguments over whether God does or doesn't exist, without first defining what they mean by 'God' and thus establishing whether they're actually talking about the same thing!

There are lots of people who do basically envisage God as the 'big bloke with a beard who lives in the sky' sort of god. One can see why people might like to have a visual image of God and why they might pick a wise-looking, human-like figure - perhaps it helps them to relate to him - but perhaps this is also a rather lazy notion of what God is!

If some religious people are guilty of a rather simplified and cartoonish Monty-Python-esque image of God as 'the big guy with the beard who lives in the sky,' then many atheists are even more guilty of cartoonising God. When some of them say, 'It's stupid to believe in God!' it is often the 'big guy with the beard' God that they have in mind.

There are, however, other, more thoughtful concepts of 'God' that are not based on this rather crude image.

For the more intellectual among us, 'God' might refer to something more conceptual. For example, suppose you could lump together all the goodness in the universe, all the compassion, all the charity, all the good principles and intent! You could call that 'God'!

Now, if I say, 'I believe in God,' that no longer means that I've been arse-licking to some big bloke with a beard in the hope he'll find me a place in his comfy kingdom! It might instead mean that I have committed myself to certain fundamental principles and moral beliefs.

Perhaps, in this context, it is much easier to accept that an intelligent person can also be highly religious. We can now imagine an intelligent person who is religious and who does 'believe in God,' but whose concept of God is a subtle one that does not necessarily easily lend itself to being visualised.

To give God human characteristics is natural enough and may even be helpful in some circumstances. It may, however, also be rather misleading in others. Perhaps the idea of a God personality - an actual being/entity with many human-like characteristics - is overplayed in its importance.

Religion is about right and wrong, good and evil, principles and values. If there is a God-being, a God-personality, then He might very well prefer us humans to concentrate on these principles and values rather than on describing, picturing, praying to or worshipping the particular version of 'God' we each believe in.

Does life have a purpose? If so, what is it? If not,

can we give it a purpose? What is right, what is wrong? What is good, what is evil? What principles should we live our lives according to? What has value? Perhaps these are actually much more important questions than, 'Is there a God?' And, perhaps, if there is a God, He thinks so too!

Creation

The issue of creation is important to many religious people - and also to many atheists. Indeed, it is one of the key issues on which these two groups clash most energetically.

The Book of Genesis is common to both Judaism and Christianity. According to Genesis, the world was created (by God) in seven days. Many Christians and Jews do not take this notion literally. They might, perhaps, view the seven 'days' as merely representing seven 'stages' of creation. After all, since God supposedly didn't make the Sun until day four, there could not have been any 'days' as we understand them until then at the earliest. Perhaps exact time periods didn't matter so much back then! We should remember that we only really become properly obsessed with stating time accurately when we got railways and digital watches!

Furthermore, a Christian, for example, might not believe that God literally created the world directly - such as with two gigantic hands - but rather that he created it through the rather more subtle and indirect method of devising the 'laws' and forces of physics.

Nevertheless, there are people who take the Genesis creation story literally. These people are

often referred to as 'Creationists.' It is fascinating (and sometimes rather amusing) to watch how these people and their beliefs really get up the noses of atheists - perhaps more so than anyone or anything else. Their arguments often descend into rather farcical slanging matches, in which neither side displays much of a sense of humour.

But why is this whole issue considered so important and why does it arouse such passions?

Perhaps creation stories are supposed to illustrate how powerful and important God is. Perhaps they are designed to encourage deference to God's will - using the idea that God is the rightful ruler of the universe because he created it and should therefore have the right to do with it as he pleases and to be unquestionably obeyed.

But is this a rational idea? Making a gun doesn't mean you should be able to use it as you please! You could make a gun and make a baby - does this mean it is OK for you to shoot the baby? No - it doesn't! Perhaps God did make the universe, but ideas and instructions should be judged on their merits, not according to who comes up with them. Sorry God - but that goes for you too!

(For some, creationism is a reflection of their belief in the infallibility of The Bible. If it says the world was created in seven days, then it must have been! This belief in the infallibility of sacred texts is something I'll deal with later on.)

Call me cynical if you like, but, perhaps, what makes some creationists so passionate about the creation story is that they know that many atheists and scientists sneer at them for being religious in the first place. They know they are considered to be 'stupid' and 'delusional' by lots of other people. Perhaps stating that they believe the world was

literally created in seven days is their way of 'sticking two fingers up' (as we say in Britain) and making it absolutely clear that they really don't care what other people think about them! They'll believe whatever they 'damn well' please and won't be dictated to by atheists and 'scientists' - especially the ones who think they have a monopoly on 'the truth' and want their particular 'truth' to be the only one allowed in schools.

The 'scientific atheists,' like most people, hate not being listened to. They've spent all this time and effort digging up fossils and carbon-dating things. They didn't do all that just so that people could turn around and say, 'So? Don't care!' Consequently, they often get rather enraged by creationism and start describing creationists as 'stupid' and 'utterly barmy!'

Perhaps, however, it is also true that members of both groups are getting involved in a rather silly game of one-upmanship.

Perhaps many creationists are out to prove how holy and righteous they are - they want to show they are more religious and closer to God than other people, even other Christians - and they do this by competing to be the people who take the Bible more literally than anyone else.

Perhaps they feel that by believing everything in the Bible literally, this somehow makes them better people and better Christians than those other people who interpret many bible stories symbolically rather than literally. Perhaps, because even most other Christians don't believe the world was literally created in seven days, this is the issue on which creationists can best prove their superiority over other people.

But aren't the 'scientific atheists' also participating

in a similar game? Are they competing in a contest to show how 'scientific' they are? Many of them view religion as the very antithesis of science. Perhaps they think that the person who can be most arrogantly dismissive of religious ideas and most insulting to religious people is somehow the most intelligent and the most scientific!

'It is stupid to say the world was made in seven days,' they say. 'We *know* from the fossil records that it took many millions of years for plants and animals to evolve and for man to evolve from animals. That is scientific fact!'

One of the problems here is that the 'scientists' who say such things, do not have anywhere near the level of intelligence they think they have and do not really understand the nature of science in the first place.

I'm not saying that the world was created in seven days - I'm quite happy if it wasn't! However, to say that fossil records prove that the creation story is untrue is a total misunderstanding of what science is and what it can and cannot do.

Scientists come up with theories and they collect data. They attempt to come up with theories that fit the data they have collected. They then go about trying to find data that disproves their existing theories. Then, they try to come up with new theories that fit both this new data and the data they already had. This is how science works and how it evolves.

Science is not about 'truth'! Science has more to do with usefulness. A scientific theory is useful if it helps us predict future events. Even when a scientific theory is untrue, it can still be useful. For example, Newton's theories of mechanics were shown, by Einstein, not to be strictly true. They no

longer adequately explain the behaviour of sub-atomic particles travelling at high speed in particle-accelerators. Nevertheless, they still remain phenomenally useful in designing cars or aeroplanes or safety equipment. Their 'value' lies not in their 'truth,' but in their usefulness.

It is in the nature of scientific theories that they serve a purpose, but are sooner or later shown to be either incorrect or inaccurate. Given time, most of them get discarded in favour of newer theories. The discarded theories were not necessarily unscientific. They may have been very useful, but they did not represent 'truth.' And we should have the humility to accept that many of today's scientific theories - however impressive they might seem to us now - will be discarded (or downgraded) in time as their deficiencies are unearthed.

Back to the issue of creation, to say that the fossil record is consistent with the theory of evolution, is perfectly reasonable. However, to say that it proves that the religious idea of creation occurring in seven days is 'stupid' and 'impossible,' is taking things too far.

Creationists believe that an all-powerful god created the world in seven days. If he really did that, then making the fossil record look like it formed over millions of years would be a cheap party trick in comparison. The fossil record is consistent with evolution. However, speaking from a strictly logical viewpoint, it is also entirely consistent with the notion of an all-powerful god.

An all-powerful god could, by definition, create any 'data' he wishes. He can hide proof of his existence if he wants. He can also create fallible men who misread data and think they know more than they

really do!

Unfortunately for atheists, no data they ever collect will be inconsistent with the notion of an all-powerful God. That's just the way it is! Science cannot disprove God. The people who say it can are usually nowhere near as clever as they like to believe.

It is ironic that some atheists belittle and deride creationists as 'unscientific,' whilst simultaneously making claims that science cannot and never will be able to justify. Science is a marvellous tool for many purposes - but it does not provide us with the answers to everything (More on this later!).

Having said all this, however, I'm not about to celebrate the creationist movement. They may very well be wrong about creation, they might possibly be right - I'm not arrogant enough to say that I know for certain that they *must* be wrong. By far the more important question, however, is whether they ought to be finding better things to do than arguing over the timetable of creation.

Jesus, they believe, came to Earth with a message for mankind. This message was not, 'Stuff the poor, stuff doing good deeds - you must spend all your time arguing about creation!' His actual message, in summary, was this: 'Live a good, principled life and try to help other people instead of being selfish money-grabbing bastards all the time!' He didn't use those exact words, but, as far as we can tell, that's basically what he said!

Would this teaching be invalidated if it turned out that the world was not created in seven days after all, but in eight days, seven weeks or even seven billion years? No - of course not! The timetable of creation has no real bearing on the validity of his central teachings.

If there isn't a god, then the world probably wasn't made in seven days. If there is a god, he might not be best pleased that people who claim to be his devoted followers are wasting their time and energy arguing over the exact creation timetable instead of devoting themselves to the good deeds they're supposed to be getting on with - like standing up for principles and helping the poor!

Did God create the world? Did he do it in seven days? Who's right - the 'creationists' or the 'scientific atheists'? The answer is that both sides are in the wrong - they are wrong to allow such importance to be attributed to an argument that doesn't matter in the way they think it does!

Religious people should be getting on with good deeds. Scientists, as a good deed of their own, should be encouraging religious people (along with everyone else) to question their values and beliefs. That is the real gift of science - the willingness to question and explore. It is not about dictating to people what they are or aren't 'allowed' to believe, or laying down the law as to what beliefs and opinions are 'acceptable' to the god of science!

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End of sample!

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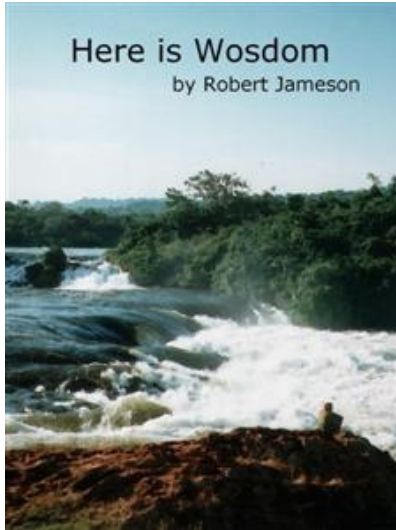
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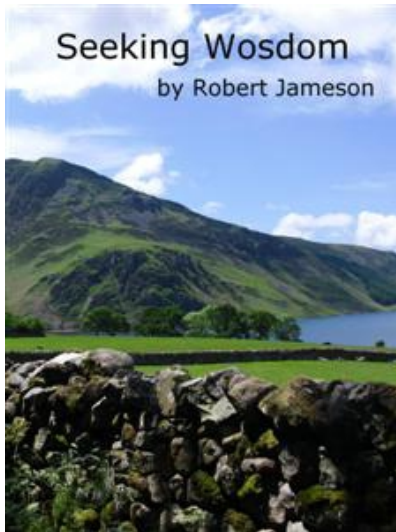


Intelligence is born out of the willingness to question what we are told - whatever it may be! Each chapter in this book asks us to do just that - question accepted ideas and popular opinions - and through questioning them, develop the ability to overcome the prejudices that stand between us and greater intelligence.

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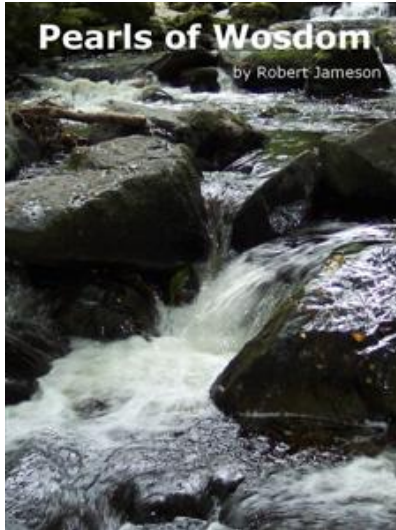


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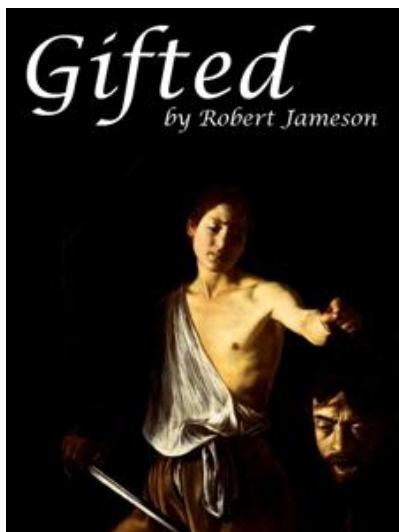


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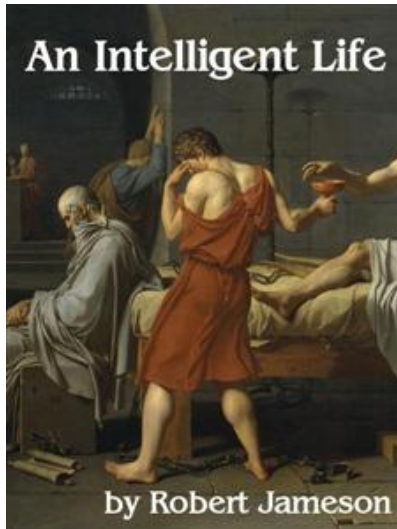


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