

## Test of Faith: Can Science Detect God?

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It was early February 1971. The three-man Apollo 14 crew had just completed their mission and were returning home. Edgar D. Mitchell, the Lunar Module Pilot gazed out of the window of the command module Kitty Hawk as it hurtled towards its landing target in the Pacific Ocean. As he stared at the Earth suspended in the immense cosmos, Mitchell experienced an extraordinary epiphany. On his return he said "When I went to the moon I was a pragmatic test pilot. But when I saw the planet Earth floating in the vastness of space the presence of divinity became almost palpable and I knew that life in the universe was not just an accident based on random processes."

This inspiration convinced him that reality is more complex and mysterious than conventional science had led him to believe. The 18th century psychologist and philosopher William James<sup>1</sup> described this type of mystical state as having a 'noetic' quality, from the Greek *noitikós* meaning inner wisdom.

Rather than viewing his scientific background as a threat to this encounter, Mitchell hoped to reconcile conventional science with his new-found spirituality and established the field of noetic sciences. Today its researchers aim to scientifically substantiate a wide range of supernatural phenomena, such as extra-sensory perception, precognition, and mind-matter interactions. The noetic sciences were recently popularised in Dan Brown's 2009 novel, 'The Lost Symbol' in which one of the leading characters, Dr. Katherine Solomon claims to have used noetic science to categorically prove that 'human thought, if properly focused, had the ability to affect and change physical mass.'<sup>2</sup>

If it is indeed possible to apply scientific methods to verify or falsify supernatural claims such as the power of prayer, then perhaps these studies could remove the need for faith which, from a scientific perspective is an anathema to rational thought. 'Faith,' as Professor Richard Dawkins put it 'is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.'<sup>3</sup>

Since the late 19th century, scientists have made a number of attempts to test the efficacy of intercessory prayer by assessing whether praying for the recovery of an ill patient has a measurable effect. In 2003 the American Psychological Association concluded that while there was some statistical evidence to support the success of intercessory prayer, given the absence of a plausible physiological mechanism which could have been influenced coupled with contradictory studies, the researchers remained predictably sceptical of their results.

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<sup>1</sup> James writes 'Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of, truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule, they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.' From *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902) Pages 380-381

<sup>2</sup> *The Lost Symbol*, Dan Brown, page 85.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Richard Dawkins on *Inheriting Religion*, from *The Nullifidian* (December 1994)

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This should not be surprising. The Torah relates that after leaving Egypt and arriving in Massah, the Jewish people complained of thirst and dissatisfaction with the manna that God had provided. They claimed that if God could not provide water in the desert, it would prove that He was not with them.<sup>4</sup> Later the Torah recalls this episode and explicitly prohibits this sort of behaviour: 'You shall not test God as you tested Him at Massah.'<sup>5</sup>

Many commentators explain that the problem is less to do with testing God, and more about the erroneous presumptions that will inevitably be made. Whereas a treatment or medication is both scientifically explainable and can be assumed to act through a mechanism of cause and effect, prayer simply does not work that way. Since the veracity of scientific research is only as reliable as the pre-experimental assumptions, when those assumptions are mistaken then no matter what the results, the inferences drawn will be wrong.

Does this mean that we must rely simply on faith? Are we left to bamboozle ourselves into 'believing' in God no matter what?

While science cannot engender faith, it is wrong to suggest that it must therefore have no rational source. Many draw on the unique revelation at Sinai as a foundation of their belief in God. For generations of Jews to assert that the entire Israelite nation witnessed God first-hand is such a unique and all-encompassing claim, it would effectively be impossible to fabricate. While individual claims of personal revelation found in other religions are neither falsifiable nor verifiable, it is unrealistic to suggest that Moses was able to convince the entire nation that they had collectively experienced revelation when they had not. Although it is impossible to authenticate such a claim scientifically, it is at the very least rational and perhaps even reasonable to believe that God exists and revealed the Torah to our ancestors at Sinai over 3,000 years ago.

Jewish faith does not require the sort of epiphany described by Edgar D. Mitchell to comprehend God, nor can the supernatural be detected through scientific research. For the Jewish people the real test of faith cannot be resolved in the laboratory but must be played out within the confines of our hearts and minds.

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 17:7

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 6:16. This concept is reflected by later sources, in particular the Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 9a.