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The smart money is on God, says odds-maker

By Christy Karras
The Salt Lake Tribune

If there's one thing Stephen Unwin is certain about, it's that he can't be sure of anything.

But as a scientist and a career odds-maker, Unwin is willing to calculate the probability of just about anything, including what may be the biggest mystery ever: Does God exist?

In *The Probability of God: A Simple Calculation That Proves the Ultimate Truth*, the professional uncertainty analyst -- he assesses risk involved in operating a major enterprise such as a chemical plant -- uses an actual mathematical theorem to determine the probability that there is a God.

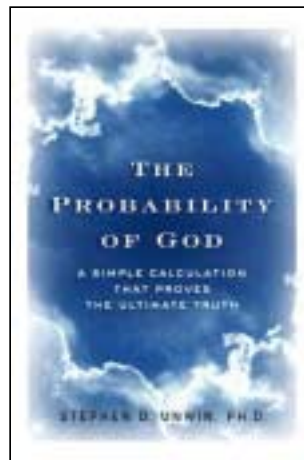
For evidence, he plugs in numerical values depicting the persuasiveness of points debated for eons, such as the existence of good or evil, miracles and religious experiences. Using what he calls "a pragmatic, no-nonsense, bottom-line, results-oriented analysis," Unwin comes up with his own answer.

Turns out, there is a 67 percent, or about 2-to-1, probability of God's existence, a number that "favors the existence of God, but not that compellingly," Unwin, who will speak and sign copies of his book at Sam Weller Books next week, said in a telephone interview from his home in Ohio.

"I would have been surprised if it'd been near zero or 100," he said, though "If you listen to atheists or theists, you would think it was closer to one of those



Stephen Unwin



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you listen to atheists or theists, you would think it was closer to one of those numbers."

In a book that is surprisingly lighthearted and funny, Unwin manages to pack in a lot of facts about science and philosophy -- Einstein's beliefs about God, for example, -- and yes, quite a bit of math.

Unwin avoids getting bogged down in too much science, though, and says readers can skip most of the math parts without missing the point. The math is mostly to explain an old formula called Bayes' Theorem, still used to predict probability in a variety of areas.

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Using even halfway scientific methods to come up with an answer to this question may seem like a leap. But in reality, "we think about probability all the time," Unwin writes in the book.

Besides, it's a worthwhile question, given the thousands of hours we could potentially spend in church (more, Unwin notes, if you are Baptist).

"Whether God exists is a perplexing question that, if not properly dealt with, could

easily consume every waking moment. That's why I wanted to get all this business firmly behind me," he writes. His analysis is "intended to allow me, and any reader who agrees with my reasoning, to get on with life without having to continually revisit the issue."

Unwin was raised in the Pentecostal faith in his native England, where the best part of a three-hour Sunday service was listening to congregants speak in tongues. When he was sent to an Anglican school at age 11, "nobody spoke in tongues. Even English was strongly discouraged unless delivered in an acceptable accent," he writes.

He eventually concluded that "the God area is one that may have specialists but no experts."

Unwin, who has a doctorate in theoretical physics, believes there's no reason to look at the question, "Does God exist?" in a purely binary, yes-or-no sense. In his own life, it means that although the probability of God is 67 percent, his belief in God is much stronger. The difference is made up of his own faith. "I always felt there was some rational reason to believe in God, but faith took me further," he said.

Although he obviously has faith in his results, he gives the impression that he won't be too offended if you don't take him seriously. But Unwin hopes the methodology -- or at least the idea behind it -- will catch on, even if people come to different conclusions.

"That was my hope, that it would at least give a platform on which the discussion could take place," he said. "My idea was to embrace uncertainty. It would be very nice if people could at least couch the debate in those terms. It would be very nice if people could discuss which direction the evidence makes the



would be very nice if people could discuss which direction the evidence makes the arrow veer instead of resorting to dogmatic language."

Unwin has had a lot of feedback, some from scientists and mathematicians who find his unorthodox approach interesting.

One math professor in New York called him to point out a variation on Pascal's wager on God (Pascal said that if you believe in God but are wrong, you're not really out anything, but if you don't believe and are wrong, you're in trouble, so saying there is a God is a safe bet). The professor said that "if people are well-behaved in life and they're atheists, then God will actually prefer them, since they're not doing it out of self interest," Unwin said.

But most people, he says, tend to misunderstand his book without even reading it, seeing it as an attack on their beliefs, whatever they are. He has received angry letters against positions he doesn't even support. Believers call him an atheist and atheists say he is trying to push religion through pseudo-science. Some were upset about him taking a stab at the question, even in fun.

More than anything, Unwin hopes people will rethink their own beliefs -- but he is not sure that is likely. "Not everyone views certainty in the negative light that I do," he said. "I'm not wildly enthusiastic about the debate being recast."

Place your bets

*Stephen Unwin will speak and sign copies of his book, *The Probability of God: A Simple Calculation That Proves the Ultimate Truth*, at Sam Weller's Zion Bookstore, 254 S. Main St. in Salt Lake City, March 27 at 4 p.m. Call 801-328-2586.

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