

# James Martin, S.J.

## 'Does God exist?' and other FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) about faith and religion.

*This is the first of four excerpts from a talk given last week at the World Youth Day in Lisbon by the American Jesuit, Fr Jim Martin*

When I asked a Jesuit friend who has worked for decades with high school students what are the most Frequently Asked Question (FAQs) asked by young people about faith, he said, "Who cares?" And I said, "What?" He laughed and said, "Oh, sorry, I'm not saying that to you! I'm saying that for many young people faith and religion are irrelevant. So the main question is not about some issue about Catholicism, but the whole idea."

Many young people don't think about God and don't pay attention to religion. And when they do pay attention it's to say how terrible religious people are: narrow-minded, misogynistic, homophobic and so on. So for this essay I spoke with friends who work with young people, and young people themselves, to get the hardest questions. I have come up with seven, some asked by people who aren't sure about faith, some by those not sure about religion and others who are believers but struggling how to believe and how to belong to a church. Here they are.

### **1. Who cares? Why care about faith? Why care about God?**

The other day I was on vacation with some Jesuit friends and I was walking on the beach. There I was, in a beautiful setting and feeling really happy. Suddenly I started to wonder: Is that all there is? From time to time, we all feel a persistent longing, a need for something more. Part of that we might chalk up to greed, as in, "I want to have even more than I have now." But it's also deeper. It's a longing to know what the point of it all is.

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That longing is something that even your disbelieving, agnostic or atheist friends may admit to feeling. They wonder from time to time, to quote an old 1960s song: "Is that all there is?" Or "What's the meaning of life?"

Why do even atheists and agnostics feel this? Where does that longing come from? The best answer is from St. Augustine, who said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O Lord." That longing, that desire for more, that quest for completion, is our desire for God. And this, crucially, is also one way that God calls us. That's one thing that I find helpful to ask people: Did you ever think that the desire to know more, to understand more, to be more, to live more fully, is a longing for God?

How else would God call to us other than to place that longing within us? A few years ago, on the wall of a retreat house I saw a plaque that said, "That which you seek is

seeking you.” So one answer to the first question: Who cares?” is “You do, if you’re honest with yourself.” And God cares too, because the desire you feel for completion, for satisfaction, for fulfillment, is your desire for God, and your desire for God is, again, God’s desire for you.

## **2. Does God exist?**

If we’re going to talk about FAQs we have to talk about the F-est of the Qs: Does God exist? Of course there is no completely satisfactory answer, no airtight proof for the existence of God. Saints, theologians and other thinkers have wrestled with this question for years. If there were an airtight proof, everyone would believe.

Let me share how I answer that question when I’m asked. If a person is open to philosophizing or theologizing, I often pose the question that stopped me in my tracks during my philosophy studies: Why is there something rather than nothing at all? That usually makes people think. Then you can ask, à la Aristotle: Didn’t something have to start all this? Even if you believe in the Big Bang, when unimaginably dense matter exploded into the universe, you have to ask: Where did that unimaginably dense matter come from? The human mind, which naturally understands cause and effect, is often teased into active thought by that question. There has to be, to paraphrase Aristotle, an “uncaused cause.”

Then I might try some St. Thomas Aquinas, who is borrowing from Aristotle, with his “argument from design.” If you were walking on the beach and found a wristwatch, you would assume that someone made it. Just so, if you look at the complexity of the universe, you assume a maker. Now you could say that the world and the universe are all the result of random probabilities, but if you see a seagull soaring over the ocean, as I did the other day, to me, it points to some sort of creative intent.

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But most people aren’t convinced by philosophical arguments. So I try to start somewhere else: their experience. I start by asking if they’ve ever had an experience that seemed to come from outside of themselves. Something that surprised them with a deep emotion or wonder or awe. And most people, if the question is asked in an inviting way, say yes. One young man, an actor, told me that he had an experience of feeling that he was in the right place, the right life and the right profession, as the sun shone down on him one day in London. He said, again as people often do, that it was coming from outside himself. So I said, “You’ve wondered about God. Did you ever stop to think that this was God’s way of reaching out to you?”

*That began his journey to faith.*

For me, then, one helpful way to answer this question is to help the person see where God has already encountered them. Evangelization, then, is often less about bringing God to other people, which is certainly necessary at times, but more about helping people see where God already is in their lives.