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I'D STAKE MY LIFE THAT STEPHEN HAWKING IS WRONG ABOUT HEAVEN

by Michael Wenham

Mike, you *have* staked your life on it. You have lived your life as if the fairy tales in the Bible were true. Those are years you will never get back; years wasted talking to imaginary friends.

*Hawking says some admirable things, but the idea that I believe in life after death because I'm afraid of the dark is insulting.*

Mike, you should feel insulted for holding the beliefs of a child.

*Like Stephen Hawking, I have been living with motor neurone disease (MND).*

Well Mike, if your beliefs were true one might wonder why God would reward one of his followers with such a horrible, debilitating disease. If Hawking's beliefs are true then wondering is unnecessary - it is easily explained by biology and evolution.

*Like him, I'm one of the lucky few not to have died within months of diagnosis.*

Mike, if what you believe is true, one would think that you would have been considered lucky to be taken to your Lord as soon as possible. Why are you none of you people in any hurry to see the Big Guy? If He is everything you claim He is, why would you even waste one more minute down here on Earth?

*I'm nine years younger than him and have had the symptoms of the disease for only 10 years, compared with his 49. However for those 10 years I've also "lived with the prospect of an early death." Unlike Professor Hawking I am not a superstar scientist. I'm simply a small-time writer, who used to be a teacher and a vicar.*

And therein lies the problem Mike. As a superstar scientist Hawking has been trained to apply the scientific method to his beliefs. You are simply a small-time writer and a has-been teacher. But the important part is that you were a vicar (a clergyman). That is why you must deny reality, and base your beliefs, not on proven scientific fact, but on faith - which is just another word for nonsense.

*It seems to me that, while some things Stephen Hawking says in the interview as it's reported are unarguably true, some are also admitted hypothesis, and some are merely tendentious. One of the features of MND both for him as for me is that it affects your ability to speak and hence pares down what you say to the bare bones. (That's not of course the case when you have time to type a script.) Hence sometimes you are frustrated by your inability to nuance your ideas. And so it may be that his very categorical answers are the nub of his opinion, but not the full expression.*

Mike, I didn't find any ambiguity in his opinions.

*For example, there's something of "nothing-buttery" about his comments about death:*

*"I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark."*

*It's unarguably true that there's no heaven for broken down computers, as I have found to my cost when I poured fruit juice over my laptop. The brain may be nothing but a most remarkable computer, yet there's something generically different from a computer in a brain which, when it starts to malfunction as happens in MND, can begin to love Wagner's music and "enjoy life more".*

So Mike, you think the fact that you love music and enjoy life means there must exist an invisible ghost pulling everyone's strings?

*That, I would say, is irrational, but not uncommon.*

Mike, that was the first truly accurate statement you've written.

*Human beings, it would appear, are something more than machines.*

Mike, Hawking didn't mean that we are literally machines. He was only speaking metaphorically.

*Maybe science will one day describe what the difference is.*

Mike, time to go back to school, but this time as a student, not a teacher. Sign up for biology and you might discover that science already can tell you what the difference is.

*Hawking tells us that "the universe is governed by science". I think I understand what he means.*

Mike, that's a good start. So why do I have the feeling that you're about to fumble?

*It is certainly discoverable by science. Scientific theories that don't fit with the evidence of the universe fail. In simple terms science is governed by the universe, not the other way round.*

Mike, that is exactly why it is called science. In those cases where it is the other way around ... we call it religion.

*What's interesting is that this is in effect what Hawking says talking about the beauty of science. It's "beautiful when it makes simple explanations of phenomena or connections between different observations", citing the double helix and fundamental equations in physics as examples.*

*I find myself admiring and agreeing with much of what Professor Hawking says,*

Mike, so you agree with everything so long as it doesn't impact your religious beliefs? How generous of you.

*but I find his ethical deduction and his quasi-religious observation sadly lacking. " So here we are. What should we do?" he is asked. The question sounds similar to ones posed to great religious teachers of the past. His answer is disappointing: "We should seek the greatest value of our action." It's certainly thought-provoking (what exactly does that mean for this or that action?) and it is a principle that is reinforced by the experience of life-threatening illness. One could say: "Don't waste your life." Yet as a rule for life, it lacks both the impact and the practicality of the great Judeo-Christian answer to that question: "Love God above yourself, and love your neighbour as yourself."*

Unless he is gay, right Mike? Or Muslim; or Buddhist; or Hindu; or Atheist; or ... you get the picture.

Hawking's answer results in people loving their families and friends above all else - your answer places them below an invisible ghost with a long history of violence and murder. The fact that you actually think your answer is a better way to live one's life is disturbing.

*Even those who are unwilling to subscribe to the first part can understand the second part and usually admit its validity.*

Mike, but as I just pointed out, you people are the last to "love your neighbors as yourselves." Your entire 2,000 year history is one of death and destruction for any who would not submit.

*Finally, Stephen Hawking's headlined observation about death, that an after-life "is a fairy-story for people afraid of the dark" is both sad and misinformed.*

Mike, what is sad is for adults to live their entire lives believing in those fairy tales; and how is it misinformed? Do you have some evidence to the contrary?

*Openness to the theoretical possibility of there being 11 dimensions and fundamental particles "as yet undiscovered" shows an intellectual humility strangely at odds with writing off the possibility of other dimensions of existence.*

Mike, that's because those dimensions have some evidence to support the belief that they might exist. No evidence exists to support the belief that your dimension exists.

*For someone "facing the prospect of an early death", with probably an unpleasant prelude, the idea of extinction holds no more fear than sleep. It really is insulting to accuse me of believing there might be life after death because I'm afraid of the dark.*

Mike, take all the insult you want: you deserve every bit of it.

*On the contrary, sad though I shall be to leave behind those I love, I suspect the end of life, whatever happens, will be a relief. And, like Pascal making his wager, if it is dark, I really won't mind, because, of course, there won't be a me to mind.*

Mike, how did I know you would resort to Pascal's Wager? Because that is always the last argument of desperate Ghost Worshippers.

Pascal's Wager is a fool's bet. How do you know which God to wager on? The answer is, that you will wager on whichever invisible ghost in which you were brought up to believe in. It's simply a matter of where you were born.

Mike, here's a wager for you: if you had happened to be born in Tehran, I'll bet you wouldn't be wagering on the Christian God.

*Strangely enough, my theory that there is a form of life after we die is not some sort of wishful thinking.*

Mike, the way you began that sentence "strangely enough" was right on the money. So if it isn't wishful thinking, what is it based on?

*It's based on evidence. If the brain is a computer, then, when I was studying where Stephen Hawking now teaches, I came on a mass of data of which the most convincing, the neatest, explanation was that death is not the end of life.*

Mike, can you give us one piece of evidence from that "mass of data?"

*It wasn't the most comfortable nor most obvious of conclusions, but the forensic case was forceful and beautiful, providing "simple explanations of phenomena or connections between different observations".*

Mike, that was beautiful, totally meaningless, but beautiful.

*The best exposition I found was by the then director of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies in London, Professor Sir Norman Anderson, in The Evidence for the Resurrection (later republished as part of Jesus Christ: The Witness of History). My disturbing conclusion was that, if it happened once, as seemed beyond reasonable doubt, then I needed to revise my whole world view.*

Mike, you are right: that is a disturbing conclusion. So where is the evidence for your disturbing conclusion? So you revised your whole worldview on the premise "if it happened once?"

Mike, you are taking ignorance to a whole new level.

*One may wish to dismiss Jesus Christ, or Julius Caesar, as fairy stories, even as bunk,*

Mike, neat trick. Dishonest, but neat. You lumped Jesus in with someone for whom there is little doubt that he actually lived so as to imply that if one was real, the other must be too.

The main reason why one can reasonably accept the existence of Julius Caesar is that there are no supernatural claims surrounding his life. The same is not true for Jesus. However, that does not rule out the existence of a *man* named Jesus who was reputed to have performed miracles.

*but, until one has examined the evidence in Anderson's forensic manner, that's a premature judgment.*

Mike, religious scholars do not employ forensic techniques.

Premature judgment? Are you serious? You've had 2,000 friggin years - how exactly are you defining "premature?"

*I suspect many do that. As for the idea that belief in an afterlife is a consolation, it is not just about heaven.*

That's right Mike, let's not forget about that other place. You know, the one that Pascal's Wager relies on to keep the faithful ... faithful.

*Most faiths in fact have a notion of judgment, which is hardly comfortable for anyone, although it does focus the motivation not to waste one's life.*

Mike, the motivation not to waste one's life explains the existence of a billion nonbelievers.

*Moreover in our situation Professor Hawking surely knows better than that some notion in your head, whatever that notion might be, makes the frustrations and pains of a terminal illness somehow more bearable. That's the nonsense of those who have not been there. I can't prove it of course, but on good grounds I'd stake my life on it, that beyond death will be another great adventure; but first I have to finish this one.*

No Mike, you can't prove it; nor can you produce any evidence that it is even possible. But that last childish little fantasy about beginning another great adventure pretty much proves everything that Hawking said about you. I would only add one word to Hawking's description, "pathetic."

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

Keeping the Flu Away:

Synthetic Protein Activates Immune System Within Two Hours

San Diego State University researchers may have found the secret to helping the immune system fight off the flu before it gets you sick. A new study finds that EP67, a powerful synthetic protein, is able to activate the innate immune system within just two hours of being administered.

Prior to this study, EP67 had been primarily used as something added to a vaccine to help activate the immune response. But researchers saw potential for it to work on its own.

The flu virus is very sneaky and actively keeps the immune system from detecting it for a few days until you are getting symptoms. Introducing EP67 into the body within 24 hours of exposure to the flu virus caused the immune system to react almost immediately to the threat, well before the body normally would.

Because EP67 doesn't work on the virus but on the immune system itself, it functions the same no matter the flu strain, unlike the influenza vaccine which has to exactly match the currently circulating strain.

While this study focuses on the flu, EP67 has the potential to work on other respiratory diseases and fungal infections and could have huge potential for emergency therapeutics.

When you find out you've been exposed to the flu, the only treatments available now target the virus directly but they are not reliable and often the virus develops a resistance against them. EP67 could potentially be a therapeutic that someone would take when they know they've been exposed that would help the body fight off the virus before they get sick. It could even be used in the event of a new strain of infectious disease, before the actual pathogen has been identified, as in SARS or the 2009 H1N1 influenza outbreak.

Right now, the testing has been done primarily in mice by infecting them with a flu virus. Those that were given a dose of EP67 within 24 hours of the infection didn't get sick (or as sick) as those that were not treated with EP67.

The level of illness in mice is measured by weight loss. Typically, mice lose approximately 20 percent of their weight when they are infected with the flu. But mice treated with EP67 lost an average of just six percent. More importantly, mice who were treated a day after being infected with a lethal dose of influenza did not die.

There are also huge implications for veterinary applications, since EP67 is active in animals, including birds. Future research will examine the effect EP67 has in the presence of a number of other pathogens and look closer at exactly how EP67 functions within different cells in the body.

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FAMOUS QUOTES

Jon Stewart (1962) is an American political satirist, writer, television host, actor, media critic and stand-up comedian. He is widely known as host of The Daily Show, a satirical news program that airs on Comedy Central.

Stewart started as a stand-up comedian, but branched into television as host of Short Attention Span Theater for Comedy Central. He went on to host his own show on MTV, called The Jon Stewart Show, and then hosted another show on MTV called You Wrote It, You Watch It. He has also had several film roles as an actor. Stewart became the host of The Daily Show on Comedy Central in early 1999. He is also a writer and co-executive-producer of the show. After Stewart joined, The Daily Show steadily gained popularity and critical acclaim, resulting in his sixteen Emmy Awards.

Stewart hosted the 78th and 80th Academy Awards. He is the co-author of America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction, which was one of the best-selling books in the U.S. in 2004; and Earth (The Book): A Visitor's Guide to the Human Race released in 2010.

"Religion. It's given hope in a world torn apart by ... religion."