

Does God exist?

A Chinese atheist and an American Christian go head to head to debate the existence of god in a bold, new book, as Robert Lawrence Kuhn reports

In humanity's long quest to understand ultimate reality, the encounter between science and religion — battling over the perennial question, Does God Exist? — is perhaps the most significant clashing of opposite views of seeing the world.

In the West, the Catholic Church in the past, and some fundamental Christians in the present, reject science whenever they feel it comes into conflict with their form of revelation.



Dr. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, who has a doctorate in brain research, is the creator and host of "Closer to Truth," a public television series in the United States that deals with the implications of state-of-the-art science, the philosophy of science, and the philosophy of religion. Two of his "Closer to Truth" books have been published in China, the latest one relating his work in China in understanding the meaning and applications of President Hu Jintao's "Scientific Development Perspective."

Today there are many philosophers and some scientists who take a different, and quite sophisticated approach, to their belief in God. These questions and this debate have profound implications and their importance is overdue to be considered seriously in China.

Timely book
It is in this context that a very timely book has been published in China. Zhao Qizheng, former minister of the State Council Information Office, and Luis Palau, a well-known international Christian evangelist, conducted a series of conversations, called the "Riverside Talks," which they term "A Friendly Dialogue between an Atheist and a Christian."

It is a pioneering effort in China to introduce a vital subject of high contemporary relevance and explanatory power. These are the kinds of subjects that make minds sharper, more aware, more in touch with deeper reality. Zhao, who was trained in nuclear physics, shows both knowledge and sensitivity about the Christian belief system. He has read the Bible and understands its teachings and stories. He sees the Bible as great literature, replete with wisdom, and he finds artistic beauty in its prose, proverbs and poems — so much so that Zhao even advises, "The Bible is well worth reading from all of these perspectives." What he does not do, of course, is revere the Bible as the revelation of God.

On the other hand, Palau claims

BRAINS BEHIND THE OPERATION
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that the Bible is divinely inspired and presents his arguments, many centered around the central personality of Jesus in the New Testament and the claim of his resurrection from the dead.

Zhao says that although he too reads the Bible, "I am not a believer." His probative question "Why?" is the resonating theme of the entire book.

Zhao explains his unbelief in the words of a scientist: "I can only understand what exists, what is concrete and substantive ... I cannot understand a metaphysical concept."

It is indeed in the metaphysical aspects of religion — the claim to explain Ultimate Reality — that Zhao and Palau disagree. On matters of the social benefits of religion, such as contributing to a harmonious society, there is more agreement.

Zhao, whom I must disclose is a personal friend, presents rich and profound ideas from traditional Chinese philosophy — such as the dialectical relationship between the physical and the spiritual — and notes that although he does not believe in a God; the concepts of "spirit and soul" are not alien to him.

"Atheists and theists," he says, "share the same pursuit in the realm of the soul and the spirit." He points out that each would have different understandings of spirit and soul.

A dialogue between an atheist and a Christian cannot progress far without the atheist bringing up the "Argument from Evil" (to the theist it is called the "Problem of Evil"), which historically is the strongest demonstration of the non-existence of God.

If God, as Christians claim, is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, how could there be such enormity of evil in the world, not only the "moral evil" that human beings do to each other but also the "natural evil" of earthquakes and floods, illness and disease. The fact that there is such evil, which no one can deny, is the demonstration to the atheist that there is no God.

Christians, as one would expect, have answers to the Problem of Evil,

many answers actually, which have been well honed over centuries of debate. (A theist's answer to evil is called a "theodicy," which is a defence of God's goodness in light of the undeniable ubiquity and depravity of evil).

These theist answers are often complicated and mostly involve "the Free Will Defence," which means that God could not possibly have created human beings with real free will without also giving them the real option of doing evil and suffering evil.

Yet it is the scale of evil which is so troublesome to believers and so supportive of the atheistic argument, a problem made even more potent by the fact that a good deal of the evil in the world has been caused by religion itself, through its intolerance of the beliefs of others.

Throughout history, religion has been, over and over again, stained with blood of its victims and stamped with the cries of those whom it has tormented.

As Nobel Prize winner Steven Weinberg said caustically: "Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion."

Yet there is something new in the age-old debate. In recent years, the search for scientific explanations of ultimate reality has been energized by increasing recognition that the laws of physics and the constants that are embedded in these laws all seem exquisitely "fine tuned" to



Zhao Qizheng, former minister of the State Council Information Office, and Luis Palau, a well-known international Christian evangelist, promote their book "Riverside Talks," on August 30 in Beijing. LU ZHONGQU

allow, or to enable, the existence of stars and planets and the emergence of life and mind.

If the fundamental laws of physics had much differed, if the values of their constants had much changed, or if the initial conditions of the universe had much varied, what we know to exist would not exist since all things of size and substance would have been impossible.

Progress made
"Riverside Talks" is an excellent general introduction to the issues and the controversies of science and religion for general audiences who are heretofore unacquainted with them, but whose truly interested should go further. If it seems improbable that human thought can make progress in explaining ultimate reality, consider the progress already made. A century ago scientists assumed that our own galaxy, the Milky Way, was the entire universe. Today we grasp the monumental immensity of the cos-

mos. But how is it that we humans have such farsighted understanding after only a few thousand years of historical consciousness, only a few hundred years of effective science and only a few decades of cosmological observations? Maybe it's still too early in the game. Maybe answers have been with us all along.

I am pleased to see Minister Zhao Qizheng and Minister Luis Palau — two different kinds of ministers to be sure — bring the debate between science and religion to broad audiences.

This subject is becoming more popular in China, and well it should — this is a good sign of the continuing development of Chinese society and the increasing sophistication of Chinese readers.

The science-religion dialogue is a fundamental probe into the nature of reality, the methodology of discerning knowledge and humanity's place in the cosmos.

Never a dull moment

By Fiona Lee

On my first day teaching English to classes of way freshmen at a certain university in north-eastern China, I asked myself, over and over again, "What am I doing here?"

Nine months later, I'm still asking myself the same question. Calling teaching an adventure is an understatement. On my good days, I feel I'm definitely expanding my students' horizons in how to use English, American culture and in learning about themselves. On the days that I have dubbed "soul-destroying days," my classes could be termed: traumatic accidents in progress, bystanders beware.

Someone once told me that most of the people teaching English in China were there to escape from something. I think I'm here to escape from boredom.

The one thing about teaching English to those charming text-messaging, sleepy, mostly indifferent students is that it's never boring. It's a challenge to get them motivated, especially when the mood of the class changes each time I walk into class. Sure, I have a lesson plan for each class, but that doesn't mean I'm actually prepared for what might greet me.

One critical part of teaching in China is the culture shock. I don't mean only the culture shock of a foreigner adapting to a new country, but also the culture shock of a teacher and a class adapting to each other.

Two semesters later, I'm still experiencing culture shock with my students. We never seem to be on the same page on even small matters. Why can't they keep my handouts that I spent so much time and money making? Why do they not understand the idea of a final draft, even after I've explained it time and time again? Why can't they write a skit that gives every person in their group a speaking part when this is the fifteenth time we've done skits? Why don't they bring paper with them to class? The "whys" never stop.

But I can see the "whys" from the students' point of view, too. Why is our teacher always on our case about arriving late? Why does my teacher want me to stay awake during class when I've spent the entire night at the Internet café playing World of Warcraft?

Why does my teacher actually expect me to hand in the assignment when she wants it instead of whenever I want to hand it in? After all, their Chinese teachers don't expect these things from them, so who is this crazy foreigner and why is she always on my case?

Teachers are also amazed by how certain errors repeated themselves over and over again. The most infamous one, of course, is the "he/she" mix-up.

As a student of Chinese, I know that in Chinese the written characters are different, but the pronunciation of the characters is the same, so there's a reason for it. All the same, I can't understand why after some 13 years of English, my students still make that mistake — even after all these months where we've played games identifying "he/she" and after I've constantly asked, "He is a girl? She is your boyfriend?"

Then there's the use of "play." After trying to gently correct their usage of the word by saying that

only children play in English, I finally tried to shock them into not using the word. I explained to my students that the connotations of the word "play" regarding adults were different from the connotations regarding children.

Yes, children play with each other. But if you are 21 years old, you do not "play" with your friends. And you definitely do not want to say, "I play with myself."

I explained to my students exactly what "I play with myself" meant in English. They were mildly shocked; and we had a good laugh. We brainstormed various ways to say it differently. "I spend time with my friends," "I hang out with my friends," "I enjoy being by myself" and so on.

A week later, they handed in essays I had assigned on their high school experiences. Half of them were still writing, "I play with my friends." Sometimes you just can't win.

While I'm often banging my head against the wall when I think about the many frustrating moments with my students, there are many other times when I know that this is one of the most rewarding jobs I've had.

One of my most successful lessons, one that I borrowed from another teacher, was when I had my classes do a scavenger hunt where they had to find, ask for and take photos of items available in the shops around campus.

The catch was that they could only speak English to the shopkeepers. Each group had a watcher who made sure that the group did not speak Chinese. The scavenger hunt was meant to mimic the experiences of foreigners in China or the experience of any traveller in a foreign country — the small, everyday frustrations of the language barrier.

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ence. They had all found it difficult and disorienting to not be able to speak their native language, especially when the shopkeepers didn't understand why they were speaking in English when they were very clearly Chinese.

The students often had to resort to communicating in body language instead. They also asked question after question about what it was like to be a stranger in a strange land, about what it was like to be unable to communicate verbally with others.

They left the class that day still talking about their experiences. Of course they would forget all about it by the next day, but for a good hour and a half, they had spoken English — or for some of them, not spoken at all — and understood the value of language.

The foreign teacher of English is also not simply a language instructor, but also an embodiment of everything positive or negative about their home country. Since I'm an American, one of my brighter students is inclined to say sly comments about the Iraq War in response to basic grammar points.

I hold an occasional English corner of my own with my students since their schedule doesn't allow them to attend the regular English Club.

Because most of the students attending one night's English corner were male, we took a vote and watched the film "American Soldiers," essentially a propaganda film on the Iraq War with every cliché in the book, but the English in the film was straightforward and easy for the students to understand.

After we watched the film, my students and I had a great conversation about the Iraq War. I went to bed that night extremely pleased with myself and with them. Hadn't we just discussed current affairs in a thoughtful way? Hadn't my students learned something about different perspectives regarding the war?

But what did my students really take away from it? They were all using course words they had heard in the film the next day. In fact, I had to take one aside and gently correct his usage of a particular phrase that had been used in the film, explaining that no, you do not need to put the preposition "to" between the curse word and "you."

After all, his parents were paying a lot of money for him to be in this programme. As long as he's going to be using English, even if it's curse words, he should be using it properly.

So what am I doing here? I have to ask myself that question because the answer changes all the time. I'm an ambassador, a language partner and an adviser — all in a day's work for the foreign teacher of English in China.

The Confucian way of saying, I love you

By Sam Crane

Confucianism is often considered a rigid and conservative philosophy, unsuited to the changing values and practices of modern society. There may be some truth in that perception, especially as it relates to the ways Confucian thought was used historically to authorize state power and patriarchal rule.

But there is more to Confucianism than that. If we go back to the Analects we can find a more open-minded and flexible understanding of humanity, one that is relevant for contemporary life.

To get to the heart of the matter, the Confucian idea of ritual (*Li*) might be seen as the most rigid of ideas, a demand that we practise standardized and formal ceremonies for every significant life event: births, deaths, weddings, veneration of ancestors, etc.

Yet, while Confucius certainly believed that we should thoughtfully enact our social roles, his notion of ritual was neither so narrow nor so rigid as modern interpreters might suppose.

Take one of the most cryptic passages in the Analects: "*Gu* (ritual vessel), not a *gu*, a *gu* indeed, a *gu* indeed." (觚不觚, 觚哉, 觚哉. Gŭ bù gŭ, gŭ zŭi, gŭ zŭi.)

The simplicity of the passage opens it to multiple interpretations, but some commentators see in it a move away from dry formalism and an acceptance of diverse expressions of sincerity.

Confucius, in this passage, may be commenting on a situation where ritual procedure calls for a vessel of a certain sort, a *gu*, but one is not available. The ceremony proceeds with some other type of cup, not a *gu*, standing in for the usual object. In the end, however, the form of vessel does not matter.

Rather, the sincerity behind the act is so genuine that the expression of deep human commitment invests the non-*gu* with the significance of a *gu*. It is a *gu* indeed, because the loving care of humane action makes it so.

The larger message is that we do not have to blindly adhere to traditional ritual forms. Intentions and sentiments are most important. If we truly care about what we are doing, then we can find many different ways to perform our social duties considerably and meaningfully.

Our modern lives have changed the forms of our social relationships. Work may take us away from home and consume much of our time. New communications media create novel channels for human interaction.

Beneath all of the social and cultural change, however, we still have a need to cultivate our closest ties with family and friends. Those social bonds define us as individuals and, if we are to express fully our individuality, we must attend to our social roles.

Confucius understands this. He tells us that the form of our meaningful interactions with others will change as society changes around us.

Traditional means of performing our social commitments may not be available to us. Yet if we are sincere in our feelings, we will find new and appropriate expressions of our heart-felt affections. We will make a *gu* out of the circumstances at hand.

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