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How to think like a mathematician—about God | John Lennox

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The Veritas Forum

PART OF A SPECIAL 6-WEEK SERIES | Does everyone have faith? Dr. John Lennox, theologian and mathematician at Oxford University, thinks so. Join us as we talk with Dr. Lennox about the pursuit of evidence, the nature of God, and the importance of fostering communication across differences. Like what you heard? Rate and review us on Apple Podcasts to help more people discover our episodes. And, get updates on more ideas that shape our lives by signing up for our email newsletter at veritas.org. Thanks for listening!

Transcript

I was introduced as speaking to you on science and faith, but that is an ambiguous suggestion. Faith in what? You see, all scientists, in order to do their science, have to have faith. Not in God, but in the rational intelligibility of the universe.

And one of the main points I'm going to make to you tonight is everyone. Without exception is the person of faith. They have basic, faith commitments.

They believe certain things. And the issue to be raised is what are the grounds for those beliefs? That's John Lennox, a professor of mathematics at Oxford, at a Veritas Forum event in 2019 at the Claremont Colleges. And he's my guest today.

Last episode we talked with another mathematician, Francis Sue, about virtues that math can cultivate, like discernment, persistence, and hope. But part of our conversation that didn't make it into the episode was when I asked Francis to talk about the truth. And that was when I asked Francis about what it means to think like a mathematician.

One of the things that's characterized as thinking like a mathematician is being careful with definitions. So really trying to pin down what an idea is. And then being able to justify your ideas to think logically.

To me, John typifies this type of thinking. And not just about math, but about religion and God too. He's careful with his definitions and he's supremely logical.

Throughout our conversation, I hope you think about your own approach to life. What do you believe? What do you hope for? Are you basing your beliefs on logic and evidence? If you don't take science and religion to be at odds, is there a place for both in your life? This is Beyond the Forum, a podcast from the Veritas Forum and PRX that explores the ideas that shape our lives. This season we're talking about the intersection of science and God.

I'm your host, Bethany Jenkins, and I run the media and content work at the Veritas Forum, a Christian nonprofit that hosts conversations that matter across different worldviews. My name is John Lennox. I am an emeritus professor of mathematics at the University of Oxford, England.

And I'm also an emeritus fellow at mathematics and philosophy of science at Green Templeton College, where I've been for the past 24 years. Although I've been a pure mathematician all my life, I'm committed to the importance of doing what the Veritas Forum does, and that is getting public discussion, rational discussion, reasonable discussion at the highest level on the biggest worldview questions that all of us face. John grew up in Northern Ireland in the 1940s and 50s.

At the Veritas Forum event, he talked about two ways that his parents lived that shaped his life significantly. I come from a very small country where that had a period of extreme sectarian violence, and my parents were very unusual in that they were Christian without being sectarian and got bombed for that stance. My father ran a store, and he tried to employ equally Catholics and Protestants, and for that reason he was bombed and my brother was nearly killed.

But he did that because he believed that every man and woman, no matter what they believed, was made an image of God and therefore infinitely valuable. And that's something that I got from my parents and has accompanied me all through my life. The second thing that they did, which was perhaps even more unusual in a country where there was a lot of religious prejudice and bigotry, they allowed me to think and encouraged me to read very widely, including worldviews that weren't my own.

And as a boy, I got very interested in the big questions of life and the various answers that were offered. And I went to Cambridge in 1962 just in time to hear C.S. Lewis, some of whom some of you may have heard, and almost immediately got involved in serious discussion because, you know, in Ireland you'd meet Protestant atheists and Catholic atheists, but there weren't many real atheists. And in Cambridge I had the opportunity to be friend and I emphasized that word.

People that didn't share my worldview, and I've been doing it for a lifetime because I'm

interested in the truth. While he was at Cambridge as an undergraduate student, his Christian faith was challenged. The most powerful challenge to my Christian worldview came very early on at Cambridge from a very unexpected source.

I found myself at dinner one night, one of those nice candlelit scholar dinners, sitting beside a Nobel Prize winner. And as I did with most people, I played Socrates and asked them questions to find out what they did and what they believed and so on. And I asked him a question in the direction of, did your work that one year, the Nobel Prize, ever caused you to think that there might be a creator.

Well, he got very unsettled and angry, I could say. And that was the end of the conversation. He turned and spoke to his neighbor.

He didn't say another word to me, but at the end of the meal, he said, "Lennox, come to my room." And it wasn't an invitation, it was a command. And I went and oddly enough, there were no other students. I thought maybe he was inviting a few students up, although I detected a certain threat in his voice.

He'd invited two or three other very senior members of the university professors and so on. And he sat me down and they stood around as far as I could remember. It's a long time ago.

They said, "Lennox, do you want a career in science?" And I said, "Yes, sir. Well," he said, "in front of witnesses tonight then, what you need to do is give up this naive faith in God because I tell you, it will cripple you intellectually. You'll never make it.

You'll suffer by comparison with your peers." Well, it was an unbelievable sense of pressure. But of course, it was staggering. And it's a fountoury.

It occurred to me afterwards. The obvious thing that if he'd been a Christian and I'd been nathiast, he'd probably have lost his job the next day. But I summoned up courage and I think I know where it came from to say to him, "Sir, tell me, what have you got to offer me that's better than what I've already got?" So he came up with the philosophy of Amy Bexall.

I had read a lot of Lewis and I knew exactly who Amy Bexall was. And I just stopped and I said, "Well, that's all you've got to offer me. I'd take a risk.

I'd stick with Christy Anatteep. Good evening. I've got to walk out." Erickson was a French philosopher in the 20th century who argued for a super consciousness as the source of all things.

This super consciousness had a will, freedom, and an impulse to create. But it didn't have intelligence. Lennox couldn't accept this idea.

Later, he'd say that no one actually accepts this idea at all, at least not in practice. How could you trust supposed intelligent humans if they were mere products of an unintelligent, creative force? And often I challenged my fellow scientists and I say, "What do you do science with? I do it with my brain. I do not believe the brain and the mind are the same, but that's the debate for another time.

Let's say, let's agree with them. We do it with our brain." So I said, "Tell me the brief history of the brain." And often they'll say something like this. "The brain is the end product of a mindless unguided process." And I look at them and they say, "And you trust it." And I've done this with many people.

I said, "Look at this computer. If you knew that it was the end product of a mindless unguided process, would you trust it?" And I always forced them to an answer. I've always, without exception, got the answer no.

And I said, "I see you have a problem. A real problem." You see, this has now moved into mainstream of the philosophical argument. They often ask me where I get the argument because they say I'm not bright enough to think of it for myself, but that's okay.

So I said, "I got it from Charles Darwin, actually." And that surprises them. He wrote, "The heart and doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, or of any value, or at all trustworthy." To point out the deep conflict between science and atheism. If Dawkins is right that we are the product of mindless unguided natural processes, then he's given a strong reason to doubt the reliability of human cognitive faculties.

And therefore, inevitably, to doubt the validity of any belief that they produce, including Dawkins' own atheism. Back to that Cambridge office room. After the candle lit dinner, Lennox never forgot how he felt.

Him, an undergraduate, with a Nobel Prize winner and other senior scholars. That was a very important formative experience for me. It put steel into my soul.

It made me resolve several things. Firstly, if I'm ever in the kind of position that I'm now in, I will never use it or abuse it to browbeat people. And to pushing my world view down the throat.

Secondly, I will promote as far as I can, balanced open discussion and share with people various perspectives and trust them with the ability to make up their own minds. Because there I was getting a glimpse into a very unacceptable side of academia, which of course exists as we all know. But it showed me that all is not pure rationality and evidence based thinking in science.

And perhaps that was one of the things that tipped me into being extremely interested in the intellectual defense of Christianity, which I spend my life doing. John has been a part

of numerous public conversations about the veracity of Christianity, debates with Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Peter Singer, Lawrence Krauss and more. And in each of these conversations, he thinks like a mathematician about God and the perceived conflict between science and religion.

For example, one topic that comes up frequently is the idea of the God of the gaps. The perceived conflict between God and science often goes back to a totally false notion of God. Dawkins has it and Stephen Hawking very much has it.

They do not think of God as the eternal creator of space time and the upholder of the universe. They think in terms of a kind of Greek God, the God of lightning say, the Greeks didn't understand lightning so they postulate a God. And therefore, as science advances, that kind of a God who is merely a placeholder.

I can't explain it. Therefore, God does it. That kind of thinking will simply disappear.

So they think many of them that that's what I believe. John says that the reason there is a conflict for them is because of how they define God. They define God as a God of the gaps, which is defining God to be in competition with science as a matter of logic.

The explanation is either God or it is science, but John says this is not how Christian theology defines God. If you believe that God is a God of the gaps, then of course you will see a conflict between God and science. And of course you'll have to choose between the two because of your definition of God.

But as often I've said to people, it's worth reading the first statement in the book of Genesis in the beginning. God created the bits of the universe. I don't yet understand.

And that usually gets a laugh. And I say that's what the God of the gaps people are believing. But when Isaac Newton discovered his law of gravitation, he didn't say wonderful.

I know how it works. I don't need God anymore. Now, what he did was to write a brilliant book trusting that it would reveal to thinking people the existence of a deity.

His attitude was what a brilliant God who did it that way. Because the God of the Bible is not a God of the gaps. He's God of the whole show.

The bits we do understand and the bits we don't. And John goes further. He says that two explanations, God and science, don't have to compete.

They can both be true at the same time. Why is the water boiling? Well, because heat energy is passing through the base of a catalyst and taking the molecules of water in this boiling. Yes, well, it's also boiling because I would like a cup of tea.

That's a very simple example, but it's very important. It shows that there are different

kinds of explanations. There's a scientific explanation of the boiling water.

And there's a personal agent explanation. They don't compete. They don't conflict.

They complement. And I just wish I could get this across to many of my fellow scientists. Let me put it this way.

Newton's law of gravitation no more competes with God as an explanation of the universe than the law of internal combustion competes with Henry Ford as an explanation of the motor car. There are different kinds of explanations. Dawkins is wrong when he suggests that the God explanation is equivalent to the science explanation.

Absolutely not. God, as creator of the universe, is the grounds for any explanation whatsoever. We wouldn't have a universe to try to explain if God didn't invent it.

Hi all. This is Carly Regal, the assistant producer of Beyond the Forum. If you're loving the podcast so far, we want to invite you to continue engaging in these important conversations by signing up for our newsletter.

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[Music] One mistake that some of us make is thinking that the scientific explanation is better or more rational than all other explanations.

At the Veritas Forum event, John quoted Christian Duduv, a Nobel Prize-winning biochemist, who said that, "The scientific method should be abandoned only if faced with facts that defy rational explanation." And John responded, "Now look at that very carefully. Science for him equals rational explanation, but that's completely wrong. If you mean the natural sciences because history is a rational discipline, philosophy is a rational discipline, language is and literature and a host of other things.

If you were to say that in this university here, the set of colleges, that the natural sciences, the only way to treat you would have to close most of this place down. And I don't think you want to do that because I think you believe you're engaged in rational activities. Now it's very important to cling on to that." John quoted another Nobel Prize-winning scientist at the Forum too, a scientist who Dawkins referred to as "the wittiest of all scientific writers." Sir Peter Medowar was a very clever, brilliant Nobel Prize-winning scientist.

And he says the existence of a limit to science is made clear by its inability to answer childlike elementary questions, having to do with first and last things. Questions such as "How did everything begin? What are we all here for? And what is the point of living?"

And he goes on to say, "You can only get at these questions through literature, philosophy and religion." He's right, the world is bigger than natural science can reveal to us. Natural science is wonderful, but it's limited.

And I cannot answer these questions. But if science and God don't fundamentally conflict, I ask John why it feels like they do. Why it seems you can either believe in God or in science, but not in both.

The fake news is that there's a conflict between science and God. There isn't. And I illustrate that very simply with the Nobel Prize in physics.

Peter Higgs won it, Scotsman, a few years back. He's an atheist. Bill Phillips over there in the States won it a few years earlier, and he's a Christian.

And I say to people, look, these people are not divided by their science. They both won the Nobel Prize. They're at the top of the tree.

What divides them is their worldview. And what you've got to understand is this alleged conflict is real, but it's not between science and God. It's between worldviews, principally between atheism and theism.

And there are brilliant scientists on both sides. At the Veritas forum event, his examples were Newton and Hawking. Think of Isaac Newton.

Don't doubt the creator, he said, because it's inconceivable that accidents alone could be the controller of this universe. Stephen Hawking, the late Stephen Hawking, occupied Newton's chair at Cambridge. God did not create the universe.

So there are two geniuses, both brilliant scientists. So science doesn't divide them. What divides them is their worldview.

And it's very important if we would understand what's going on in the culture in the debate. It's not God on the one side, and science on the other side. It's atheism on the one side, and theism on the other side.

And there are scientists on both sides. And so the real question you need to ask is, where does science sit? Does it point towards atheism? Or does it point towards God or is it neutral? And for John, the science points towards God. The God of the Bible is not a God of the gaps.

He's God of the whole show. The bits we do understand and the bits we don't. And interestingly, it's the bits we do understand that show his fingerprints to us, much more than the bits we don't, because we simply don't know anything about them.

But he's also convinced Christianity is true for two other reasons, history and experience. As a Christian, I believe that Jesus died, and he rules again. My Jewish friends believe he

died, but didn't rise.

My Muslim friends believe that he didn't die. He can't all be right. It's a question of evidence.

They differ. And we've got to face that. And we've got to decide individually how we respond to that evidence.

That is why I spent my entire life checking it out, because I don't want to be fooled. And John contrasts his approach to evaluating historical evidence with Dawkins approach in his book, *The God Delusion*. Going outside one's field as a mathematician or physicist or scientist, we've got to give credibility to people and other disciplines.

And when Dawkins says in his book, "The good case can be made out that Jesus never existed, although to be fair," he says, "I don't accept that case." And he quotes a professor. But I looked up this professor. He's a professor of German.

Not a professor of ancient history. A conspiracy name, a single professor of ancient history in the world who doesn't believe Jesus existed. And if you start to read, if you're a skeptical person, and I hope many of you are skeptical, because I'm a born skeptic, to read what the ancient historians, some of them atheists, have to say about the reliability of the world.

And the reality of the stories about Jesus we have in the gospel, it is mind-blowing the evidence that's amassed there. So we can get evidence from these people, not in our own disciplines if we're scientists, but who are rational, thinking people who may not even share a Christian worldview. The final piece of evidence that John looks to to test the veracity of Christianity is his experience.

Intellectual arguments are very important. They're necessary. The historical arguments are important.

But the most important thing of all is, does it actually work? And again, thinking like a mathematician, he first turns to definitions. There's a question of what we mean by religion. And that's a very important question, because I often ask people what is a religion? And generally speaking, they'll say something like this.

Well, our religion has got a path. It's got a way. And it's got teachings.

And there may be an initiation ceremony, something that you get on the path, and then you have gurus, priests, mimmams, all kinds of people that teach you, etc., etc. And then in the end, you face some kind of assessment. There's a final judgment or something like that.

How you've behaved is way to measure it. And if you pass the test, then you're welcome

to heaven or divine or whatever it is. And if you don't pass, then you're not.

And you go somewhere else. But John says that Christianity isn't a religion, at least in this sense of the word. You listen very carefully, because it's failure to understand this that turns many people away from Christianity.

They think that Christianity is a religion of merit, and they're thoroughly fed up with it. That it's giving them a set of rules that are impossible to keep, a set of laws that just crush them into a kind of religious slavery. And dangling in front of them the fact that one day they're going to be assessed on those rules.

But this is where Christianity is offered. You're a neat ladies and gentlemen. Let me say something that might provoke you a little bit.

Christianity competes with no other philosophy or religion, because it offers me something that none of them do. It offers me a relationship with God not at the end of the way, but at the beginning of the way. He illustrates his point by making an analogy to his relationship with his wife Sally.

When I met her in my first day at university and eventually decided she'd make a good wife, I came to her and I gave her a present. It was a big cookbook. And I said to her, "Sally, now look, I would like you to be my wife." Now it's going to be like this.

Let's have a look at page 303 of this recipe for apple strudel. Now, this is an example of my dear. If you keep the rules in this book, I shall take so many answers as sugar.

I shall take so many kilos of flour. I shall take so many and I shall do this and this and this and this. If you keep that, let's say for the next 40 years, then I will accept you.

Of course, she threw the book back at me. I'm glad you're laughing, folks. I don't know why you're laughing because that's how millions of people think about God, and it breaks my heart.

You would never insult a fellow human being by making a relationship depend on merit and performance like that. Now, be careful. My wife has several cookbooks.

But what sets her free to enjoy cooking is because she knows that even if she makes a mess of an order apple strudel, I'm not going to send her back to her mother. Because my relationship with her doesn't depend on merit. That's what Christianity teaches too, John says.

A relationship with God doesn't depend on merit. It's not something that can be earned. And therefore, it's not something you have to work anxiously to keep.

It's not something you can lose. And I meet many young people and they're uncertain. They're feeling lonely.

They want a real relationship. Well, the wonderful thing, and you asked me, "Why am I Christian?" This is why I'm a Christian because Christ offers me something. Nobody else offers me.

But in order to get there, I have to face the fact, straight, that I've made a mess of things like everybody else. I haven't even kept my own standards. Let alone God's standards.

So what Christ asked me to do is to repent and face the mess I've made of my life and other people's lives, and to trust him as the person who's done something. Now, this will sound like gobbledygook to you. But ultimate reality is very complex.

We don't understand what energy is. We don't have a clue what consciousness is. So if I say to you, ladies and gentlemen, that 20 centuries ago, God incarnate died on a cross to do something, to enable you to have a relationship with God that's unbreakable and eternal.

And it goes beyond death. Don't mock it too quickly because reality is always more complex than you think. And as I sit there, that is what I believe.

You see, I do these lectures, not to gain brownie points. So God says, "O Lennox is a good champion. He's done another veritas." I don't do them to gain acceptance.

I do them because I've got it, because it doesn't depend on my merit. And that is why I'm a Christian. I'm not involved in the philosophic system or a religious system that bases everything on my merit when I know I could never achieve it anyway.

And the experience that he looks to for evidence of the truth of Christianity isn't just from his own life. It's what he sees in others' lives too. I'm in my mid-70s now.

I've watched people come from, say, narcotic dependence, alcohol dependence, broken relationships, failing suicidal even. Many students, I love students, I've been with them all my life. I'm a perpetual student.

But the point is that I'll see them and then I may not see them again for a year. And I meet them and say, "There's something different about you. What's happened?" And they'll say something like this, "Well, I became a Christian, or I met Jesus, or I had an experience of God." They'll put it in different ways.

But instead of broken relationships, they're amended. Instead of alcohol and drugs, there's food on the table. They got meaning in life.

At the forum, he told the audience to do what his parents encouraged him to do. Don't take my word for it. Look for yourself.

My experience is that it does work. But please check it out for yourself. You've got a great opportunity in this university to do that.

There are Christians in this room. Grab ahold of them. Squeeze them.

And get it. I don't mean literally. Get information out of them.

Find out what makes them tick. Do you believe John's words from the beginning of this podcast? Everyone, without exception, is a person of faith. Both people of science and people of religion are people of faith.

Christianity isn't a blind faith. It's an evidence-based faith, just like science. What do you believe? What do you hope for? As you think about these big questions, see if you can follow Francis Sous's advice.

What it means to do math is to prove things or is to establish the truth of things, understanding why things work the way they work. Pin down your ideas. Define your terms.

Seek to justify your thinking with logic. And like John, see if you can come up with differing levels of explanation. The water boils for more than one reason.

Do your reasons necessarily conflict? Or might they compliment each other? And when your brain stops hurting, you can join us next week for the third episode of the season, when I talk with Dr. Rosalind Picard, an artificial intelligence researcher at MIT. Hi again, this is Assistant Producer Carly Riegel. To end our episode, we at Beyond the Forum want to take time to say thanks to all the folks who helped us get this show together.

Our first thanks goes to our guest, Dr. John Linux. Thank you for joining us all the way from England and for your commitment to having conversations across differences. We also want to thank our production team at PRX.

That's Jocelyn Gonzalez, Genevieve Sponseler, Morgan Flannery, and Jason Saldana. And of course, we want to thank the students who host and plan these forum conversations, as well as the John Templeton Foundation and all of our donors for their generous support of our conversation. Alright, that's all for this episode.

Thanks for listening to Beyond the Forum.

[Music]

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