

EDITORIAL

Should the cartoons of the Prophet have been published in that Danish newspaper? This has been a hot topic, and it's no surprise that *Think* devotes at least one article to it. Whatever your views, you will find 'A Storm in a Turban' an incisive read.

In issue 12, Brenda Watson argued that atheism is a faith position. In this issue, Piers Benn, a humanist, questions whether it is.

Perhaps atheism is a 'faith position' in at least one sense of that term. However, there is one popular argument for atheism being a faith position, and thus no more or less rational and reasonable than theism, that just won't do. The argument is based on an application of what I call the 'You can't prove it' move. This move involves pointing out that neither position A, not its denial, position B, can be proved. So both are 'faith positions'. But if both are 'faith positions', then they are equally rational/irrational. So, for example, theists sometimes point out that while they cannot prove there is a God, the atheist cannot prove there isn't one. So both are 'faith positions' and so equally intellectually respectable.

Perhaps the first question we should ask about this move is: what does 'prove' mean here? If it means 'prove beyond all doubt' then perhaps it's true that neither atheism nor theism cannot be 'proved'. If a 'faith position' is then one that cannot be, in this sense, proved, it follows that both theism and atheism are faith positions. But of course it doesn't follow from this that both positions are equally rational. After all, I obviously can't prove beyond all doubt that there are fairies at the bottom of the garden. But then neither can I prove beyond all doubt that there aren't. Are we then to conclude that both positions are faith positions, and so equally intellectually respectable? Of course not. The fact is that the evidence and arguments may still overwhelmingly support one position over the other. Indeed, when it comes to the question of whether there are fairies at the bottom of the garden, they clearly do.

Those who find themselves out-argued often use the 'you can't prove it' move as a last-ditch spoiling tactic. You may have provided Sophie with overwhelming evidence that there are no fairies living at the bottom of her garden, but then she hits you with 'But you can't *prove* there are no fairies, can you?' as if that showed that her belief that there are fairies dwelling must be just as sensible as your belief that there aren't.

The theists use of this move would be no less suspect if it were used to gloss over the fact that they have not yet come up with a good case for the existence of an all-powerful, all-good God, while the atheist has come up with compelling evidence against.

However, while this would be a bad argument for calling atheism a 'faith position', and thus intellectually on par with theism, that's not to say there might not be better arguments. Piers Benn's excellent article begins to unpack the many issues and question surrounding this thorny issue.

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