



THE PEOPLE & THE BOOK TIBOR KRAUSZ

# Pining for the Almighty

A Jewish atheist makes a case for God

IAN CHEN/UNSPASH

Noah's flood. Not only is Hebrew scripture a demonstrable mélange of often inconsistent ancient beliefs and traditions, it's also derivative, pain us though this may.

And then there is the New Testament, which is glutted with discrepancies, ahistorical details, and mangled, out-of-context readings of the Hebrew Bible. In the Gospel of Matthew (2:15), for instance, Joseph and Mary flee with baby Jesus from an infanticidal King Herod to Egypt, only to return to Judea after Herod's death in fulfillment of "what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" Yet Hosea 11, to which this passage refers, clearly identifies the son in question as the people of Israel during the Exodus.

In the face of such vexatious issues with sacred texts, one can parse them endlessly, read them allegorically, torture their meanings through exegesis, despair at their impenetrable mysteries, or simply ignore them. But that won't make them go away.

As should be obvious by now, I am not much of a believer and nor, it turns out, is David Baddiel.

Are we worse off for it? That's debatable, but Baddiel has no doubts. Despite professing to be a diehard atheist, the Jewish-British comedian wishes he believed in God, even though he is dead certain Hashem doesn't exist.

He lays out his case for this stance in *The God Desire*, which is less a proper book than a protracted, discursive and amusing soliloquy seasoned with pop culture references. What sets it off is that Baddiel, who is about to turn 60, is terrified of dying and has been since he was a wee

boy in an Orthodox Jewish primary school. He would like God to exist, along with the hereafter. Wishful thinking won't make either into a reality and he knows this full well, but still.

"I love God," he declares. "I believe a modern God would almost definitely have a Twitter bio that ended [with] They/Them," he elucidates, referencing the current craze about alleged gender fluidity whereby many men and women prefer to identify as "non-binary" or as an invented gender from an ever-growing potpourri of options. How this woke new deity would be an improvement on the irasci-

**GOD HAS** a problem. Namely, it's not obvious He exists. In fact, all germane evidence, when carefully evaluated, leads you to conclude that God is no more real than Zeus, Vishnu, and Thor.

That's a bummer if you hope for eternal life in His heavenly kingdom or need His help through the solicitation of prayer. I would be thrilled with both life everlasting (so long as it's spent in a hearty state) and some divine succor for my troubles, but there you have it.

Our understanding of the world with the tools of science strongly suggests that both the universe and life in it have been created not by any divine being but by impersonal and random material processes. As for us, far from being created in God's sublime image, as the Bible would have it, we are but intelligent apes longing for meaning in a world without much of it.

In defense of their faith, many believers cite scripture as proof of God's existence, but that won't do: Scripture is not evidence for its own claims. Few religions demonstrate this as convincingly as Islam, which undermines its very premise by claiming the Quran to be inerrant as the literal word of the Almighty. "Do [unbelievers] not reflect upon the Quran? Had it been from anyone other than Allah, they would have found in it many inconsistencies" (4:82), it declares.

Yet, lo and behold, we can find plenty of discrepancies in Islam's holy book and just as many errors of fact. Here are a few: Stars are lamps in heaven, where shooting stars are fiery missiles lobbed at pesky celestial devils (67:5); the sun sets in a muddy spring (18:86); and the Earth is flat like a carpet in a Bedou-

in's tent and secured in place by mountains (15:19 and 71:19).

But that's not all. The Quran contains a clue about its all too human authorship. In it, Allah, who putatively conceived the book for the edification of all mankind before he even set about creating the world wherein he would reveal it in bits and pieces to an illiterate merchant in Arabia, deemed it imperative to spare Mohammed from unwelcome intrusions into his downtime.

"O believers, do not enter the houses of the Prophet, except when you are permitted for a meal, without awaiting its readiness. But when you are invited, then enter; and when you have eaten, disperse without seeking to remain for conversation," warns Islam's god, who speaks of himself in the third person (33:53).

"Indeed, this (behavior) is troubling to the Prophet, and he is shy of dismissing you. But Allah is not shy of the truth."

Then again, it's not as if the Bible could double as a science textbook. That's clear from the get-go. In one of the two conflicting creation accounts in Genesis, God fashions the first day and night before He brings forth the sun, without which there can be neither, only on the fourth day. One could write hefty books about such oddities, and many scholars have. They have also highlighted the numerous borrowings in the Bible from ancient Sumerian and other sources, one famous example being



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David Baddiel (Brian Minkoff-London Pixels)

ble God of old the author does not say.

That's a pity, since a great many radical progressives are no less doctrinaire and no less intolerant of those who don't share their each-to-their-own notions of human biology and race relations than medieval inquisitors were of ostensible heretics' divergent views on Jesus's divinity. They also tend to be vehemently anti-Israel, slandering the Jewish state at every chance with a limited repertoire of absurd calumnies: apartheid regime, genocidal colonialist entity, racist ethno-state.

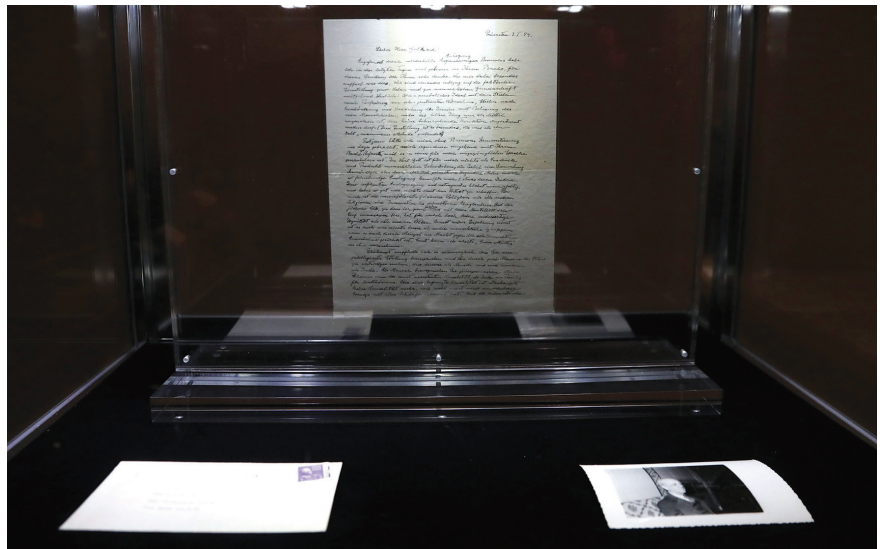
In any event, deep down we are all perpetually infantile (Baddiel prefers the word "babyish") and thus sorely in want of a celestial father figure, he argues. "I am flawed and shallow and scared and often desperately in need of comfort, both psychological and physical," he confesses as though in repose on a psychoanalyst's couch.

Well, I can be all those things, even if I may be more reluctant to admit (albeit I just have), but what is one to do? Hardwired Jewish neurosis runs deep in many of us, and we have to grin — or grimace — and bear it. Plus, people of faith can have all these shortcomings too, so it's not evident that belief in God is a prophylactic against them.

Moving on, Baddiel likens religious belief to conspiracy theory. They are similar, he observes, insofar as people resort to both to impose order on a chaotic world and thereby create a more user-friendly view of reality sans sufficient evidence. Anyone who has ever debated with religious zealots and conspiracy nuts will know he is right: They are virtually indistinguishable with their tendentious lines of reasoning and blithe disregard for counterfactuals and counterarguments.

The author is equally on point about a troubling in-vogue trend of seeing reality through an increasingly erratic and personalized lens, facts be damned. He quotes Scott Hershovitz, an American philosopher, who told his young son: "God isn't real... But when you pretend, he is." This, Baddiel writes, "is a deeply profound truth about God." No, it isn't, but we'll let that pass. "But it is also a truth," he goes on, "about how we live now: that our construction of reality slips and blurs, to allow for pretense to become reality." Now, that is a salient insight.

But then we have this: "The [ancient] idea that stars are chinks in the floor of heaven — that is wondrous. That is beautiful." Presumably, Baddiel would see equal beauty in the Quranic notion of stars as lamps in heaven,



A letter known as 'The God Letter' written by Albert Einstein and addressed to philosopher Eric Gutkind in 1954 is seen on display at Christie's auction house ahead of its sale in New York City.

which is fine. Yet in the same book, we also find this verse instructing Muslims: "When you meet those who disbelieve, strike at their necks until you have inflicted slaughter upon them" (47:4).

Plenty of other *surahs* [chapters] are just as belligerent, and radical Islamists take them very seriously, as has long been evident, not least by Hamas terrorists' wanton savagery in southern Israel in October. Muslims of such persuasions expend far more time and energy on devising ways to slaughter Jews and other infidels than on gazing with wonder at those little lamps in the night sky.

Hence the problem. Religious texts contain this and that, but in revealed religions they are believed to have been handed down from on high as instruction manuals, which makes it mandatory for believers to follow scriptural tenets. And if Allah wants you to strike at the scrags of stiff-necked Jews, Christians, and polytheists (whom he particularly loathes as per the Quran), who are you as a devout Muslim to quibble about that?

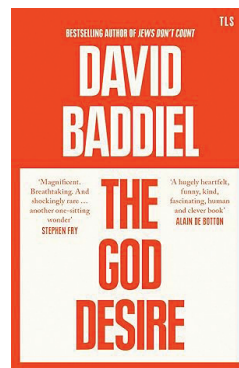
Martyrdom by jihad is deemed an expressway to heaven; and not only do homicidal jihadists appear not to fear death as Baddiel does, but they positively welcome it. Many Muslim children would be far better served by being taught physics and astronomy rather than Islamic theology of a sanguinary, literal-

ist kind. Instead of stargazing, however, they are indoctrinated into a death cult with grievous consequences for them and us.

However, this doesn't mean that "religion poisons everything" as the late Christopher Hitchens, a self-avowed Jewish "anti-theist," insisted. The biblical claim, for instance, that we were created in God's image has bestowed sanctity on human life in Jewish theology. "Whoever destroys a single life [has] destroyed the whole world, and whoever saves a single life [has] saved the whole world," the *Mishna* avers.

And, of course, without Judaism and the belief in God it engenders in its adherents, there would be no Jewish people with their ancient traditions, gift of survival in the throes of great misfortunes, and monumental achievements. There would have been no Spinoza and no Einstein, no Mahler and no Kafka.

That would have been a terrible shame. Baddiel certainly thinks so. He is a proud Jew, just one who happens not to believe in God. He is moved, he says, by the "centuries of tradition and suffering and defiance" during which Jews have been fortified by their religion. And so it is with many of us *Yehudim* of little faith. We pride ourselves on being Jewish, and if perchance there is a God up in His celestial realm somewhere, we can only hope He will take this into account. ■



The cover of Baddiel's book, published on September 5, 2023.