

**Believer, Agnostic, Athiest: The old conflicts, and the newer discussions**

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**Bob Seibel and Suzanne Weinstein**

**Bob:**

**For Lighting the Chalice:** I shall focus on the issue of “**why** we believe” while Suzanne will emphasize “**what**” she believes, how she got there, and why she is sharing it. I also believe it is very important to examine “**what** we believe”, even if the arguments about the “truth” of different beliefs are not resolvable. The consequences of different beliefs impact individual and group behavior, moral values, how we view our neighbors – especially those who do not believe as we do, and how we view our relations with other creatures and our planet. The consequences must be thoroughly examined and carefully evaluated. They are not all negative, and they are certainly not all positive. Here’s to careful examination and evaluation of “**what**” as well as “**why**”.

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**Believer Agnostic Atheist. The old conflicts, and the newer discussions:**

It was the series of "Atheism books" that have been published recently, as well as the fact that several of them have been on "best seller" lists, that makes the topic seem important for us at this time. The "prime mover" for me was the article in the March 4 2007 issue of the NY Times Magazine by ROBIN MARANTZ HENIG with the title "Darwin's God". Religion and the belief in supernatural "entities" is **almost** universal in the world, and throughout recorded history. How does that "fact" fit into an evolutionary framework? What is the "survival value" of such beliefs? The article emphasizes that the discussion is about **WHY** we believe, **NOT WHAT** we believe.

First I'll briefly describe some illustrations of the old "conflicts" in the Believer – Atheist dimension. I'll then briefly describe some hypotheses about the survival values of Religious belief. I'll finish by describing some of the psychological, biological, and sociological "findings" related to the study of why we believe.

**Some of the Old Conflicts:**

First. Consider just the question of Creation. I have a 1994 book by David Leeming entitled "A Dictionary of Creation Myths" The book includes about 2 ½ pages on Christian Creation (I don't know of too many Christians who would agree with calling it a myth), while the rest of the dictionary includes about 300 pages describing multiple creation stories for each of the letters of the alphabet (except V and X). It even includes evolution and the Big Bang (and I believe including them in a dictionary of MYTHS would make some other "believers" uncomfortable). Clearly the only creation story that is "correct" is the one YOU believe in. Almost all of the other stories are just **myths** (in the derogatory sense of the word).

A few other unresolvable conflicts: How about does God exist? Is there a soul? And, what happens to a person after they die? Whatever your view on these questions, do you seriously believe that you could convince someone with a different view that it is your view that is correct (and not his or hers)? Even if both of you believe that your arguments are based on logic and/or empirical observation, you will still not convince the other. The arguments cannot be resolved. If you ask me during the Congregational Feedback, I'll try to further "unpack" **WHY** the arguments are unresolvable.

**The Survival Values of Religious Belief:**

Let me move to "Darwin's God" and the discussion of **WHY** we believe. Trying to understand the survival value of religious belief really got to me. If religious belief had no survival value (as some atheists might believe) then I felt I had to give up on my belief in evolution and that would make me VERY uncomfortable. I was not willing to do that. And, that fact illustrates one of the major points I want to make this morning. I was not willing to give up my belief, and I worked hard to find an "understanding" that would allow me to keep my belief.

This point is not new. It was made in writing a few years back -- in 1620 Francis Bacon wrote: "The human understanding resembles not a dry light, but admits a tincture of the will and passions, which generate their own system accordingly: for man always

believes more readily that which he prefers. ... In short, his feelings imbue and corrupt his understanding in innumerable and sometimes imperceptible ways." I can't find the quote, but I'm quite certain that the point was also made more than 1,600 years before Francis Bacon in the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers. And, modern psychological research has demonstrated the point in many different experiments in many different settings – yes, even among scientists doing scientific research in many different areas, even including physics.

**BUT**, in the scientific/empirical arena beliefs evolve and change as more and more “findings” are reported and checked, and different “beliefs” (hypotheses, theories) are suggested. It is a social process and it extends indefinitely over time. AND, current “beliefs” are almost never just rejected. They may be challenged by some contradictory findings, but they are **SERIOUSLY** challenged only when they can be **REPLACED** by new “beliefs”. We **MUST** “understand” in some way.

Keeping all this in mind let me briefly describe two “understandings” offered for the survival value of religious beliefs.

**Religious Belief is an incidental byproduct:**

One says, in effect, that religious belief is like the redness of blood. The redness is an incidental byproduct of the survival value of blood transporting oxygen to the cells of our bodies. Religious belief is an incidental byproduct of some other aspects of our evolved mental structures and belief systems that **DID** have survival value (even though they may no longer have such survival value).

**Religious Belief has direct survival value:**

The other “understanding” focuses on the direct survival value, but it is “survival value to the group”, not the individual. My son, David, came up with this one on his own just recently, and the “Darwin’s God” article also mentions it. My interpretation/elaboration is:

**Religious Belief has direct survival value for the group:**

Very early human evolution adapted primarily to the external “natural” environment, i.e., predators and food sources, and human competitors for food and mates. It was primarily individual and small family units or “tribes” against “other” humans and non-humans. “Cohesion” within the small group enhanced survival and procreation, with a leader (or very small subset of leaders) and many followers leading to a faster and more coordinated response to external threats and needs. Successful responses led to enhanced odds for the group’s survival and procreation. Cohesion could be fostered via “family” ties and the “wisdom of elders” or other “successful” individuals. While supernatural belief may not have been directly needed for enhanced survival of individuals and the group, it did help in at least two ways: 1. it helped “cement” the leader-follower roles, and 2. it offered “explanations” for events that were not otherwise “understood”. This “explaining” value seems to be important to almost all animals, including humans. It is reflected in MY search for the “survival value” of religious belief.

Later human evolution adapted to the “human” environment of large groups of humans. “Cohesion” could no longer be maintained via family ties, and there were multiple and competing “wise elders” and “successful” individuals. Religions helped to maintain cohesion and structure within these larger groups, enhancing them in competition with other large groups – and I have now found an “explanation” (that satisfies me) of the **direct survival value** of religion. It is primarily sociological.

**Religious Belief as an incidental byproduct:**

I believe there are two major areas of psychological and biological findings that relate rather directly to why we believe, and they seem (to me) to fall under the “redness of blood” idea. The “Darwin’s God” article presents the two “understandings” of why we believe as in competition. I believe they both contribute.

**First Area: Conditioned Responses and belief in the Validity of the Fallacy of Affirming the Consequent:**

About 50 or so years ago B.F. Skinner showed that a “variable ratio of reinforcement” produced extremely strong conditioned responses. Let me unpack the technical jargon. When the lab animal presses a bar it gets a piece of food – a reinforcement. If the food only comes after the 5<sup>th</sup> bar press then we have a ratio of reinforcement of 5. If reinforcement comes after a randomly variable number of bar presses, say 3, 5, or 7 presses, then we have a variable ratio that averages 5 bar presses per reinforcement. Variable ratios of 5, 10, 50, and even several hundred are not difficult to achieve. Humans at slot machines illustrate this very well (except that the slot machines also have variable ratios of the amount of reinforcement). These kinds of behaviors are extremely resistant to being turned off. In a less structured situation the human may carry a lucky charm, or wear a particular piece of clothing, whenever engaged in, e.g., a competitive sport. The human “understanding” might be: if I have my lucky charm it helps me win. I had it last time and I won. Therefore my lucky charm works – at least some of the time.

The fallacy in this reasoning was identified at least as long ago as the ancient Greeks. Aristotle referred to it as the fallacy of affirming the consequent – if “understanding” (hypothesis, theory, belief) then I’ll observe a certain consequent. I do observe (affirm) the consequent, and then fallaciously conclude that the “understanding” is correct. Not too long ago a famous TV preacher was concerned that an approaching hurricane might strike a particular coastal area, so he asked all of his followers to pray for the hurricane to avoid that area. The hurricane did not strike that area. He thanked all of his followers for their prayers – they had worked. Employing the fallacy of affirming the consequent is probably about as common as belief in supernatural gods and religion.

An evolutionary framework helps me “understand” this. If an animal perceives a subtle clue – a rustling of leaves – and responds by fleeing the potential predator, and survives to later procreate, then committing the fallacy has survival value. My “understanding” is: If I perceive rustling leaves I should run away in order to survive, I ran and survived, therefore my “understanding” is correct. Committing the fallacy increased the odds of

my surviving. Thus, committing the fallacy is “wired in” at a very primitive level via our evolutionary history. Aristotle didn’t show up until at least a few million years later.

### **Second Area: The Pleasure Center in the Brain:**

The second major area of bio-psychological findings is that of the discovery of the “pleasure center” in the brain. About 50 years ago James Olds discovered that electrical stimulation in a particular area of a lab rats brain was an extremely powerful reinforcer, that is the rat would keep pressing a bar to get the stimulation even in preference to all other activity including eating. Since then we have developed very powerful non-invasive imaging techniques, and can observe when similar areas in the human brain are showing increased activity. In a large variety of settings when humans report pleasurable experiences we see increased activity in this area of the human brain. We can now watch a human brain and tell what elicits pleasure, and when. Odors, sounds, observing “nice” pictures, and thinking pleasant thoughts all can work. Even behaving altruistically seems to work. I’m waiting for the experiment that shows pleasure activity when a person figures out a problem, that is when she finds an “understanding” of something that was until then not understood. I’m willing to bet that not understanding something that is perceived to be important will elicit increased activity and anxiety, and when an “understanding” is reached the pleasure center will “light up”. For example, what route do I take to get to my appointment on time when an accident blocks me from taking my planned route?

Once again, an evolutionary framework helps me “understand”. If an animal does not find food in an expected location, the animal becomes energized and active until food is found elsewhere. Once a route to food is found (an “understanding”) the pleasure center “lights up” and then the animal eats. Achieving an “understanding”, as well as eating the food, is “rewarding”.

### **In summary:**

Belief in the supernatural is, for me, consistent with an evolutionary framework: in terms of survival value to the larger human societies of the past two or three thousand years,

in terms of the survival value of belief in the validity of the fallacy of affirming the consequent, and in terms of the operation of behaviors and thoughts (including achieving an “understanding”) that “tickle” our pleasure centers.

I’m still working on achieving an “understanding” of why Suzanne and I believe as we do, while most of the rest of the world believes differently. Suggestions are welcome.

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**Suzanne:**

According to social psychologists, disclosure is an important part of social relationships. But too much disclosure at too early a stage in a developing relationship can be a turn off. I have some personal information to disclose today and I hope that I know at least some of you well enough so that you that it won’t overwhelm you!

I’m going to start by telling you a secret. It is frightening to tell the secret when I realize that only a few hundred years ago I would have been burned at the stake for telling it. But I think the time is right so here goes:

I am an atheist. By that I mean that I do not believe in a God who made the world and everything in it, listens to prayers or controls events on earth. I believe that the world and its inhabitants are as they are due to natural events, not supernatural ones.

As many of you know, I am also a lesbian. Being a closeted atheist is similar to being a closeted lesbian. We are afraid that people will not understand us and will think we are immoral and/or unethical. But I am not a closeted lesbian. I am not afraid to discuss my relationship with co-workers or even people I have just met. The misunderstandings about being gay have gradually diminished thanks to brave individuals like Don Amaeche, for example, who have spoken out and revealed to the world that we are not so different from anyone else. But I am still, for the most part, a closeted atheist. I don’t dare breathe the word among my co-workers or even among some of my lesbian acquaintances.

Today, I am ready to come out as an atheist, thanks to several prominent (and brave) atheists whose books have made the best-seller list. They have not yet been burned at the stake so I think I'm relatively safe. Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and others argue against a belief in an anthropomorphic god who has created life on earth. And, despite the taboo against mixing religion with science, because they are scientists they make their arguments using scientific evidence from fields such as cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology, anthropology, neuroscience. Reading these books (and others) has had a major impact on me because they have validated my own (mostly secret up until now) beliefs. The impact on me personally has been so profound that I find myself wanting to share what these writers have to say. When I was asked to help to plan a summer service, I thought "Now's my chance to share these ideas with more people" and you are the lucky ones!

Today I want to share my journey to atheism with you. I want to tell you about the influences that have brought me to this moment, which include notable figures like James Mitchener, Stephen Hawking and my father, Albert Weinstein. My studies in biological psychology have also had a strong influence on my beliefs. I have developed the strong conviction that the brain is responsible for all human thought and behavior (including belief in God) and has developed its capabilities due to natural evolutionary processes.

I want to share with you just a few examples of how the structure and function of the brain can explain behaviors associated with religious belief such as morality and "belief" itself. I also want to share with you why I don't think that atheists are necessarily so different from many theists. And finally, I'll disclose my personal reasons for wanting to share this today.

My journey to atheism began at birth because my father, who is a physicist, is also an atheist (and a devout Unitarian). Although he was raised Jewish, he became an atheist after WWII and the holocaust. He simply could not conceive of a god who would allow such horror. He became a Unitarian Universalist in the 1950s when he discovered that he wasn't the only one who doubted belief in god. He also wanted to provide my older

sisters with something to say when their friends claimed that they were Catholics or Methodists or whatever.

Let me tell you about my father. He is one of the most caring, sincere, supportive and “moral” people I have ever met. Several examples of his character spring to mind. I remember Watergate, which happened when I was a teenager. I remember distinctly thinking to myself – my father doesn’t swear, lie, cheat or steal – how come he isn’t president and Nixon is? He was in an unhappy marriage to my mother for many years but to this day always speaks respectfully about her. He entered a retirement community by himself at age 85 so that he would not be a burden to his children. He voluntarily gave up his car a year ago (at age 90) because he felt it unsafe for him to continue driving. How many people do you know have those types of moral standards? So when people say that there is a connection between morality and belief in God, I vehemently disagree.

During my late teens, being a good Unitarian Universalist, I began “searching for truth and meaning.” I came across James Michener’s book “The Source.” (Actually I think my father recommended it to me!). The book traces the development of religion back to caveman days. As I remember it, the first several chapters follow a caveman family and their struggle to make sense of the natural world around them. They created stories to explain important natural phenomena, like rain, sunshine, birth and death. Based on my interpretation of that book, I concluded that God (and religion) is man-made, rather than the other way around.

A little later, during my studies in biology here at Penn State in the late 70’s, I took a few psychology courses and became enamored with the connection between mind and body.

I was thrilled to find evidence in the physical brain for the observations I had made a few years earlier. In one of my early courses in psychology I was intrigued by the story of Phineas Gage. He was a construction foreman in charge of setting detonations to clear a pathway through the rocks in order to lay new railroad tracks across Vermont.

According to the account by Antonio Damasio in his book "Descartes's Error," Gage's bosses called him "the most efficient and capable man in their employ." On one hot afternoon in 1848, as he was preparing a detonation, something went terribly wrong and the tamping iron he was using flew upwards into his face. Damasio describes the result:

"The iron enters Gage's left cheek, pierces the base of the skull, traverses the front of his brain, and exits at high speed through the top of the head."

Amazingly, he recovered his physical abilities completely, except for loss of vision in one eye. However, according to his doctor, "the equilibrium between his intellectual faculty and animal propensities had been destroyed." He was "fitful, irreverent, indulging at times in the grossest profanity which was not previously his custom, manifesting but little deference for his fellows. The problem was not lack of physical ability or skill; it was his new character." According to Damasio, this story is significant because "while other cases of neurological damage that occurred at about the same time revealed that the brain was the foundation for language, perception, and motor function, Gage's unfortunate story hinted that there were systems in the human brain dedicated more to reasoning ... in particular the personal and social dimensions of reasoning." I would go a bit further. Given the description of Gage's behavior, I conclude that morality has a place in the brain. According to some extensive recent detective work by Hannah Damasio to find out what part of Gage's brain was damaged on that fateful afternoon in Vermont, that area is the pre-frontal cortex.

Later on in my coursework, in a course in physiological psychology I learned about studies that to this day are about the most fascinating I have ever heard. These were studies carried out on split-brain patients. These people suffer from epilepsy so severe that the method for alleviation was to sever the connections between the hemispheres. Working with these patients has resulted in fascinating studies that have revealed distinct differences between the hemispheres. Roger Sperry won a Nobel Prize in 1981 for work in this area and Michael Gazzaniga has continued it. Gazzaniga relates one such study in his book "The Ethical Brain." In this study a man is shown the word "walk"

to only the right hemisphere, which has no capability to produce speech. He gets up to walk. The researcher asks why he is walking and he responds "I wanted to go get a coke." The left hemisphere does not know why he is walking because it didn't see the word but according to Gazzaniga, the role of the left hemisphere is to make sense of the world so it makes up a reason, that is to say, a "belief" for the behavior. Beliefs are formed in the left hemisphere, and we make them up all the time to fill in the gaps of the world.

I have since learned of many more stories that indicate to me that biology is the basis for religious beliefs but I think you've heard enough for now!

**And by the way, I recognize that none of these studies proves that God does not exist. But they provide evidence for my own belief in the natural evolutionary process of creation.**

In fact, my studies of the brain in undergraduate school were not enough for me to make the final step and admit (to myself) my atheism. For quite some time I hedged my bets. I considered the fact that it is safer to believe than not to. If I believe in God and he doesn't exist, it will do no harm. But if I don't, and he does, I just might be in trouble.

But there came an exact moment some years later when I took the final step. I was watching the film version of Stephen Hawking's "Brief History of Time." He made a statement that I don't remember verbatim, but went something like: If god made the world and everything in it, who made god? At that point, for me, a belief in God seemed unreasonable. I must admit that it was satisfying for me to read the very same argument made by Richard Dawkins.

But I have two more questions I'd like to explore today.

The first is, can atheists and theists co-exist harmoniously? Do they have anything in common? An interview between Dawkins (an atheist biologist) and Francis Collins (a Christian geneticist) in a recent Time article provides insight.

Following a discussion of the improbability, given the nature of physics, for life on earth to have become exactly as it is, Time asks: "Could the answer be God" Dawkins, the atheist, responds: "There could be something incredibly grand and incomprehensible and beyond our present understanding." Collins says "That's God"

I interpret that exchange as evidence that Dawkins and Collins actually have the same belief – a belief in the possibility of something incredibly grand and incomprehensible and beyond our understanding. Collins gives it a label - God. Dawkins does not. As we Unitarians know, there are as many different beliefs as there are people. But I also think that in many cases we think our beliefs differ but on closer examination they are not so far apart.

The second question I would like to address is why? Why did these authors write these books? Why have I spent hours and hours putting together this talk for today?

Through the book excerpts I've tried to show you why the authors have written the books. Why they touch me is much more personal.

The most hurtful experiences in my life have been a result of persons who have fundamentalist Christian beliefs. I married into a fundamentalist family about 30 years ago and several years after my wedding my mother-in-law claimed "As soon as I heard your last name I knew you shouldn't marry my son" and my father-in-law claimed that instead of gaining a daughter at the wedding they had lost a son. Does their belief in God give them to right to say such hurtful things to me? None of the atheists I know (mostly from my own family) would ever be so unkind.

Recently my own son also married into a fundamentalist family. He has incorporated their beliefs and after the birth of my grandson informed me that he thinks homosexuality is wrong and my partner, Roxanne, is not welcome in his home. And this after he chose to live with us (rather than his father) from the time he was 16 until he left for college at age 19. I now must visit my grandson by myself and I cannot share this most important joy with the most important person in my life. To say this is incredibly painful is an understatement.

I don't know for sure, but it seems to me that without a belief in God and a literal belief in the bible, I would not be suffering such emotional pain right now. As I see it, sometimes, along with the belief in God comes a license for hate and intolerance. If you read any of these books by atheists you will not find expressions of hate or intolerance (except perhaps for those who use God and the bible to justify their hateful behaviors!).

But I can't argue with my son. I can't reason with him. His faith is his choice and off limits for discussion. Even though his faith allows him to hate and hurt, I must continue to be a loving mother and I have to accept his belief.

And that brings me to one more reason for sharing with you today. It is something that each of the authors addresses in one way or another. It is the fact that it is unacceptable to question others beliefs. All beliefs are considered "equal." Even though some people's beliefs lead them to hate and kill, we cannot raise our voices against those beliefs.

This issue is, to me, the most important one.

I don't expect that the percentage of atheists will increase all that much if we all "come out," but I do know that there are many, many theists who believe in a God of love and are also dismayed at the beliefs and actions of the fundamentalists who share a belief in God. In efforts to have a safer, more just world, is it time to lift the curtain on the taboo against discussing our religious beliefs? Would it make any difference?

I don't have an answer but would love to hear your thoughts on this issue and any others that have been raised in your minds this morning.

**Bob:**

We hope you find this general area of thought and conversation as interesting as we do. If you do, please give us your name, email address, and phone number on the sign-up sheet that will be available during the social hour after the service, or send the information to either of us at: [rxs@psu.edu](mailto:rxs@psu.edu) or [swd107@psu.edu](mailto:swd107@psu.edu).

A table in the Social Room will have some of the recent books on it for your examination. Please do not remove them from the table. They are personal copies, not part of our lending library. Thank you.

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**For Extinguishing the Chalice:** Here's to careful and thorough examinations of "why we believe", "what we believe", and the consequences of our beliefs. May your need for "understanding" provoke much active thinking and searching. Going in peace may "tickle your pleasure center" for now, but it is not a good long-term solution for you, us, our country, or our planet. Thank you.

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**Analysis of why unresolvable:**

Arguments between two people who believe in different creation stories will never be resolvable. Arguments based on holy writings, intuition, feelings, logic, and empirical observation are all given different weight depending on YOUR belief system. If both people who believe in different stories both place high value on writings, intuition and/or feeling, then there really is no basis at all for one convincing the other. The argument cannot be resolved. If one of the people places high value on writings, intuition and/or feeling and the other places high value on logic and/or empirical observation, then once again there really is no basis for one convincing the other. The argument cannot be resolved. It is when both people place high value on logic and/or empirical observation that the arguments even look like they might be resolvable.

Even if both of you believe that your arguments are based on logic and/or empirical observation, you will still not convince the other. The arguments cannot be resolved. The relatively current arguments between those who believe in the literal truth of the Christian creation story on the one hand, and those who believe in evolutionary theory on the other, are “living proof” that one is not able to convince the other. Yet, they both may claim to place high value on logic and empirical observation.

I believe that the psychological, biological, and sociological study of belief and persuasion can help us “understand” many aspects of the fact that the arguments are not resolvable.