



WHAT IS THE ENDURING QUESTION?

Easter is an annual occasion for those of the dominant religious belief – theists – to plead their increasingly irrelevant and awkward case. This year, on the day before the spring holiday named for the Goddess of the Radiant Dawn, it was William Irwin, professor of philosophy at King's College. Writing in the March 26th New York Times that "God Is a Question, Not an Answer," Irwin asserted: "The question is permanent; answers are temporary."

Of course, all "answers" are temporary in the sense that our beliefs – what we take to be truths – are simply the best sense we have been able to make of things for now. But it is not at all clear that the "question" of "God" is either profound, "permanent," or even meaningful. The question is simply no longer related to most of the problems that beset humanity. In particular, our understanding of the natural world has obviated the idea of pleasing deities to gain their favor. The question of "God's" existence is therefore only "permanent" for those who give it their attention, take it seriously, and, especially, for those who make it their obsession.

It is undoubtedly frustrating for people like Irwin to be faced with the fact that their "enduring question" is increasingly seldom asked. His best efforts to keep it alive go like this:

"Any honest atheist must admit that he has his doubts, that occasionally he thinks he might be wrong, that there could be a God after all ... Dwelling in a state of doubt, uncertainty and openness about the existence of God marks an honest approach. ... Still, there are potentially unpleasant consequences that can arise from decisions or conclusions, and one must take responsibility for them ... belief without doubt would not be required by an all-loving God, and it should not be worn as a badge of honor. ... We can all exist along a continuum of doubt. ... What is important is the common ground of the question, not an answer. Surely, we can respect anyone who approaches the question honestly and with an open mind. ... Rather than seeking the security of an answer, perhaps we should collectively celebrate the uncertainty of the question. This is not to say that we should cease attempts to convince others of our views. Far from it. We should try to unsettle others as we

remain open to being unsettled ourselves. In a spirit of tolerance and intellectual humility, we should see ourselves as partners in a continuing conversation, addressing an enduring question."

What Irwin does not understand is that atheists, except perhaps those who have only recently extricated themselves from a supernaturalism-based religion, seldom think about "God." They do not consider Irwin's question either "enduring" or even interesting. This is not a matter of "honesty" but simply of good sense. How many people who do not strive to believe in something on faith ever think about it? On Irwin's logic, "honesty" demands that Christians continually doubt their lack of belief in Zeus, Allah, reincarnation, and many other things.

It is worse than this, though, because the bulk of the reasons that "God" was once believed in, as a way to explain much of the natural world, have been superseded by scientific understanding. As Laplace explained to Napoleon when asked where "God" fit into theories about the solar system: "I had no need of that hypothesis." The idea of phlogiston was taken seriously for a century or more before it was replaced by the modern understanding of combustion. Just so has "God" been displaced. Honest and reasonable people do not occasionally wonder if there could be phlogiston after all. On the contrary, most have not heard the term or know what it means. Likewise, sensible people do not concern themselves with whether unicorns, centaurs or mermaids exist, regardless of how "enduring" someone may want such questions to be.

Irwin's veiled threat about "potentially unpleasant consequences that ... one must take responsibility for" is particularly troubling. For here he is obviously talking about the Christian theological doctrine that one will be damned to eternal torture if one does not believe in Christian doctrines. This is considerably removed from general intellectual virtues of "doubt, uncertainty and openness" with which Irwin began. Indeed, it is the antithesis of those virtues and of the principle that facts and reason alone – never coercion! – ought to be the determinants of belief. How can reasonable people be open-minded about the notion of a deity that requires belief in Christian doctrines? If there were such a deity, then a zeal-

ous and unquestioning faith without doubt would indeed be a "badge of honor" just as the New Testament and Christianity have long taught. Irwin tries to soften Pascal's Wager, contrasting "indifference" to "desire." But this is just as bad since the "unpleasant consequences" remain for unbelief.

Of course Irwin wants desperately for there to be "the common ground of the question," because this keeps the focus on "God." His demand for an "open mind" thereby falls exclusively on unbelievers. For believers have already decided the question. Believers need to be themselves open-minded about and be willing to "collectively celebrate" the idea that whether or not there is "a God" is not really relevant to the important problems of human existence. Because unbelievers are doubtful, to say the least, that the question that Irwin wants to focus on even matters.

The other thing believers need to stop doing is proselytizing, even in the "nice" way that Irwin thinks he is doing. Rather, there should be a greater effort to do what is more important, which is to understand and be understood. This may, of course, cause people to become "unsettled," which too many still take to be offensive if not blasphemous. But it is the why of belief and not the what of it that matters. Appreciating and honoring this would go a long way to people becoming "partners in a continuing conversation." Because the "enduring question" is not the self-serving and self-indulgent matter of Christian doctrines. It is the larger question, the real common ground, of the human condition itself.

If questions, doubt and uncertainty are to really count in such a conversation, the words of 20th-Century physicist Richard Feynman are worth considering:

"I can live with doubt and uncertainty and not knowing. I think it's much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers which might be wrong. I have approximate answers and possible beliefs and different degrees of uncertainty about different things, but I am not absolutely sure of anything and there are many things I don't know anything about, such as whether it means anything to ask why we're here ... I don't have to know an answer. I don't feel frightened not knowing things, by being lost in a mysterious universe without any purpose, which is the way it really is as far as I can tell. It doesn't frighten me."

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All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:
- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant "The Vineyard" - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: This is nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Freethought Book Club April 23, 2016
 THE BOOK: Science Fiction classic Stranger In A Strange Land by Robert Heinlein Location: Farina's Winery, 420 S Main in Grapevine, TX. at 4:30 PM!

Communitas Dinner Group: To be Announced!
Have Another Idea? Email or call! Read past bulletins and service presentations and post on the FORUM at www.churchoffreethought.org LIKE US at www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/ and sign up for our Twitter feed at twitter.com/ntcof !

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
 "BEING WRONG"
 Is it Such a Bad Thing,
 Considering it's Unavoidable?
 > Sunday, May 1, 2016 <
 COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
 (Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the
 frontage road east just past Best Western;
 starts at 10:30 but come at 10 for fellowship!)**

The North Texas Church of Freethought
 The Fellowship of Unbelievers

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