

FR RONALD ROLHEISER

Proofs for the existence of God

Can anyone prove that God exists? Well, many have tried. Some of the greatest philosophers and intellectuals in history have tried to prove that God exists.

One of the most famous of these was Thomas Aquinas, who produced five logical “proofs”. For example: imagine walking down a road and finding a stone. Given the brute, simple reality of a stone, you needn’t ask who put it there. It could always have been there. Its existence doesn’t provoke much thought.

But now imagine walking down a road and seeing a watch lying on the ground, ticking, keeping perfect time. Two things make this very different from the stone. The watch has obviously been designed by someone and the fact that it’s ticking means it could not have been there forever. Someone with intelligence must have made it and put it there at some point in time.

Aquinas simply extends this image to the world itself. Within it (not least inside the central nervous system and brain structure of the human person), we see an intelligent design that dwarfs all other intelligence. Also, we know that we and the world have not always been here; we had a beginning – and science today, in fact, can date that beginning. Draw out the logical consequences of this and it should lead you to postulate that there exists somewhere an Intelligent Creator, God, who is the author of all of this.

Equally famous is an argument first put forth by St Anselm in the 11th century. Anselm argued this way:

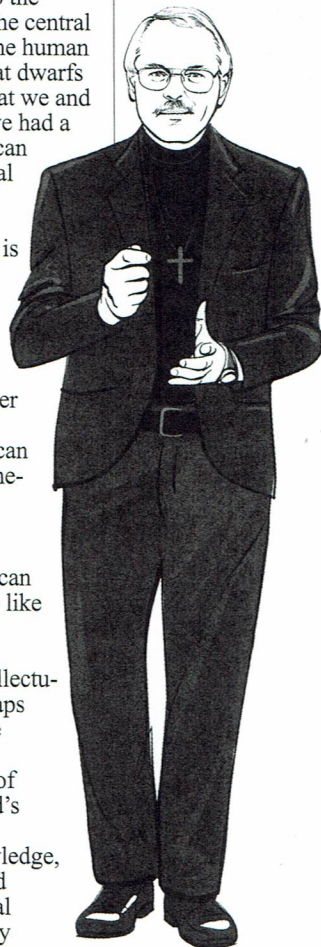
- 1) God is that of which nothing greater can be thought of.
- 2) But that of which nothing greater can be thought of must exist, otherwise something greater could be thought of.
- 3) Therefore God exists.

At first glance this kind of argument can seem silly – except that great minds the like of René Descartes, Gottfried Leibnitz, Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne have believed it. When intellectuals of that sort see merit here then perhaps those of us who consider it silly may be missing something.

More importantly, perhaps, millions of people have their own “proofs” for God’s existence stemming from their private experience of faith, their intuitive knowledge, their moral and aesthetic sensibility, and sometimes from the experience of actual “miracles” within their own lives. Today

“

God isn't meant to be proven. That's not the way faith works or the way Jesus reveals the reality of God



too there’s a huge, ever-growing body of literature which chronicles the experience of hundreds of people who died and then were resuscitated. In almost every such case, the testimony of the person is the same, namely, that there is another world and there is a God. And the further news is that this world and this God are unconditionally loving and powerfully invitational.

What’s to be said about all of this? Can we prove that God exists?

Sixty years ago there was a famous public debate in England between two intellectuals, the atheist Bertrand Russell and the believer Frederick Copleston SJ. They ultimately agreed on one point: if the world makes sense, then God exists.

Of course, that question can be answered either way, depending upon one’s faith and experience. But it still establishes an important truth. Our lives and our existence really only have meaning if God exists. As Søren Kierkegaard puts it: “If there is no eternal consciousness in a human being, if underlying everything there is only a wild, fermenting force writhing in dark passions that produced everything great and insignificant, if a bottomless, insatiable emptiness lurked beneath everything, what would life be then but despair?”

So what’s the value of any “proof” for the existence of God, beyond perhaps establishing that without a God to underwrite us we cannot ever fully make sense of our lives?

I wrote my doctoral thesis mostly on this question and at the end came to this conclusion: you cannot logically, mathematically, mystically, or from things inside your own experience prove God’s existence to an honest sceptic. You can tease with logic and you can lure from graced experience, but you cannot finally “prove” that God exists.

But – and this is the point – God isn’t meant to be proven. God isn’t found at the end of a syllogism, equation or empirical miracle that no one can deny; that’s not the way faith works or the way Jesus reveals the reality of God.

God isn’t proven; God is met and experienced through a certain way of living. What the various proofs for the existence of God do is invite us to a certain openness of mind within which we are more receptive to recognising God’s presence. What Jesus and the saints do is invite us to live our lives in a certain way so that in living that way we will begin already to live inside of God’s life, whether we believe in Him or not.

Visit ronrolheiser.com