God and the Human Experience

A physicist’s case for a theistic world view

Julio Gea-Banacloche
Introduction

Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you the reason for your hope.
(1 Peter, 3:15)

It may be pretentious for anybody to believe that they can make, at this point, a contribution to the ongoing public debate about God, and religion in general, by writing yet another book; and yet, I am a physicist, which is almost to say, by definition, a compulsive explainer. I cannot help but feel that there may be somebody out there who may benefit from having the case for a personal God presented in this particular way. At a minimum, I wanted to leave this manuscript to my children; so that, when they, in turn, experience the need to look beyond the simple conception of God that saw them through their childhood, they may at least have a record of what it was that their father believed, and why.

Not that this book presents anything even approaching the complete Christian faith which I profess. Its goal is much more limited in scope. It is, in a sense, only to clear the way, to remove the obstacles to faith; and, in so doing, to show that there is “at least one way” to think about God, and his relevance to our lives, that makes sense. This I have attempted to do in as empirical a way as possible, starting from the basic facts about the human experience of existence.

For convenience (but also with an ulterior theological purpose in mind) this experience is divided into three “worlds”: the outside world of other (non-human) beings of matter and energy; the internal world of our consciousness, ideas and values; and the world of other human beings, centers of consciousness like our own, with whom a relationship as equals is possible. It is argued that in each of these “worlds” we encounter a different aspect of God, and that the whole of our experience of this Ultimate Reality can be integrated into a world view that may be fairly characterized as “minimal” or “basic” theism.

The range of specific topics explored is necessarily quite broad: from the interplay of “chance” and determinism in the material universe (what is called here “the creative freedom” of the world); through the human mind’s ability to reflect upon its own thoughts, and hence to conceive of, and seek, truth; to the main problem that humans encounter as moral, reflective beings, namely, the “problem of evil”: the reality of undeserved suffering. I believe that, to a large extent, in order to “think right” about God, one needs to think right about the world and about humanity. One needs, for instance, to be able to see past the bad science (and worse philosophy) of materialistic determinism, and the attempts to reduce humanity to an insignificant branch in the primates’ evolutionary tree. As the source of ultimate meaning, the dignity of God is inseparable from the dignity of the world and the dignity of the human race; and much of this book is devoted to a defense of the latter two, so that the former might be seen more clearly.

Overall, however, I have tried to write a book to whose methodology no scientist could object, even if he were a die-hard atheist. As regards the physical sciences (my immediate area of expertise, since I have been teaching and doing research in quantum physics for almost thirty
years now), I have not assumed anything beyond the current, well-established theoretical knowledge; as regards biology, and particularly evolution, nothing beyond modern Darwinism. The relative autonomy from bottom-up processes that I have claimed for the human mind in Chapter 3 is nothing but the minimum necessary for the word “freethinker” to be meaningful; or, alternatively, for the pursuit of science to be at all possible. I have even acknowledged, at the end of Chapter 4, that the best possible objective response to the “problem of evil” is likely to be felt as subjectively unsatisfactory, which makes the subjective response presented in Chapter 5 all the more necessary. In turn, the latter may be said to depend solely on whether some of the claims of various forms of religious experience (most importantly, in the context of suffering, Buddhism) are, at a minimum, psychologically true; but even this can be regarded, to a large extent, as an empirical question to which an affirmative answer seems warranted by centuries of successful practice.

This emphasis on rationalism and empiricism implies that the book stops, necessarily, just short of the “leap of faith” that leads into full Christianity; but at least, I believe, it makes the leap appear plausible. Furthermore, by keeping the more specific and, as it were, particular aspects of Christian belief to a minimum, I have endeavored to show that the basic understanding of Reality —of God and the world—presented here, is not at variance, but rather in broad agreement with the insights of other religious traditions. We may not agree on all the details (some of which, admittedly, may be quite important), but there can be, I think, no question that we are all looking at the same picture.