



## **Exploring Philosophy - Audio**

*Faith and Reason*

### **Winifred**

In this debate we've brought together four people to discuss the question of faith versus reason and whether religious belief is based on blind faith or evidence.

Our guests represent four very different points of view. Professor Mona Siddiqui is a Muslim theologian from Glasgow University. Rabbi Mark Goldsmith is from Alyth Synagogue in London. Keith Ward is Professorial Research Fellow at Heythrop College, University of London. He is a philosopher and a priest in the Church of England. And Dr Peter Cave is an atheist and is Chair of the Humanist Philosophers Group.

So I will begin with a question for the three believers. Some people think the existence of God can be proved. Others think it's something beyond scientific proof. So what's your view?  
Professor Siddiqui

### **Professor Siddiqui**

It depends what you mean by the word "proof". If you are asking me whether I can prove the material existence of God I probably can't prove the material existence of God. If you are asking me can I imagine my world without God then for me the belief in God is so strong that it doesn't require that objective proof.

### **Winifred**

Muslims though often say don't they that Islam is a religion of reason and yet you seem to be suggesting, well you said, God's existence cannot be proved.

### **Professor Siddiqui**

For Medieval Muslim philosophers they used various arguments about the existence of God. But they largely debated God's attributes and God's magnitude, God's omnipotence in the context of the existence of a transcendent being. A being who we cannot grasp ultimately and that we can only feel and apprehend through our emotions. So in a way within the Muslim context you are starting from within the spectrum of belief rather than stepping outside the belief and saying now let's try and prove God.

**Winifred**

Professor Ward –

**Professor Ward**

If you think you experience God a personal presence, which is not embodied, but which appears to be real to you, you have to ask the question is this an illusion or is it valid. And then you're asking is it reasonable. But I don't think faith is blind. If you're faith is not reasonable, if it doesn't fit into your view of how the world is at all then you should give it up. And so some sorts of faith are reasonable and some aren't. So I always want to challenge that disjunction that faith is something which doesn't appeal to reason or evidence at all. Whereas reason tells you some truths and I would say reason doesn't tell you anything. Reason is like logic; a method of arguing and you should have reasonable beliefs, which often commits you to things beyond the minimum evidence that you might have.

**Winifred**

Beyond the minimum evidence that you might have –

**Professor Ward**

What I'm thinking of is somebody called W K Clifford who said it is always and everywhere wrong to believe anything on insufficient evidence. And what I'd suggest is that the word "evidence" is used by many philosophers, much too narrowly, as though evidence consists in what your senses can tell you, sight and hearing and sound and so on. Whereas you could construe evidence much more widely to include religious experience, experience of God and also very general metaphysical beliefs about whether the world is ultimately a material only world, just matter. Or whether there is spirit, spiritual reality in the world.

**Winifred**

Rabbi Goldsmith – faith or reason?

**Rabbi Goldsmith**

Well I can perhaps pick up from what Professor Ward was saying. Judaism works on the God presumption. The presumption that there is a God. Our first text, the Torah, begins with the word .. .. "In the beginning, God created." So, you are starting with the idea that God is there. Then comes the next big challenge, which is searching for that God and trying to find that God now. Now for that reason the name of the Jewish people Yisrael means "Those who struggle with God". The philosophers who there have been throughout Jewish history, some of whom are shared with Islam, some of whom have been part of Christian discourse as well have been part of that search; different ways of doing that search, different ways of trying how you could encounter that God. There's also for Jews the idea that there is evidence from history. One looks back at Jewish history, in fact in every single Jewish service you look back

at Jewish history. An awful lot of it is talking about Jewish experience and that evidence from history also helps to reinforce the God presumption. And then after that comes personal experience and the way that an individual experiences the spiritual. All of those in a way are tools to do your own personal search, to be part of Yisrael yourself. But I will say one more thing which is that there's over a hundred and one names for God found in the Talmud, the basic Jewish book of law and history. Those are all different ways of encountering God. So to say there is a God in which there is faith is only the very beginning of the struggle.

**Winifred**

So it begins with faith to which you then apply reason?

**Rabbi**

I think that's right. It begins with the presumption that there is a God to be found – now go out and find.

**Winifred**

Dr Cave, you're an atheist. What of what you have just heard then do you not agree with? First of all I suppose you don't make the God presumption, you don't presume there is a God to begin with.

**Dr Peter Cave**

No. I'm surprised to hear about that presumption. That immediately makes me think we are already into the realm of faith. Really, these religious believers maybe they are adopting the great kangaroo line. The great kangaroo line is the case in which you have some minimal evidence to use Keith's words, and then you have to do a huge kangarooing leap, the huge hop of a kangaroo, into your commitment to God. That does worry me a lot because that does show that in fact there isn't being based on evidence or reason. It is being based on just a feeling maybe and that also worries me because normally the great kangaroo leap is irreversible. Most people make that leap are so committed to God so committed to Allah, so committed to Jehovah, that whatever they then hear about him they are then prepared to die for it.

**Professor Siddiqui**

I think that one of the things we should be wary of is that irrespective of why it's baffling to non-believers, why people believe in God, people who do believe in God for the large part, do struggle with belief as well, not necessarily in their God but how to make sense of God and his laws. And I think it's – it's a very simplistic way of looking at faith and none faith that all people of faith have dogmatic views and they don't struggle and they know certainty and they know God and they know what's right and wrong. We all, all of us around this table who do

believe in God, I am sure have struggled with belief and have struggled with how to make sense of God.

**Winifred**

Dr Cave I think you will agree that the people gathered around the table are highly intelligent people and lots of very gifted people throughout history have been religious people. Your case then is that they are all deluded. They have all made the kangaroo leap from very little evidence to faith, religious faith.

**Dr Peter Cave**

I think the delusion might be more to do with the nature of the claim. Namely when people say that God exists and God is Love, perhaps what they are doing in many cases is expressing a wonderful attitude towards the world of how we should in fact respect the environment, how we should look after and have concern for other people and so on. And so what they misleadingly take to be a claim about the existence of a supernatural being is in fact more like an attitude of reverence towards the world, an attitude of reverence towards other human beings and other creatures. And with that obviously I can agree.

**Professor Ward**

I strongly object philosophically to the statement or the implication that we all start from some position where we know the material world is real but we are not sure about God and to get to God you have to make the kangaroo leap. And I think that is totally false. I think almost everyone starts from the belief that there is a personal transcendent reality with which they have some personal relationship. Belief in God is not a kangaroo leap. It's the natural starting position.

**Dr Peter Cave**

Just because something is a natural belief it doesn't follow it's true. Of course for many, many centuries and indeed maybe today children will naturally believe that the earth is flat. It doesn't follow that the earth is flat.

**Winifred**

Could I move on to the business of proof which has been mentioned. Rabbi Goldsmith, you talked about the Old Testament and the Scriptures being part of the history of the evidence that is gathered, passed down from generation to generation. How important is it to the three believers around the table that you have these books, the Koran, the Old Testament, the New Testament.

**Rabbi Goldsmith**

Well as I said this is about search, both personal and a search of a people and a search of humanity for God. The Scriptures are the collected Wisdom, the collected ideas, some of which we challenge, of our previous generations but it gets us going on that search.

**Winifred**

Mona Siddiqui –

**Professor Siddiqui**

It's interesting that even the most fervent believers of the formative period of Islam and then right up to the Medieval period discussed did you need revelation from God that His scripture for Muslims to take you to God and to show you justice and goodness in the world. Or could human reason alone take you to God? And it was disputed and in some circles it's still disputed. So despite belief, despite a strong belief in God, to be human is to question and the biggest question for human beings I think is this very nature of our existence and how we are connected to a transcendent if there is a transcendent. So for many people today I mean the average Muslim you would ask would say they cannot imagine Islam without the Koran, without Scripture, without Prophecy. God in his mercy cannot leave human beings without some kind of guidance towards Him.

**Winifred**

Professor Ward – if it was proved by archaeologists, if archaeologists found the tomb of Christ and could prove scientifically beyond doubt that this was the tomb of Christ and here were his mortal remains and that he had not risen in body and ascended into heaven, would that shake your religious ----

**Professor Ward**

I would stop being a Christian, yes. I would still believe in God but I would be something else. Yes, I mean that's obvious. Faith must be falsifiable otherwise it has no content. You just – that's your faith. You don't think it's going to be falsified.

**Winifred**

If I could ask those who believe in God at this table, if there is a God why don't you agree which God there is and which of the religions is true? Rabbi Goldsmith

**Rabbi Goldsmith**

I think there's a problem with the question. Why don't we agree which God there is? The Jewish Foundation Prayer in morning and evening services and in personal prayer says . . . .  
.. “that God is our God and God is one.” Basically it means both things. There is a Jewish relationship with God, which comes through our Scriptures, from what we learn through our

ancestors, from what we learn from our own families and the people around us, which is particular to the Jewish experience. But there is but one God and that is that one God who is shared by all who behind their spiritual understanding of the world, is God. And let's keep searching. But it's one God.

**Professor Ward**

Yes, I agree totally with that. Jesus quoting the Hebrew Bible said "The Lord your God is one Lord". And I think there is one God and Jews, Muslims and Christians all agree that there is one God though we might have slightly different descriptions of some of God's attributes. And most Hindus really though a lot of people don't realise this, most Hindus believe in one God with many names.

**Professor Siddiqui**

I have absolutely no problem with saying that the God of the Muslims is the same God of the Jews and the Christians. I think where the difference is how we perceive that God and more importantly how we see God's relationship with human beings as well. There is a difference within the three traditions. But to say that why don't we agree on one God – I think we do.

**Winifred**

Thank you all very much indeed. Thank you.