

# Investigating God

An incisive look at the God phenomenon from a scientific perspective

***The Ghost in the Universe: God in the Light of Modern Science*,  
Taner Edis; Prometheus Books  
2002**

There is an old SF story by Frederick Brown from the days of computer punch cards. Technicians had finally wired together the most powerful computer in the world. Super-fast and with every sort of knowledge in its memory banks, it was set to answer any question. As an initial test, the techs decided to give it the biggest question of all, the one people have been working on for as long as they have been thinking: "Is there a God?" The tech typed in the question, the rows of lights blinked on and off and the reels of tape ran through. Finally the paper tape reeled out of the computer with the answer typed on it: "THERE IS NOW."

Taner Edis has the answer to the big question, and he is qualified to submit an answer, given the amount of thinking he has done on it. A physicist, he has for years run the cerebral and entertaining e-mail Skeptic Discussion List (see [www.csicop.org/bibliography/list.html](http://www.csicop.org/bibliography/list.html)), which is devoted to the discussion (read "debunking") of such topics as astrology, psychic powers, creation 'science', miracles, and

more. So you can probably guess where he stands – there are thousands of gods you don't believe in, and chances are he believes in even fewer than you. In *The Ghost in the Universe*, his first book, he tells why he thinks that a naturalistic view, based on science, is a better explanation for what we experience in the world than any reach for spiritual answers.

It is clear, wide-ranging, and intelligent, and it brings in topics from philosophy and science explained at a level accessible to readers with no expertise in those fields. It perhaps will swing no one from the spiritual camp, but those who wish to stay within it with intellectual vigour will do well to examine the arguments here.

Refreshingly, this is not just another examination of religion versus science. Edis starts with an admission that accepting that the world is a godless, accidental place seems crazy and against common sense, but it is one that has had more evidence for it as the centuries have gone by. He begins with the philosophical arguments about God. The 'proofs' are here: "A perfect being must exist, since if it did not, it would not be perfect. Having made God pop into existence by sheer force of logic, we now break out the cham-



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pagne.” This is the sort of proof atheists have been poking holes in for years. I doubt that anyone suddenly starts believing in any god because of such a proof, but as Edis points out, the equivalent disproofs (for instance, “No perfect deity can create evil”) are not likely to turn anyone into a nonbeliever either. Edis is skeptical that we will gain much knowledge from philosophical arguments one way or the other, but would do better to examine the idea of a universe with God as the main actor; this is the sort of God in which many people believe, the one who created and maintains the universe.

### Cause and effect

Unfortunately for such beliefs, discoveries in physics, astronomy, and biology have given such a God less and less to do. The skill of God in using circles, the perfect shape, as the path of planets around the sun used to be much admired, until it was discovered that they did not move in circles. Then the godly miracle was that all the planets revolved around the sun in the same plane, perfection compared to having them zip over and under like cartoon pictures of The Atom. Physical laws, however, dictate that just this near-planar alignment should occur. The Newtonian revolution turned many intellectuals into Deists who thought that God had started the Universe, only to let it run on without further interference. The argument that there has to be a first cause God is a strong one that withers under quantum physics. We are used, in day to day life, to examining causes and effects, but we are guilty of looking only in our own scale of neighbourhood.

### Quantum acausality

In the quantum world, things happen without being caused, and the Big Bang was a quantum event; the chain back to the first cause is broken. Of course Evolution is covered, in only a chapter, which shows that Edis’s book is about much more. Life is surely complicated, but it does not need a guiding hand. It needs ran-

domness. The randomness can be harnessed to ratchet up to increasing complexities. This is not a godly randomness; we cannot conclude that a god has made the randomness just so, for not only would that be causal design and therefore not really random, but more importantly, the inference that such a god is tinkering in such a way cannot improve our understanding of how the world works. Physics has shown our world as a framework for random accidents; it is not a purposeful place.

### The purpose of purpose

But our purpose is essential in the views of scriptural history, and generally people do not believe in a god derived from natural science, but one from scripture. One of the strong points of Edis’s book is that he is not only well acquainted with Bible scripture, but with Quranic scripture as well. The archeology that is currently showing the lack of historical accuracy in the Old Testament stories is not emphasized, but more importantly, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian history are demonstrated to be human creations. The stories in the scriptures were not historical accounts, but tales with a theological point. It is clear that such figures as Jesus and Mohammed had some sort of religious experience, but so do those who, for instance, gain wisdom by astral travel to other planets. Religions are built on supernatural explanations of these experiences, and historical accidents involving national might and economics take over to make them influential.

We could accept that a God was present and pushing the world along if there were some interruption in the natural flow, some miracle or paranormal event. The eagerness to believe in such events is very high, but the evidence is extraordinarily low: “Those of us who are stubborn skeptics, well, we get along without magic. And late at night we sometimes wish we could still storms and read minds.” Wishes are insufficient; psychological and neurological evidence indicates that our brains are engaged in examining an unmagical

world, and spirits, souls, or direct contact with some ultimate reality are all equally unlikely.

Edis discusses the idea that science is overrated; the fundamentalists have been saying this for a long time, and have recently gotten support in this particular idea (although they might not like to acknowledge it) from postmodern philosophy. Belief in science may just be a social construct arbitrarily chosen, with no inherently better ability to explain the world than an equally arbitrary fundamentalism. Edis shows that there is not a transcendental guarantee “out there” that reason, evidence, and replicability are the best way of looking at the world, but there still are no real competitors. Similarly, he sees no transcendent moral reality, no good and evil “out there”; morals instead are a product of our genes and our social, collective effort to live together and incorporate conflicting interests.

Believers should be grateful that they have such a gentle critic. It could only be a fundamentalist of insecure faith who would accuse Edis of trashing religion. In fact, in intelligent opposition, Edis has shown a great deal of respect for the religious view. He also reveals himself to be a fan of the stories religions tell, because they can explain a good deal about ourselves. Most will think that this will be giving the stories too little credit, but as he repeatedly says in acknowledging how little certainty we have, it is good enough. His book is certainly good enough to benefit believers and nonbelievers alike.



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### Quote

*When someone is saved from certain death by a strange concatenation of circumstances, they say that’s a miracle. But of course, if someone is killed by a freak chain of events – the oil spilled just there, the safety fence broken just there – that must also be a miracle. Just because it’s not nice doesn’t mean it’s not miraculous.*

(Terry Pratchett, *Interesting Times*)