

THE LAST FAITH

Karmak Bagisbayev

THE LAST FAITH

A BOOK BY AN ATHEIST BELIEVER

Translated from Russian by Joanna Dobson

CONVERSATIONS BEFORE DAWN

*“And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.
It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.”*

Ecclesiastes

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ISBN: 1537271229
ISBN 13: 9781537271224
Library of Congress Control Number: 2016914251
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform
North Charleston, South Carolina

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The physicist Leo Szilard once announced to his friend Hans Bethe that he was thinking of keeping a diary. "I don't intend to publish. I am merely going to record the facts for the information of God". "Don't you think God knows the facts?", Bethe asked. "Yes", said Szilard. "He knows the facts but He does not know this version of the facts."

Hans Christian von Baeyer,
"Taming The Atom"

PROLOGUE

As early as I can remember I have wondered what people live for, what the purpose of living really is. In my earliest memories of childhood I had already begun to question why people are so afraid of dying and why they may suddenly stop being afraid and risk their own lives to save the lives of others.

In my youth, the questions that concerned me most were related to the irresistible attraction all life experiences towards the opposite sex. Why do some people, albeit rarely, make the conscious decision not to procreate? When, how and under what circumstances did the kind of human sex arise, which is free from the purpose of reproduction, a phenomenon that so sharply distinguishes man from animals, for whom sex exists solely as a reproductive

act? Why such “free love”, which was derided for millennia, common among some nations today and not among others?

Why do people get married and why do they get divorced?

Why it is that throughout the world, monogamous marriage has almost entirely replaced polygamous marriage? Why do married partners cheat on one another and why do they suffer jealousy?

Why do we consider some women (or men) beautiful and others less so? Why do parents bring up their children in one style rather than another?

Why is the difference in gender specific education gradually being erased today when traditionally men and women among many peoples and various social strata have always been taught differently?

Why is it that until recently an intolerant attitude towards homosexuality was prevalent, and why are same-sex marriages recognised today in certain Western countries?

Why is virginity in a bride no longer a requirement in a significant part of the world, whereas until as late as the middle of the last century, it was a widespread condition of marriage?

Why are experiments in human cloning banned and how long might this ban last?

Why are almost all religions opposed to suicide? Why is euthanasia still illegal, and why is policy beginning to change in a growing number of countries? Does suicide exist among animals?

Why do we have so many moral rules: do this, do that but don't do this and don't do that? Who invents the rules and why should I comply? Where does our morality originate, in God, or do we make

it up ourselves? And if we do make it up ourselves, to what degree are we free to choose the morality by which we live our lives? How do our moral values change with time? And why has the rate of change so accelerated, that now, in the 21st century, a divide in moral expectations exists not just between father and child, but between older and younger brother. Why is society now adopting different moral values practically on a yearly basis? Why is the line between male and female behaviour so rapidly becoming blurred? Which laws determine the path of the evolution of morality?

Can a world without violence exist? If not, then when does man have a right to express violence and what type of violence is acceptable? What is the source of this right?

During times of revolution and war, why does a person who would otherwise feel an aversion to murder, become capable of killing without significantly damaging their sense of morality? Does man have a right of revolution?

Why is it that in the protest movements of the twenty-first century occurring in the United States, Europe, the Arab East, Asia, the Ukraine and Russia, we no longer see examples of undisputedly charismatic leaders, the type of which have appeared over several millennia at times of the world's most significant social movements? Why do we no longer see strong spiritual movements which are attractive and accessible enough to appeal to large segments of the general public? Why is the spiritual authority of all the world religions in such rapid decline?

How and when did patriotism emerge and why is it losing ground today, especially among the younger generation?

Collectivism emerged with man's very appearance on the planet and has over time played the same role for mankind as the herd

instinct has played in the animal kingdom, namely, survival of the race or species. So why is it that since the Renaissance collectivism has gradually been slowing down the processes of change that initiate human development? Why is it, that as of the 20th century, collectivism has become a great source of evil and can generally be seen to be relinquishing its position ever more freely to individualism, particularly in the West. Why do we consider Western countries more “advanced” and by which criteria do we measure “advancement”?

What is Love? Why do we no longer hear about the kind of love shared by Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde, Layla and Majnun? Can this kind of love still exist today? If not, then why not?

People are born with very different intellectual, spiritual and physical abilities. So why do we insist that we are all equal? In what context are we equal and what is the source of our equality?

Why is man such a curious creature? Why has man experienced the urge to create ever since his appearance on earth and why does he continue unremittingly to develop the sciences and the arts? What is a genius, a revolutionary, a criminal? What do these different types of people have in common? How are they different?

What is friendship and why does it occur?

Why are young adults so eager to leave home and achieve independence from their parents even if it means living at a lower level of material comfort?

Why did the colonial peoples living in relative prosperity, rise up and face a deadly struggle for independence in the middle of the last century? And why is it that despite the difficult economic

conditions that followed independence, these peoples did not push to return to colony status?

Why, in spite of everything, is the world becoming more tolerant than it was in previous centuries? What is driving the shifting pattern of greater tolerance in the world?

Why do all nations strive for democracy despite fierce opposition from ruling regimes?

This was the endless stream of questions that besieged my mind: “why”, “why”, “why”...

The body of world classical literature gives the reader a deeper, finer understanding of the motivations for human actions, but no body of literature, neither the Torah, the Bible nor the Quran explains in a simple, accessible way, what drives people to act in one way rather than another...

Meanwhile, having received an education in physics and mathematics, I was amazed by the achievements of Albert Einstein, who at the beginning of the 20th century, managed to unify space, time, mass, energy, and later gravity. Einstein set forth his framework for a unified field theory, something with which physicists continue to wrestle today, and not without some success. In all fairness, prior to Einstein, other great minds had worked continually in an attempt to unify the knowledge that had accumulated in their day. For example, Isaac Newton succeeded in creating classical mechanics by combining his great laws of the fall of a ripe apple, the flight of an arrow, and the movement of the celestial bodies. J. von Mayer united what in his time had been thought to be independent concepts of mechanical and thermal energy, and set forth his hypothesis for the general law of conservation of

energy. J. K. Maxwell brought together electricity and magnetism for the first time.

The various conservation laws of physics are essentially laws of unification and work to fully unify all the branches of physics continues to this day. The periodic table of chemical elements (D. Mendeleev et al.) combined all contemporary knowledge on the chemical elements into a single table by studying their common stable properties. At the same time as Einstein, the Gottingen mathematicians headed by David Hilbert began a course of work which was to be completed half a century later by the French Bourbaki mathematicians. This group succeeded in unifying all the seemingly fragmented branches of mathematics on a single axiomatic basis.

When we consider a wide variety of objects endowed with a single given property (the axiom), we may derive all other possible properties (corollaries) possessed by those same objects. Further, considering a narrower part of the original set, possessing other additional properties (the axiom), we find new corollaries, true only of the subset. In other words, we find a subset with a richer range of properties than the original set. For example, defining a rectangle as a four-sided figure with four right angles (the axiom-definition), we may generate another property-corollary being that the diagonal of a rectangle is divided in half at the point of intersection. Further, considering in a set of rectangles a subset referred to as squares and possessing the additional property of all sides being equal in length (the axiom-definition), we may derive a new property-corollary, true only of this subset: the diagonals of a square are not only halved at the point of intersection, they are also mutually perpendicular. In this process, it is important to distinguish

whether an assertion is the equivalent to another assertion, or whether it represents its corollary. For example, one may state that any property of a rectangle is true for a square but the inverse would not be true.

When one observes how scientific minds divide the objects they are studying into smaller parts, singling out primary factors and setting aside secondary factors, one thing becomes clear. It is easier to explore and understand a part than it is to study the whole. Sooner or later, however, one reaches a point at which it becomes extremely difficult for the mind to grasp a huge number of parts that have been examined independently.

However, this is also the most interesting stage of any scientific study because it is at this point that someone will notice a base property common to all the individual parts and succeed in bringing them together again in a single unified theory. Furthermore, at this stage, secondary factors can be taken into account which were previously discarded when focus was centred on determining the common properties of the objects under study, rather than the detail of their individual nature. Of this process one could say: “after the time to scatter stones, comes the time to gather them.” In place of many laws, one new law can be written in such a way that all previous laws become a consequence of the new one.

What is the purpose of this process? Well, first and foremost, it is very beautiful! Aesthetics, though, are not the only reason for the scientific process of unification.

Unification basically makes material science simpler and clearer and, as a consequence, facilitates qualitative breakthroughs in epistemology, which in turn makes it possible to

predict new objects and phenomena. For example, the prediction of the existence of previously unknown elements such as scandium, gallium and germanium was made using the periodic system of chemical elements. The existence of the planet Neptune was predicted on the basis of Newton's classical mechanics. In addition to the above, a new, more "basic" law helps define the limits to which any previous theory might be applicable and serves to explain any phenomena that exist beyond those limits. For example, Einstein's special theory of relativity explained the behaviour of bodies moving at very high speeds, close to the speed of light, whereas the general theory of relativity explained the curvature of light when passing near a massive celestial body. It predicted the existence of black holes and gravitational waves, phenomena for which Newtonian mechanics could provide no explanation.

The third benefit of the unification process in science concerns the problem of transmitting knowledge accumulated by humanity to future generations. Having consecutively passed through processes of accumulation, classification and theorisation, many sciences had amassed such a volume of knowledge by the turn of the 20th century that it would have been quite impossible to pass on that knowledge over a 4-5 year period of university education without creating basic general theories. It is not surprising that by this time the notion of the scientist-polymath had all but disappeared. Although the tendency towards generalisation arose with the very emergence of science, it was only in the 20th century that along with the other reasons mentioned above, it became an end in itself.

There is also a fourth reason why scientists search for the most basic, most fundamental laws of the natural world from which all

others derive as a consequence. This reason is, in my opinion, the most important to those who devote themselves to the search and it lies in the following: When a man discovers the most basic laws of the universe, he experiences an increasing intimacy, if not a full "interconnectedness" with the mystery of creation; he experiences his "God-likeness". The Bourbaki construction of mathematics on a single axiomatic basis was later termed the "bourbakisation" of mathematics. Russian physicist Y. Kulakov and his students brought about the "bourbakisation" of physics in the last quarter of the 20th century. The question is, is it possible to "burbakise" the behaviour of living matter, and especially human beings?

This book is an attempt to answer that question.

It is clear that living matter is also governed by the laws of Galileo, Newton and Einstein, but what makes it fundamentally distinguishable from inanimate matter?

Is the simple fact of the self-reproducing nature of living matter sufficient to explain all elements of its behaviour and the meaning of its existence?

And finally, human beings naturally conform to all her laws as an element of living matter, and yet they are still clearly distinguished by something else as well. The question is what? And is this "something else" capable of explaining human behaviour at the level of the individual as well as society?

Why has the individual en masse failed ever to observe (or perhaps been incapable of observing?) the Biblical commandments or indeed any other systematic paradigm? And it is important that we observe them?

Are they divine in nature? What “commandments” would God give to people if He or She¹ were to come down to earth today? Religions undoubtedly proffer consolation to the suffering of the weak but they take their freedom in payment; it is no wonder that in all major religions man recognises himself as a “slave of God”. Rather than limit the individual, is it possible for a “religion” ultimately to release the individual so that they become equal with God? What “commandments” does a person really live by and is it possible to formulate these commandments in such a way that man can actually fulfil them.

Does man really need God?

What is Good? And what is Evil? Is there a simple criterion by which one may distinguish Good from Evil?

Is there any true meaning to life?

In what direction is humanity developing? Is there a comprehensive law that governs the evolution of mankind?

Is it possible to give a clear, simple answer to all these questions?

It is, in fact, possible!

The book you are reading is neither scientific nor anti-scientific. And although it is written in the form of night-time conversations between the protagonist and God, it is meant to be neither theological nor atheistic. It is perhaps a first attempt to build a simple axiomatic model for the behaviour of living matter, including mankind, which may help us to explain, at least

¹ It is generally accepted by theologians that God is beyond gender. However, it has been traditional to refer to God as ‘He’. Quite reasonably feminist theologians have argued that it is equally correct to refer to God as ‘She’. To avoid controversy some writers choose to use ‘He or She’. For the sake of simplicity, in the text that follows God will be referred to as ‘He’.

as an initial approximation, much of what is happening in the world around us.

Finally, what kind of specialised knowledge is required in order to read this book?

The answer: None!

Who is this book aimed at?

The answer: Everyone!