

Why We Need Religion



WHY WE NEED RELIGION

Stephen T. Asma

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For Julien, my son



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Introduction

Opiate for the Masses?

It's a tough time to defend religion. The respectability of religion, among intellectuals, has ebbed away over the last decade, and the next generation of young people is the most unaffiliated demographic in memory. There are good reasons for this discontent, as a storm of bad behavior, bad press, and good criticism has marked the last decade.

On the negative side, abuse by priests and clerics, jihad campaigns against the infidels, and homegrown Christian hostility toward diversity and secular culture, have all converged into a tsunami of ignorance and violence. The convergence has led many intellectuals to echo E. O. Wilson's claim that "for the sake of human progress, the best thing we could possibly do would be to diminish, to the point of eliminating, religious faiths."¹

It's hard to disagree with Wilson when we consider some recent cases. The 9/11 terrorists famously shouted "Allahu Akbar"—or "God is great" as they hijacked the planes. In January 2015, gunmen arrived at the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine offices, went to the third floor, and shot dead eight journalists, a guest, and a police officer who had been assigned to protect workers. The gunmen were heard saying "We avenged the Prophet Muhammad! We killed Charlie Hebdo," in French, and also shouting "Allahu Akbar."² And after the Islamic State (Daesh) attacked Paris on November 13, 2015, killing over 125 people, they released their "Statement about the Blessed Paris Invasion on the French Crusaders." In the statement, they quote the Qur'an repeatedly as a motivation and explanation of their violence, and also state, "In a blessed attack for which Allah facilitated the causes for

success, a faithful group of the soldiers of the Caliphate, may Allah dignify it and make it victorious, launched out, targeting the capital of prostitution and obscenity, the carrier of the banner of the Cross in Europe, Paris.”³

In May of 2014, the Catholic Church revealed that it defrocked 848 priests for rape or child molestation, and sanctioned another 2,572 clerics for lesser violations.⁴ These dramatic figures represent only the ten years between 2004 and 2014. These kinds of negative cases lead many reflective people to question the sincerity of religious people (especially those in power), and the value of religion itself.

On the positive side of the antireligion trend, there has been a surge of important analyses coming from recent atheist and agnostic critics, and an arguable uptick in scientific literacy among the younger generation. For the first time in U.S. history, for example, the majority of young people believe that Darwinian evolution is a fact about the natural world.⁵ I call these positive developments because they represent increases in critical thinking generally, although they’ve negatively impacted traditional religious belief.

These negative and positive developments, in turn, have generated a greater skepticism toward religion in the new millennium. It’s a relative golden era for agnostics and atheists, and some of this is a welcome transformation.

On a personal note, it feels like the current zeitgeist has finally caught up with my own mindset of the 1990s. Most of my early publications were strenuously critical of religion, but it was a more credulous era then and the club of skeptics was tiny. I remember one of my mentors warning me in the early 1990s not to anger the gods and their servants too much before I secured tenure. It was good advice then, because I was scolded regularly in those days by Christians and New Age spiritualists for poking holes in Biblical literalism, mystical overreaches, and naïve supernaturalism. I wrote regularly for the *Skeptical Inquirer*, the *Humanist* magazine, *Skeptical* magazine, and my bestselling *Buddha for Beginners* (1996) exposed a wide audience to a demystified, nontheological Buddhism, long before it was standard. I even found myself listed as an entry in the reference work *Who’s Who In Hell* (2000), and I’m still proud of my inclusion in that collection of august freethinkers and humanists. I’m relieved that the younger generation of skeptics has a smoother road now, and along with a generation of much better writers than myself, I take a sliver of credit for making skepticism more mainstream than ever.

So, now, it feels oddly familiar to be strangely out of step with my time, as I come around to write an appreciation of religion. But this will not be your typical, aging, return to religion, after a rebellious youth. I am not a religious apologist of that variety. Nor will this book use the old strategy

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of sweeping religious irrationality under the reassuring rug of “faith.” The fideism or faithism tradition, from Kierkegaard to C.S. Lewis, has defended religion on the grounds that its truths are above and beyond the regular faculties of knowledge. I have no such allegiance to faith, as a special ability, or power, or window to the light.

So, what is my appreciation of religion based upon? Why do I think we need religion? Perhaps a story is a good way to begin.

After pompously lecturing a class of undergraduates about the incoherence of monotheism, I was approached by a shy student. He nervously stutted through a heartbreaking story, one that slowly unraveled my own convictions and assumptions about religion.

Five years ago, he explained, his older teenage brother had been brutally stabbed to death. He was viciously attacked and mutilated by a perpetrator who was never caught. My student and his whole family were utterly shattered by their loss and the manner of their loss. He explained to me that his mother went insane for a while afterward, and would have been institutionalized if it were not for the fact that she expected to see her slain son again. She expected to be reunited with him in the afterlife, and—she stressed—his body would be made whole again. A powerful motivational force, hope, and a set of bolstering beliefs dragged her back from the brink of debilitating sorrow, and gave her the strength to keep raising her other two children—my student and his sister.

For the more extreme atheist, all this looks irrational and therefore unacceptable. Beliefs, we are told, must align themselves to evidence and not to mere yearning. Without rational standards, like those entrenched in science, we will all slouch toward chaos and end up in pre-Enlightenment darkness.

Strangely enough, I still agree with some of this, and will not spend much time trying to rescue religion as reasonable. It isn’t terribly reasonable. But therein lies its secret power. Contrary to the radical atheists, the irrationality of religion does not render it unacceptable or valueless. Why not? Because the human brain is a kludge of three major operating systems; the ancient reptilian brain (motor functions, fight or flight types of instincts, etc.), the limbic or mammalian brain (emotions), and the most recent neocortex (rationality). Religion nourishes one of these operating systems, even while it irritates another.

In this book, I will argue that religion, like art, has direct access to our emotional lives in ways that science does not. Yes, science can give us emotional feelings of wonder and the majesty of nature (we can feel the sacred depths of nature), but there are many forms of human suffering that are beyond the reach of any scientific alleviation. Different emotional stresses

require different kinds of rescue. Unlike previous secular paeans to religion that praise its ethical and civilizing function, I will be emphasizing its emotionally therapeutic power.

Of course, there is a well-documented dark side to spiritual emotions as well. Unlike scientific emotions of sublime interconnection (also still available in religion), the spiritual emotions tilt toward the melodramatic. Religion still trades readily in good-guy bad-guy narratives, and gives testosterone-fueled revenge fantasies every opportunity to vent aggression. But although much of this zealotry is undeniably dangerous, much of it is relatively harmless, and even the dreaded tribalism has some benign aspects. Moreover, I will argue (based on recent social science and psychology data) that the positive dimensions outweigh the negative. I will argue that traditional religion recruits and channels the mammalian emotions of *fear* and *rage* adaptively in premodern small group collectives, but in state-level global societies fresh challenges and obstacles arise. The lamentable story of religious zealotry is used by the enemies of religion to damn the whole enterprise, but this critique oversimplifies both the emotional palette (much of which is prosocial) and the religious modes of emotional management.

The New Atheists, like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, are evaluating religion at the neocortical level—their criteria for assessing it is the hypothetico-deductive method.⁶ I agree with them that religion fails miserably at the bar of rational validity, but we're at the wrong bar. The older brain, built by natural selection for solving survival challenges, was not built for rationality. Emotions like fear, love, rage, even hope or anticipation, were selected for because they helped early mammals flourish. Fear is a great prod to escape predators, for example, and aggression is useful in the defense of resources and offspring. Care or feelings of love (oxytocin and opioid based) strengthen bonds between mammal parents and offspring, and so on. In many cases, emotions offer quicker ways to solve problems than deliberative cognition. Moreover, our own human emotions are retained from our animal past and represent deep homologies with other mammals.

Of course, the tripartite brain is not a strict distribution of functions, and many systems interpenetrate one another, but affective neuroscience has located a subcortical headquarters of mammal emotion. This, I will argue, is where religion thrives. For we humans the interesting puzzle is how the old animal operating system interacts with the new operating system of cognition. How do our feelings and our thoughts blend together to compose our mental lives and our behaviors? Our cognitive ability to formulate representations of the external world, and manipulate them,

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is immersed in a sea of emotions. When I think about a heinous serial killer, for example, my blood runs cold. When I call up images of my loved ones in my mind's eye, I am flooded with warm emotions. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has shown that emotions saturate even the seemingly pure information-processing aspects of rational deliberation.⁷ So, something complicated is happening when my student's mother remembers and projects her deceased son, and further embeds him in a metaphysical narrative that helps her soldier on.

I will argue that religion helps people, rightly or wrongly, manage their emotional lives. No amount of scientific explanation or sociopolitical theorizing is going to console the mother of the stabbed boy. But the irrational hope that she would see her murdered son again sustained her, according to my student. If this emotionally grounded belief gave her the energy and vitality to continue caring for her other children, then we can envision a selective pressure for such emotional beliefs at the individual and kin levels of natural selection.

Those of us in the secular world who critique such emotional responses and strategies with the refrain, "But is it true?" are missing the point. Most religious beliefs are not true. But here's the crux. The emotional brain doesn't care. It doesn't operate on the grounds of true and false. An emotion is not a representation or a judgment, so it cannot be evaluated like a theory. Emotions are not true or false. Even a terrible fear inside a dream is still a terrible fear. This means that the criteria for measuring a healthy theory are not the criteria for measuring a healthy emotion. Unlike a healthy theory, which must correspond to empirical facts, a "healthy emotion" might be one that contributes to neurochemical homeostasis or other affective states that promote biological flourishing.

The definition of an emotion is almost as contentious as the definition of religion. For our purposes we will acknowledge that emotions involve complex combinations of (a) physiological sensations, (b) cognitive appraisals of situations, (c) cultural labels, and (d) expressions or behaviors of those feelings and appraisals (Simon and Nath 2004, following Peggy Thoits 1989). I will sometimes refer to the physiological aspect of emotions as "affects" to distinguish them from the more cognitive emotions of modern humans.

The intellectual life answers to the all-important criterion: Is this or that claim *accurate*? Do our views of the world carve nature at its joints? But the emotional life has a different master. It answers to the more ancient criterion: Does this or that feeling help the organism *thrive*? Often an accurate belief also produces thriving (how else could intelligence be selected for in *Homo sapiens*?). But frequently there is no such happy correlation. Mixing

AQ: "... expressions or behaviors of those feelings and appraisals (Simon and Nath 2004, following Peggy Thoits 1989)" Please include 2004 and 1989 citations in Notes (p. 11)

up these criteria is a common category mistake that fuels a lot of the theist/atheist debate.

Some skeptics suggest that my appreciation of emotional well-being (independent of questions of veracity and truth) is tantamount to “drinking the Kool-Aid” or “taking the blue pill” (from the *Matrix* scenario). But the real tension is not between delusion and truth—that’s an easy one. And that easy debate dominates the conversation, preventing a more nuanced discussion. The real tension is between the needs of one part of the brain (limbic) and the needs of another (the neocortical). Evolution shaped them both, and the older one does not get out of the way when the newbie comes on the scene.

William James understood this tension, long before we had a neurological way of framing it. And I will draw heavily on James’s still powerful “middle way” between the excesses of both secularism and theism. James recognized that faith is not *knowledge* in the strict sense, but since it is deeply meaningful it is important to see how and why it might be justified. He also understood, long before Damasio, that secular reason is more feeling-laden than we usually admit—there is a sentiment of rationality. The recent debates about religion, like polarizing political rhetoric, have lacked James’s refined understanding of the real stakes involved. John Dewey’s pragmatic *A Common Faith* also tried to preserve aspects of religious experience, while jettisoning the troubling metaphysics. “The religious,” Dewey explained, “is any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of its general and enduring value.”⁸ In this more capacious definition he laid down a template for both today’s moderate skeptics and interfaith optimists.⁹

I will build a case for religious tolerance and appreciation, without neutering metaphysical traditions entirely. I will argue that there are *indicative* metaphysical commitments of religion (e.g., “Jesus is God,” “Shiva is destroyer,” “the soul exists”). But these are not the primary elements of religion. Our indicative beliefs are derived instead from our *imperative* emotional social experiences. Adaptive emotions, folk psychology, and cultural transmission are enough to generate most religious life. The metaphysical beliefs become part of a feedback loop, but they are not the prime movers or motivators of religious life. Dewey’s insight, that almost anything can be “religious” if we understand its unique blend of enthusiasm and existential scope, can be updated and revitalized with recent insights from social psychology, neuroscience, and cross-cultural philosophy.

I never had much use for magical thinking . . . until, eventually, I did. In the years since my student told me of his slain brother and unbreakable mother, my own troubles amplified in disturbing albeit illuminating

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ways. My personal suffering in the last decade, together with my experience living in Cambodia, strengthened my respect for religion, while leaving my agnosticism fully intact. There's no need to go into confessional mode here, except to express an emotional solidarity with believers who find meaning in the intellectually awkward domain of religion. The relationship between suffering and religion is old and obvious, but we now have new tools (philosophical and scientific) to assess the relationship better. Moreover, this book will couch the issue of suffering in the wider web of religious necessity, namely human vulnerability. The need for religion is frequently proportional to the stakes involved—the householder/parent, for example, has a level of high-stakes vulnerability largely unknown to the bohemian ascetic, or the teenager, or even twenty-something citizen. And sure enough, their religious interests follow quite different paths. My book will offer an explanation of and modest justification for these religious impulses. It will be a respectful, rather than reductionist, psychologizing of religion. As Roger Scruton has pointed out, “consolation from imaginary things is not an imaginary consolation.”

Importantly, this book is not just a defense of religion on the grounds that it comforts. It certainly has this function, and it is a crucial aspect of why we need religion. But many thinkers, from Lucretius and David Hume to Pascal Boyer, have noticed that religions inculcate some uncomfortable, harrowing psychological states.¹⁰ Sometimes religion creates more distress for believers than consolation. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) famously set the bar for American religious horror, when he said, “The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.”¹¹ I will endeavor to show that even these negative feelings are part of the larger therapeutic mission of religion to manage the emotional life.

How one *feels* is as vital to one's survival as how one *thinks*. This argument, premised on the view that emotions are largely adaptive, will be made throughout the chapters. Running through the text then will be two sets of data and argument. One will be the evidence and argument for adaptive lust, care, panic, fear, equanimity, rage, and so on. How exactly are these adaptive (from the Pleistocene to the present)? Secondly, how exactly do religions manage and modulate these affective powers? How do some of the religious universals (e.g., ritual, sacrifice, forgiveness, soteriology) regulate the emotions into successful survival resources?

Before we begin, we need to define some important terms, and also introduce the idea of the *religious imagination*. Not only are there many different global religions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, but there are also many definitions of religion. Some definitions are too narrow or provincial, and exclude religions from unfamiliar regions (e.g., monotheists frequently ignore animism). On the other hand, some definitions are so capacious as to include every kind of human endeavor, and do not successfully limit the domain (e.g., Dewey’s definition may be too broad in this sense).

The etymology of the word “religion” is unclear. Some scholars claim it is derived from the Latin *religio*, a modification of *ligare*, “to bind.” This makes sense, given that religion unites or binds people together into a cultural unit, and religion binds the believer with behavioral constraints. The ancient Roman philosopher Lucretius uses the term in this way, as does St. Augustine. But Cicero offers a slightly different etymology when he suggests that religion comes from *relegere*, “to read through” or “to go through again.” And this suggests a crucial liturgical or ritual element of religion.¹²

If we think of religion as a “family resemblance” of ideas, behaviors, feelings, and so on, then we find a general likeness in many features (like a family nose or forehead, for example) but not an exhaustive required set of properties. Most religions, for example, bind a social group together and provide a sense of identity. Most religions commit to a belief in supernatural beings. Most religions have ritual or sacred objects and conduct ceremonies around those objects. Most religions promote an ethical or moral code. Religions engender rare feeling states, such as awe, reverence, guilt, and so on. Religions have a story about the origin of the cosmos or the origin of a people. They involve modes of communication to other divine realms, such as prayer, divination, or meditation. And although theologians might stress the scriptural notions of the gods, and anthropologists might stress the ritual ceremonies, religion is all of these things.

If a cultural system exemplifies many of the above features, then it is most likely a religion, even though some systems share few features and no systems are complete exemplifications. In addition to a list of defining features, religion also can be analyzed using two different approaches; namely, *essential* or *functional* methods. Crudely put, the essentialist approach to religion is concerned with *what* a particular religion is about, while the functionalist approach tracks what a religion *does*. If I’m analyzing the Christian idea of “original sin,” for example, then I can investigate the scriptural story of Adam’s rebellion in Eden, and examine St. Augustine’s and Martin Luther’s interpretation of original sin as an ongoing expression of human desire (concupiscence), and so on. These would be essentialist approaches to

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religion, because they examine the nature of the ideas and beliefs directly—taking them as explicit statements about the self, the world, and God. Essentialist approaches are deeply concerned with the content of religion, and track the variations of religious systems as constitutive (e.g., polytheism vs. monotheism or Catholicism vs. Protestantism).

By contrast, functionalist approaches to religion tend to look beyond the specific doctrines and unique rituals, to focus on the social uses or purposes of religious behavior. One might take a functionalist approach to original sin, for example, by arguing that the doctrine helps believers take a cautious or pejorative attitude toward their own desires and appetites, which in turn reduces selfish behavior. Or one might take a functionalist approach to religious sacrifice on the grounds that such activity signals group membership and solidarity. Notice, however, that it's not just anthropologists who are functionalists about religion. Even the growing interfaith movement, like what one finds in the Interfaith Youth Core, looks beyond the specific essentials of denominational religion to find underlying purposes in all religions. For example, it is common for interfaith proponents to identify “love your neighbor” as an underlying function beneath specific Christian, Jewish, and Muslim doctrines. One needs some functionalism in order to find some of the common or shared goals and values in diverse religions. But most functionalists, like psychologists and social scientists, are examining beliefs and practices as extrinsically valuable or useful.

I will be making many functionalist arguments about religion, because I will be arguing that it is part of a broader adaptive strategy for human beings. But the division between essential and functional should not be overstated. In reality, there is no function or use of religion without the essential or substantive ideas and behaviors. We can abstract the deeper functions from the specific rituals or scriptures, but this is an analytical move that comes from a metalevel of detachment and does not represent the lived experience of the believer. We will discuss both the essential beliefs and behaviors of specific religions, as well as their functions and uses.

Human beings are meaning-seeking animals. And from this perspective we see the marriage of form and content, or religious function and substance. The *religious imagination* is a broad field that contains the various methods of religious analysis within it, and then some. Religion is about making and finding meaning, in the sense that it's about issues of ultimate concern, existential exploration, or what philosopher Bernard Williams called our “ground projects.”¹³ The religious imagination is a way of understanding the world and ourselves, that draws upon our visual and narrative capacities (underwritten by perceptual and cognitive faculties). The

religious imagination sees the world as it is, but also a second universe, infusing the facts.

Philosopher Charles Taylor broadened the definition of religion to the larger project—the system of meaning. He suggested that religion is not really about supernatural beings and big sacrifices, but about frameworks that give us values. These values give us norms, and ways of behaving that define us as a social group, and thereby increase cohesion. Such value frameworks are inescapable for humans, and even our Western secular framework is just another one (Western secular liberalism is a religion that doesn't know it's a religion, according to this view).¹⁴ The main reason for thinking of contemporary liberalism (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democracy) as “religious” is because it has certain fundamental values (e.g., individual rights) that are not demonstrable, or derivable, or provable. Our values are not obviously derived from scientific investigation, Taylor points out, and therefore they are similar to the faith-based first principles of traditional religions (e.g., God made nature).

Although I'm sympathetic to Taylor's emphasis on meaningful value systems, I think he has broadened the notion of religion too much. The frameworks that give meaningful values for Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists, for example, are intimately metaphysical (and often tend toward the supernatural). The values and the meanings flow from the metaphysics. The belief in a God, or a soul, or karma, or an afterlife, makes up the foundational content that anchors the values.

I take it as obvious that we can have values, and very good values, without religion. It's time to acknowledge that although this was once a pressing point of contention, it is thankfully now a no-brainer. Human reason and sentiment, properly cultivated, are sufficient to provide us the golden rule, and many other ethical norms. I will not waste time rehashing this tired debate. We will be focusing on the relationship between religion and values, because that is one of the key elements of the book, but it's a given that nonreligious people can be, and are, deeply ethical.

The relation between secular and sacred values is not a purely academic issue, because we need a social world that appreciates the multicultural diversity of different religions in the United States or Europe, but also limits and constrains those beliefs/practices when they occasionally contradict the values of Western liberalism (e.g., polygamy, honor killings, or no education for females). Competing value systems and their metaphysical assumptions are difficult to reconcile, even in a pluralistic culture.

For now, we only want to acknowledge the importance of imagination as a force of religious life. We're wrong to think that the imagination is

only a fantasy fabricator. I will argue throughout this book that the imagination has epistemic power—that is to say, power to construct knowledge and also change behavior. Yes, there is an aspect of imagination that spins unreality, but there is another aspect that *investigates*. And another aspect that synthesizes or composes from disparate parts. And yet another aspect of imagination motivates behavior, conduct, and even conversion. The religious imagination is a mediating faculty between facts and values on the one hand, and cognition and affect on the other. The nature of this imagination has been misunderstood by both proponents and detractors of religion.

Mark Twain tells of the fascinating case of Reverend Thomas Beecher (brother of Henry Ward Beecher), who came from Connecticut to Elmira, New York (Twain's summer hometown) to take charge of a Congregational church. Beecher served as pastor there for many decades, and became Twain's friend.

"He had a fine mind," Twain reports in his *Autobiography*. When he came to Elmira to take over the parish, Beecher was a "strenuous and decided unbeliever." But, he reported to Twain, his upbringing required him eventually to come to believe in Christian doctrine, or he would never be happy or free from terrors. So, the atheist Beecher had accepted the parish confidently, knowing that he had made up his mind to compel himself to become a believer. Twain says that he was astonished by this strange confession, and found it stranger still that Beecher managed to pull it off. Beecher claimed that within twelve months of coming to Elmira, he had "perfectly succeeded in his extraordinary enterprise, and that thence forth he was as complete and as thorough a believer as any Christian that ever lived. He was one of the best men I've ever known. Also he was one of the best citizens I've ever known."¹⁵

It's hard to interpret this credulous compulsion, this self-imposed conversion. If we take Twain and Beecher at face value, then the conversion represents a kind of tour de force of the will-to-believe. But belief on demand seems, forgive the irony, hard to believe. This is an important issue for us, because we will be considering the possibility of religious belief or commitment, without satisfaction of truth requirements, and even in the face of truth failure.

There is full-on belief, without doubt. And there is complete disbelief. But there are also many fine-grained intermediate positions that need more exploration. The religious imagination has a powerful role in the construction of an unseen, meaningful world—one that structures life, even as it fails to deliver on its literal promissory notes.

Philosopher Jean Kazez writes, “I am a religious fictionalist. I don’t just banish all religious sentences to the flames. I make believe some of them are true, and I think that’s all to the good.”¹⁶ At her family’s religious feast, the Seder, she pretends there is a deity to be praised for various things. “I like pretending the Passover story is true,” she explains, “because of the continuity it creates—it ties me to the other people at the table, past years that I’ve celebrated Passover (in many different ways, with different people). I like feeling tied to Jews over the centuries and across the world. I also like the themes of liberation and freedom that can be tied to the basic story.”

Many people take a fictionalist approach to God. They accept the existence of God, but they do not really believe God exists. As philosopher William Irwin puts it, “They accept that God is love and that (the concept of) God has shaped human history and guides human lives, but when pinned down they admit that they do not really believe in the actual existence of such a God. Their considered judgment is that the existence of God is not literally true but is mythologically true.”¹⁷

Many nonbelievers dismiss this kind of fictionalism as bad thinking, but many of these same nonbelievers accept the moral power of imagination. In his song *Imagine*, John Lennon famously entreated us to imagine “no countries,” “no religion,” “no possessions,” and a subsequent “brotherhood of man.” And Martin Luther King, Jr. invited us to project a “dream” into future reality, and make it so.

Imagination helps us find empathy for other people, by putting us in their shoes. It helps us envision an alternative reality where greater social justice exists. Dreaming our ideals helps us organize our daily lives and institutions to bring about those ideals. But, of course, the imagination is not intrinsically positive and affirmative. Nightmares are also dreams, after all. In contrast to the egalitarian dreams of liberalism, imagination-based xenophobia drives cultures to imagine the worst, and fear tears apart communities and fosters “us versus them” dynamics. So, the religious imagination is a double-edged sword, and we must try to ascertain which direction it is cutting throughout the specific cases of this book.

Finally, we need just a word or two about opiates. The modern condemnation of religion has followed the Marxian rebuke that religion is an opiate administered indirectly by State power in order to secure a docile populace—one that accommodates poverty and political powerlessness, in hopes of posthumous supernatural rewards. “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature,” Marx claimed, “the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”¹⁸

[12] *Why We Need Religion*

Marx, Mao, and even Malcolm X leveled this critique against traditional religion, and the critique lives on as a disdainful last insult to be hurled at the believer. I hurled it myself many times, thinking that it was a decisive weapon. In recent years, however, I've changed my mind about this criticism.

First, the opiate critique was born during the rise of industrial urban culture, and it trades on a particular image of “the masses”—an image that doesn't really hold up. Yes, the State can use religion to anesthetize the disenfranchised, but we need to rethink the role of religion for the “elemental social unit”—the family. Nineteenth-century theories, such as Friedrich Engels's, suggested that the nuclear family was a product of industrialization, but more recent anthropology reverses this order and suggests that industrialization was so successful in Europe because nuclear families facilitated it. Anthropologists Timothy Earl and Allen W. Johnson studied hundreds of human societies, in their *Evolution of Human Societies*, and discovered that the nuclear family is the default form of human organization, because it allows for maximally flexible management of resources, limited demands on those resources, and trustworthy social ties.¹⁹ Religion, then, may be analgesic, but it is managed more by the family, not a faceless bourgeois State or even a centralized Vatican or other power hub. When the family unit is making selective use of the images, stories, and rituals of the local religious culture, then insidious Big-Brother interpretations are politically expedient but inaccurate.

Secondly, religion is energizing as often as it is anesthetizing. As often as it numbs or sedates, religion also riles-up and invigorates the believer. Indeed, one might argue that this animating quality of religion makes it more dangerous than any tranquillizing property.

Finally, what's so bad about opiates, anyway? If my view of religion is primarily therapeutic, then I can hardly despair when some of that therapy takes the form of palliative pain management. If atheists think it's enough to dismiss the believer on the grounds that he should never buffer the pains of life, then I'll assume the atheist has no recourse to any pain management in his own life. In which case, I envy his remarkably good fortune. For the rest of us, there is aspirin, alcohol, religion, hobbies, work, love, friendship, and other analgesic therapies. After all, opioids—like endorphins—are innate chemical ingredients in the human brain and body, and they evolved, in part, to occasionally relieve the organism from misery. Freud, in his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, quotes the well-known phrase, “He who has cares, has brandy too.”

We need a more clear-eyed appreciation of the role of cultural analgesics. It is not enough to dismiss religion on the grounds of some puritanical moral judgment about the weakness of the devotee. The irony is too rich. In this book, I will endeavor a charitable interpretation of the believer and religion, one that couches such convictions in the universal emotional life that connects us all.

CHAPTER 1

Adventures in the Creation Museum

FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO

Driving from my home in Chicago to the Creation Museum in Kentucky (six hours away) is, itself, a kind of espionage foray in the American culture wars. The culture-shock goes both ways and I'm sure that natives of the rural heartlands also feel like they're entering "enemy territory" when they roll up to the urban jungle.

Just as the skyscrapers recede in the rearview mirror and the now verdant landscape begins to flatten out, the radio acquires considerably more twang—and more sincerity, too. Whether it's melodramatic arena-rock ballads or modern country, the music loses all the tongue-in-cheek irony of urban college rock and the cynical posturing of hip-hop. The music becomes heartfelt, strident, almost embarrassingly earnest.

Suddenly, around Hebron, Indiana, there are eight or nine Christian stations pumping a combination of power ballads (with lyrics such as, "you are my one redeemer"), personal inspirational confessions, and inflammatory conservative talk-shows. By the time I get to Petersburg, Kentucky, I feel as though I'm in a foreign country, excited by the different customs and the distinctive aesthetic.

Inside the ~~newly opened~~ \$30 million Creation Museum I am immediately confronted by a bizarre animatronic scene—a small girl plays next to a raptor dinosaur (unaware that her species arose 64 million years *after* the extinction of dinosaurs). But this is only the first in a long line of polemical "challenge exhibits" designed to undercut the idea that the earth is billions of years old. This evangelical museum is an offshoot of Answers in Genesis

(AiG), which is run by Ken Ham, president and CEO. Ham, who holds a BS in applied science from the University of Queensland, is author of titles such as *The Lie: Evolution*, and *Walking Through Shadows: Finding Hope in a World of Pain*. In addition to books, AiG produces a creationist magazine, and a variety of Christian DVDs, CDs, and so on. He and his board of directors, each of whom he describes as “a godly man who walks with the Lord in wisdom and maturity,” have been “upholding the authority of the Bible” since 1994.

In 2014, Ken Ham famously challenged science educator Bill Nye (the Science Guy) to a debate about creationism versus evolution. The event, held at the Creation Museum, sold out instantly and garnered several million video stream viewers. Ironically, donations to Ham’s organization spiked after the debate and may have enabled Ham to open his Noah’s Ark theme park in Williamstown, Kentucky. The ark and the Creation Museum are counter-punches from the deep American culture war.

Ham and his organization believe that the time is ripe for rebuttal museums and theme parks. The promotional material on the AiG website states, “Almost all natural history museums proclaim an evolutionary, humanistic worldview. For example, they will typically place dinosaurs on an evolutionary timeline millions of years before man. AiG’s museum will proclaim the authority and accuracy of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and will show that there is a Creator, and that this Creator is Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:15–20), who is our Savior.”

After the foyer animatronics of humans and dinosaurs, I am quickly shuttled into a high-tech movie theater to watch *Men in White*, a “humorous” and awkwardly preachy spoof of the Hollywood film, *Men in Black*. Here the hip sunglasses-wearing protagonists are actually archangels Michael and Gabriel (“Mike” and “Gabe”), and they give us (and an animatronic purpose-driven searcher named Wendy) a quick tour of the “problems” with modern science. Science is represented entirely by a congregation of dogmatic egg-headed teachers, who espouse (shriek actually) such “dubious” doctrines as geology, evolution, fossil-dating methodology, and basic cosmology. They are all vanquished by the lovable wise-cracking Mike and Gabe, while we the audience are thumped and rocked by motorized theater chairs and even sprayed with water during the jocular Flood sequence.

From here it’s just one unsettling display of edutainment after another, culminating in a relatively gory film about Jesus’s bloody sacrifice for “you and me.” Along the way, we get to walk inside a scaled section of Noah’s ark; we learn that pornography, suicide, and abortion are on the rise due to evolution’s nihilism; and the Grand Canyon was formed in a few weeks. One spends two to three hours touring the “Seven Cs, in God’s Eternal Plan”; Creation, Corruption, Catastrophe, Confusion, Christ, Cross, and

Consummation. And there is no way to break off the tour at any point prior to consummation, as I learned the hard way. About two hours in, I start to get claustrophobic (the spaces seem to get tighter and darker as one walks the eschatological narrative). I decide to step away (just when genocide, racism, and crime were being blamed on Adam's imprudent taste for forbidden fruit), in order to find an exit to the cafeteria ("Noah's Café") so that I might nourish my weakening spirit. To my horror, I discover that one cannot actually exit anywhere along the pathway. The herding is so absolute that when you attempt to backtrack, you find that the doors you've been entering have no handles of any kind on the opposite side. Unlike any other museum, you must (like someone who has entered a haunted house) complete the entire circuit in order to stop the experience.

It's not quite accurate to call this evangelical center a "museum" at all. It contains almost no "information," unless one counts speculations on how Noah kept dinosaurs on the ark as information. It offers no new observations about nature, unless inferring its Designer can be called observational. Unlike most other nature museums, it has no "research" component whatsoever. When I asked Mark Looy, vice president for "Answers in Genesis" ministry relations, where the research labs and archive collections were located, he stuttered and confessed that he didn't understand the question. "This is a museum," he finally said, chuckling.

What the Creation Museum *does* have, however, are copious ways of needling accepted and established theories of science with juvenile conspiracies and misguided quests for certainty. Some of their hostility toward geology and evolution is understandable on the cultural (as opposed to evidentiary) grounds that some science educators are dogmatic (i.e., bad educators). But Americans, even American evangelicals, believe that the power of "choice" is supreme, and so a growing number of Christians feel comfortable choosing a different origin story than the materialist one. The Creation Museum emboldens them to do so because it invokes a naive "show me" empiricism (e.g., "hey, I don't *see* evolution happening"). The exhibits repeatedly ask visitors, for example, to consider that: dinosaur bones don't come out of the ground with their dates printed on them, so why should we believe the crazy scientists with their theoretical dating methods? It's an "empiricism" that gives them just enough skepticism to doubt the secular culture they're immersed in, but not enough to doubt their own Biblical culture.

"How many sheep," I carefully asked "would a dinosaur need to eat per day while living on the Ark?"

I had done my homework in order to interview Ken Ham, the director of the Creation Museum. I had the good fortune to interview him during the

first month of the museum's opening. But in order to be up-to-date with "ark science," my "homework" had to go back to the 1660s. Here, particularly in John Wilkins's *An Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668), I learned that "atheistical scoffers" had been rolling their eyes, of late, at the notion that so many animals could fit on so small a boat (300 cubits = 450 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 45 feet high; Genesis 6:15). Bishop Wilkins, who acted as the first secretary of the Royal Society, set about demonstrating once and for all that the ark could indeed hold the menagerie. Creating elaborate charts based on scriptural descriptions of Noah's craft and cargo, Wilkins established that the middle floor of the three-floor ark was just under 15 feet tall and held foodstuffs for all the passengers, including 1,600 sheep for carnivore consumption. So naturally, when I learned that Ham's new exhibit diorama would show visitors how the dinosaurs lived on the ark (something Wilkins couldn't have predicted), it seemed reasonable to ask how many sheep they'd be digging into.

It is exceedingly hard to ask this question with a straight face. Even now when I think about it, I start smiling. When I asked this surreal query of Ham, I was sure I had edged over some boundary of tact and would now be perceived as mocking him. But he didn't miss a beat, and replied, "Well, that's an interesting question."

"We don't know for sure," he said, "but from a biblical perspective we know that all animals were originally herbivores." (Carnivore activity only happens as a result of the Fall—no animals experience death before Adam's sin.) "So it is possible that carnivores ate plants and grains while they lived on the ark. Even today we know that grizzly bears eat grass and vegetation primarily, so it's not true that an animal with sharp teeth and claws must eat meat or must be a carnivore. At the very least, the carnivores could survive on vegetation for a significant time span."

I was relieved to find Ham unfazed by my line of inquiry. The fact is that I was drawn into the ark issue more fully than I had ever expected. Something slowly happens to your criteria of "reasonableness" the more you become immersed into this creationist worldview. Ham and I were having a perfectly reasonable conversation, had we been living in the 1600s. Ham's speculation on the possibility of ark-bound vegetarianism seemed, at least for a moment, ingenious because it simultaneously cut down on the physical space needed for food (grains and vegetables can be compressed to take up less space than sheep) and eliminated another 1,600 mouths to feed. Bishop Wilkins would be proud.

The museum has an elaborate walk-through exhibit of Noah's ark. As you enter the giant exhibit you encounter twelve animatronic figures building the vessel. You can then meander around two floors of animal pairs, walking

both inside and outside the ark. There is also a display of the design plan of the ark to lend scale—demonstrating to visitors that this massive diorama represents only 1% of the total ark space. The walls are covered with mural paintings that show how Noah’s family took care of the animals, including engineering speculations about food and waste management. And crucial to the logic of the entire ark display is the exhibit showing how two of every “kind” of animal was brought on board, not two of every “species.”

If Noah had to get every species on board, then Ham and the other Creationists would be in deep trouble. The Amazon rain forest alone, according to some researchers, may contain as many as 20 million species of arthropods, which are themselves only a piece of the rain forest biosphere. The popular college textbook *Biology* (Campbell, Reece, and Mitchell, 2012) sums up the numbers by saying that, “To date, scientists have described and formally named about 1.8 million species of organisms. Some biologists think that about 10 million more species currently exist; others estimate the number to be as high as 100 million” (p. 1245). Even if we take the most conservative numbers of species and then add the staggering numbers of now extinct species (such as the dinosaurs), we have an insane number of animals to fit on a boat that’s less than two football fields long.

But the Creation Museum argues that Noah never had to take two of every species, but only two of every “kind,” and that cuts the numbers enough to reasonably pack the boat. What is a “kind”? Creationists are invoking the next level up on the ladder of taxonomy, the genus. To the skeptic who thinks there were too many species of dinosaur, for example, to fit on the ark, Ken Ham responds by saying that “there were not very many different kinds of dinosaurs. There are certainly hundreds of dinosaur names, but many of these were given to just a bit of bone or skeletons of the same dinosaur found in other countries. It is also reasonable to assume that different sizes, varieties, and sexes of the same dinosaur have ended up with different names. For example, look at the many different varieties and sizes of dogs, but they are all the same kind—the dog kind! In reality, there may have been fewer than 50 kinds of dinosaurs.” In contrast to the Creation Museum, scientists estimate that there may have been over 2,000 genera of dinosaurs.

I asked Ham if just a handful of dinosaurs wouldn’t be too big (even in smaller genera numbers) to accommodate on the ark.

“We want people to understand,” he responded, “that, of all the fossil skeletons found around the earth, the average size of dinosaurs is only the size of a sheep. We also want to point out that dinosaurs probably don’t have a growth spurt until after five years, so they could be quite small when

AQ: “The popular college textbook *Biology* (Campbell, Reece, and Mitchell, 2012) . . .” Please provide year of publication and include bibliographic information. (p. 10)

young. Therefore, it's not ridiculous to think that two of every kind were on the ark."

It's worth noting that while Ham and others are trying to make the animal kingdom smaller so it will fit into the boat, earlier exegetes entertained the idea of making the ark much bigger in order to accomplish the same goal. Augustine argued for example that the biblical "cubit" was really more like 9 feet long, rather than the 1.5 feet that we usually accept. But John Wilkins put the brakes on that when he applied this new cubit to other biblical passages, pointing out that if Augustine and others were correct, it would also make Goliath's head nine feet tall, simply too big for David to carry.

The Museum teaches that plants would have survived the flood as floating mats of vegetation, and insects and invertebrates would have lived on them, instead of inside the ark. And so on. My purpose here isn't to refute each and every such claim, but to highlight that the main agenda behind all this pseudoscience is to make the world a much smaller place. The Creation Museum is not just trying to shrink the animal kingdom, it is also scaling back the universe.

The world I live in is ancient and vast. The Big Bang occurred around 14 billion years ago; the earth is approximately 4.5 billion years old; life itself (single-cell organisms) emerged a few hundred million years later; dinosaurs went extinct 65 million years ago; and modern humans developed from ancestral hominids around 100,000 years ago. The Creation Museum, however, is speaking to the Americans who live in a much smaller world. That world was created by God 6,000 years ago; a great deluge covered the earth 4,400 years ago; species have gone extinct within the last several thousand years, but no new species have evolved; and the savior came 2,000 years ago and will come again soon to wrap up the whole enchilada.

To maintain this smaller-scale picture of nature (i.e., a human-centered, young cosmos), the Creation Museum offers an exhibit illustrating the rapid formation of the Grand Canyon. Near the museum bookstore, a hallway wall is covered with a replica of Grand Canyon strata, complete with dinosaur fossils lodged in situ. But the exhibit explains to visitors that the Grand Canyon was formed quickly during the great flood, rather than over the course of millions of years as current geology contends. (Scientists believe the Colorado River probably began carving the canyon around 20 million years ago.)

When I asked Ham if there was any particular museum exhibit that might prove conversionary for the skeptic, he underscored the importance of the young-earth doctrine.

“I think one of the big issues in this whole topic is obviously the age of the earth—the question of millions of years versus thousands of years. That issue is even more key than the business of Darwinian evolution. And I believe that there is very compelling evidence in our displays, and in the DVD’s that we produce, to show that the earth is not millions of years old.”

The socially conservative political stance of the museum is prevalent in almost every exhibit, but the *coup de grace* is the “Culture in Crisis” exhibit. Here the museum gives us a “natural history” of the breakdown of the American family. Visitors are invited to look through three windows of a contemporary American home. Videos loop to show two young boys looking at porn on the computer and experimenting with drugs. Another window shows a young girl crying, surrounded by abortion pamphlets. And finally, the parents are shown arguing. A recreated church facade stands at the other end of the room, but the foundation of the church has been damaged by a large wrecking-ball labeled “millions of years.” The signage explains that the cause of all this misery is our move away from Genesis and toward the scientific ideas of geology and evolution. Ideas about an old earth make people feel small and insignificant, so naturally they do drugs and have abortions.

To play on Max Weber’s famous terminology, the Creation Museum exhibits the world as an “enchanted garden.” It may be defiled temporarily by the sins of man, but the world is a magical place wherein God cares about human beings and codes nature with secrets and signs of his power and purpose. The evolutionist, on the other hand, lives in a much larger, older, and more mechanical version of nature. The late Stephen Jay Gould once described his metaphysical worldview as “the ‘cold bath’ theory that nature can be truly ‘cruel’ and ‘indifferent’ . . . because nature was not constructed as our eventual abode, didn’t know we were coming (we are, after all, interlopers of the latest geological microsecond), and doesn’t give a damn about us (speaking metaphorically).” And Gould writes, “I regard such a position as liberating, not depressing.”

The Creation Museum, on the other hand, finds this “cold bath” view very depressing, and it is the reason, the organizers say, why the American family is disintegrating. Ham’s “Answers in Genesis” website laments that “the devastating effect that evolutionary humanism has had on society, and even the church, makes it clear that everyone—including Christians—needs to return to the clear teachings of Scripture and Genesis and acknowledge Christ as our Creator and Savior. In fact, Genesis has the answer to many of the problems facing the compromising church and questioning world today.”


One of the developers of an evolution exhibit at Chicago’s Field Museum, Eric D. Gyllenhaal, told me that curators will often do front-end surveys and exit surveys of visitors to see what they knew before going through the exhibit and what they knew and felt afterward. Curators do this to see whether their “message” is getting through. Unprompted, patrons exiting the Field’s evolution exhibit reported a strong sense of their own “fragility” as a species, and many visitors reported feeling very “small” in comparison with the vast scales of geological time.

In that vein, I asked Mark Looy, vice president for Answers in Genesis ministry relations, what the intended “message” was for the whole museum.

“The message is that the Bible is true. We’re not trying to hide that from anyone—the museum will be an evangelistic center.”

Many mainstream moderate Christians read the Bible figuratively rather than literally and they see God as the maker of natural laws, from the Big Bang to natural selection. They are comfortable with modern science and for them God is not a micromanager of nature, nor an intruder on the free-will affairs of the human species. But the Creation Museum characterizes those moderates as part of the problem.

I asked Looy if moderate Christians, or any “theistic evolutionists,” would enjoy  museum.

 “Well, we welcome them to the museum,” he said, “to observe two things; one, the evidence that supports Genesis and shows them that they don’t need to compromise with the evolutionists. And two, we’ll also challenge them with the question, ‘Why would an all-powerful, all-knowing God use something so cruel and wasteful as Darwinian evolution?’”

The museum does not shy away from the traditional “problem of evil” by saying that suffering does not exist, or by saying that it only looks like suffering to us but it’s really good from a God’s-eye perspective. Instead, it offers a disturbing progression of exhibits that move the visitor from the “Cave of Sorrows,” where Eve eats from the Tree of Knowledge, to “The First Shedding of Blood,” where images and text explain how animals began to suffer and die after God’s wrath at the fallen Adam and Eve. So, the museum accepts the reality of natural selection’s brutality (all organisms tend to make more offspring than can survive to procreative age), but it places the blame for this unpleasantness on man’s shoulders, not the Deity’s.

Scientists observe the “carnage” of natural selection and see it as the engine of adaptation and speciation. Creationists observe the same carnage and explain it as divine punishment, with no evolutionary significance. The

gap reminds us that data usually underdetermine the theories that are proffered to explain them. In other words, we can usually give more than one coherent explanation for the same data. The people at the Creation Museum were eager to point that out to me, whenever they could.

“The big issue in the museum that we deal with,” Ham said, “is helping people to see the difference between using the scientific method in the present—what’s called operational science—and one’s origin beliefs.”

“An evolutionist,” said Looy, “looks at a dinosaur bone and says it must be 65 million years old. We look at the same bone and say the creature was probably covered by a global flood about 4,400 years ago. Same evidence, same bone, just a different interpretation.”

Never mind, I guess, that the different interpretation flouts the facts of all the sciences combined. Creationists believe that since an observable dinosaur bone must be explained by an unobservable story, we are all legitimately entitled to choose the story we like best. Choosing a Biblical story of origins brings with it comforting cultural baggage—kindred spirits who live in a cozy, young, enchanted world, comprised of obvious good guys and bad guys. Choosing an evolutionary story of the bone brings its own cultural baggage, but also the immeasurable advantage of consistency with established discoveries, observations, and stories from the scientific brain trust. Not all stories are made equal.¹

HABITS OF MIND

How does a modern person come to dismiss science and history in favor of an Iron Age book, like the Bible? Answering, as some secularists do, that the person is stupid or crazy tells us nothing and closes down a real investigation. We need to delve into how the mind works—some psychology and epistemology—in order to understand a seemingly pathological view of nature.

It is typical of Blue-State urbanites and college-educated liberals to feel quite superior to the superstitions of Red-State Bible thumpers. My own students in Chicago chuckle with ironic dismissal about the Creation Museum. But now it gets interesting. My students believe in ghosts.

It’s not just a few students, or an odd cohort, that believe in ghosts. It’s a vast majority. Over the last decade, I have informally polled my students and discovered that around 80 percent of them believe in ghosts. I suspect that most other American college students also believe in ghosts, but their college professors have had no pressing reason to ask them. The topic doesn’t come up in geology, or economics, or math classes. I have occasion

to ask them because I teach critical thinking and philosophy, and I ask them a whole battery of bizarre questions.

If you are surprised to find such a high number of ghost believers, you might be alarmed to discover that almost half my students also believe in astrology, and around one-third believe a variety of conspiracies, including alien cover-ups, the intentional murder of Princess Di, the man-made origin of AIDS, and the U.S. government's secret role in hatching the 9/11 events. Interestingly, almost none of them believe that global warming is a hoax. This last volte-face piece of sober conviction might seem like a rare triumph of logic and evidence, but it seems to stem more from their being urban liberals than from scientific literacy.

Much has been made recently of the nonreligious nature of the Millennials, given that they self-identify as “unaffiliated” when polls ask them about religion. They are indeed disaffected about organized institutional religion, but we would be mistaken if we read this as an Enlightenment style triumph of scientific literacy. They are as devoted to mysticism, supernaturalism, pseudoscience, and conspiracy as Generation X and Baby Boomers, perhaps more so. Their postmodern childhoods have made the lines of belief and doubt unpredictable and idiosyncratic, but not more rational. They are not better thinkers, in the sense of evaluating evidence.

Several of my students laughed and mocked the ludicrous beliefs of creationists, but presented their ghost and alien beliefs with implacable gravitas. And the same ones who think the idea of heaven and hell is ridiculous, see karma and reincarnation as manifestly obvious. This haphazard mix of credulity and skepticism is not a result of critical thinking or systematic investigation, or anything educators promote as legitimate justification for belief. It's just an accidental grab bag of opinions, accumulated by parental influence, the sway of peers, cable television, and the Internet. Of course, most adults, including professors, are victims of the same mental hodgepodge.

No doubt, some naive pedagogues are harrumphing about “evidence and logic”—that's all you need to sort good thinking from bad! This is the sort of person who hasn't studied much history of science. When you look at the development of good thinking (like a good scientific theory), it only looks more logical and evidenced after decades of hindsight. Additionally, consider how informed and educated many of the conspiracy theorists are. They're not suffering from backwoods myopia. The 9/11 deniers know more about engineering than most people, and there are now over 2,000 architects and engineers (AE9/11Truth) who have signed a petition for an independent investigation of the towers collapse. I point this out, not because I think they're right, but because the “obviousness” of evidence is

never very obvious. One can always interpret data in multiple ways. And for every expert witness in a legal case, the opposition can always find a counter expert. Also, life is short, and no one can crosscheck and fact-check everything coming at us, even if the crosschecking is reliable. This is a fundamental challenge for all critical thinking, because there does not appear to be any algorithm for churning out believable facts from a contentious tide of “evidence.”

The traditional criteria used to distinguish good thinking from bad include things like Karl Popper’s criterion of “falsifiability” and William of Occam’s “Occam’s Razor.” The simple-minded rationalist suggests that competing explanatory claims (such as creationism and evolution) are easily resolved—creationism is usually dismissed on the grounds that its claims cannot be falsified (evidence cannot prove or disprove its natural theology beliefs). Popper’s criterion of “falsifiability” seems, at first blush, like a good one—it nicely rules out the spooky claims of pseudoscientists and snake oil salesmen. It’s probably enough to rule out creationism and ghosts. Or is it?

Philosopher Larry Laudan thinks we’ve failed to give credible criteria for demarcating science from pseudoscience. Even falsifiability, the benchmark for positivist science, rules *out* many of the legitimate theoretical claims of cutting-edge physics (e.g., string theory) and rules *in* many wacky claims, such as astrology—if the proponents are clever about which observations corroborate their predictions. Moreover, historians of science since Thomas Kuhn have pointed out that legitimate science rarely abandons a theory the moment falsifying observations come in—preferring instead (sometimes for decades) to chalk up counterevidence to experimental error. Philosopher Paul Feyerabend even gave up altogether on a so-called scientific method, arguing that science is not a special technique for producing truth but a flawed species of regular human reasoning (loaded with error, bias, and rhetorical persuasion). And finally, increased rationality in one domain doesn’t always decrease credulity in other domains. We like to think that a rigorous application of logic will eliminate kooky ideas. But let’s not forget Arthur Conan Doyle, who was well versed with induction and deduction, and yet also believed that a pharaoh’s curse may have caused the death of Lord Carnarvon, the patron of the Tutankhamun expedition.²

None of this is designed to suggest the reasonableness of creationism per se. Compare creationism for a moment with another controversial contender for scientific status, namely Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The possibility that TCM may turn out to be true hinges on the possibility that current Western medicine fails to explain x (say, “frozen shoulder” or some other ailment) but TCM succeeds in explaining and fixing x . Let’s

say I get frozen shoulder, and Western doctors can't figure out the casual matrix and can't seem to treat it, but the acupuncturist has a *qi* theory and a treatment that fixes my shoulder. That might happen. This is not the situation with creationism and evolution.

Evolution has been providing superior explanations (testable) for most natural history data for a century and a half (e.g., the fossil record, anatomical homology, genetics, immunology), while creationism has not shown a track record or even a promise of explaining an “x” that evolution cannot explain. On these grounds, TCM—while contentious—looks like a much better contender for believability than creationism or ghosts. On the other hand, for Ken Ham and like minds, God is the most fruitful and capacious explanatory strategy because He explains not only the fossil record and genetics, but also geology, historical change, and even moral truth. God's will potentially explains everything. What creationism lacks in empirical falsifiability, it makes up for in its ability to unify disparate domains of explanation under one umbrella of ultimate causation. Is that a virtue or a vice? Here the problem with creationist explanation is that it seems unlikely to help us make predictions about nature. God's will doesn't help us predict the weather. But, then again, evolution is also better at explaining the *history* of life than at making useful *predictions* about the future.

One way radical religious beliefs might be explained (e.g., the cosmos is 6,000 years old) is via a poverty of information. Maybe the religious fundamentalist is not getting the quantity or quality of information needed, and is making the best belief commitment she can, given the available info. The remedy for this, presumably, is to give the fundamentalist better information. And this makes sense when the believer is socially, geographically, or culturally isolated. But two problems arise immediately. First, there are many cases in which the relevant information is introduced and patiently explained (e.g., Bill Nye detailing the science of evolution to Ken Ham in a debate), and the person remains unmoved and does not revise his beliefs. And secondly, many believers in ghosts, or gods, or conspiracies, have extensive access to copious information (via the Internet, urban resources, media, etc.) and yet hold firm to radical beliefs. Remember that some of the 9/11 conspiracy proponents are engineers and architects. And my Chicago students, for example, live in an information-rich environment, yet still readily believe in ghosts and conspiracies.

The issue, as I see it, is not the quantity of information but how the person uses or weighs the information. This is not a simple story of how a person deduces (well or badly) from premises or starting points. This explains some issues, like when Ken Ham reasons (quite sensibly) about how to fit dinosaurs on the ark. But starting points or first premises—for all of us,

not just Ken Ham—are already bound up in a messy amalgam of mutually reinforcing assumptions, values, articles of faith, emotions, and so on.

The general failures of finding an unambiguous set of criteria for distinguishing sense from nonsense has led some philosophers to shift from the pursuit of criteria to the pursuit of psychology. If there are no clear rules to settle the good thinking question, then are there good habits of mind? Are creationists sloppy thinkers in general? What about ghost believers? Are secular humanists tidy or orderly thinkers? Or are they unimaginative?

Intellectual vices include things like being overly rigid in one's thinking, gullibility, prejudice, carelessness, and so on. Just as there are moral virtues (such as courage or temperance), there are intellectual virtues, including things like mental flexibility, moderate skepticism, carefulness, attention focus, and so on.

When a person doggedly commits to conspiracies, ghosts, or young earth creationism, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, they may be revealing a poor intellectual character. But this is not some inborn character; rather, it flows from habitual practice, or lack of practice. On this account, the creationist belief in “ark science” is not about a specific data point, or information gap, or deduction error, but about a flabby intellectual character. The way we handle knowledge is the result of habit. Additionally, our beliefs never stand alone, but have a holistic integration with many other beliefs and feelings.

Someone believes x presumably because they have reasons for believing it. If I ask Ken Ham why he believes that dinosaurs were on the ark, he gives me reasons why—a combination of logic and evidence that, at least in his own mind, justifies the belief. But stand-alone reasons are a myth, and our inner world is not so simple. Trying to reason a believer out of their belief is not very successful, as any specific reason must come up against a whole network of intertwining beliefs, where some of them are quite deep and existential in nature. A creationist, for example, believes x in part because his mother, whom he loves, believes in x . This is not irrelevant. Your critique of x is also, in his mind, a critique of his mother. We could divorce the logic of creationism or evolution from the psychology of its proponents, but that won't help us understand each other. And it won't help us understand how knowledge really works.

Imagine the mind as a collection of complex “pictures” or paintings, rather than as a computer. A picture is a composition of various forms and patterns. Sometimes the forms are related to one another in a concordant way, sometimes not. Sometimes small parts of the overall composition seem to coordinate well, while other parts hang together in a haphazard way. The individual human mind and life are like this. The gestalt composition of our

ideas, emotions, beliefs, background assumptions, and experiences cannot be completely sifted into two realms of facts and values.

At bottom, Ken Ham and I have two very different pictures that govern our lives. In my picture, I can't get the random mutation pattern to coordinate with an all-good God pattern. The combination clashes too much for me, but Ham can pull it off. This difference has to do, in large part, with what other forms or patterns (i.e., ideas, experiences, or emotions) these two beliefs are attached to or mixed with. Isolating one feature of Ham's picture, or my picture, and showing all the ways it doesn't make sense, can be legitimate and fair in some cases, but it also fails to recognize how that feature is connected to other important ways of living and being in the world. The belief in a nonrandom nature is connected in an important way, for Ham, to a feeling or attitude of gratefulness or a general appreciation of life itself. Whereas, my feelings of appreciation and existential gratitude are connected to completely different parts of my picture. One's organizing picture structures the way one thinks, imagines, and behaves. And while that picture might include a very large section that is given over to a pattern called logic, we should not be so naive as to think that the picture itself is constructed on the foundation of logic.

When the believer in randomness and the believer in design go head to head, they bring with them their respective pictures. If ontological beliefs existed in an isolated way within people's minds, then straightforward refutations would work; people would hold up their belief to specific tests, see that a specific belief doesn't accord, and happily discard it. But because the belief is tied to so many other things, some of which may be very precious commitments, people will hold fast to the belief and reinterpret the tests instead. This happens as much in the sciences as it does in the religions.

One of the positive outcomes of this metaphor, of human organizing pictures, is that people who disagree with you cannot be easily dismissed as either stupid or deceptive. Some deep disagreements between people may have more to do with the picture contexts, than the isolated terms under discussion. Does this mean that there is no shared vantage point from which to critique each other's beliefs or even pictures? Are Ken Ham and I simply two ships passing in the night; two incommensurable pictures? No.

Two things are clear about the pictures that organize our respective lives: they are revisable, and they have many features in common with other people's pictures. Although our core picture of life is built up by gradual accretion and is slow to change, it is not immovable. New experiences, persuasion, and logic are always tinkering with our picture. Secondly, our common humanity gives us very similar raw materials for our pictures (needs, wants, hopes, etc.), and this allows each of us to gain some entry

into another person's mode of life. My picture and Ken Ham's picture are deeply rooted things, but they are not unchangeable, and they are not totally incommensurable.

So, the question of "Who's right?" comes down to the issue of what's at stake. If Ham and I are having a lively debate over coffee somewhere, and he's advocating for design and creationism and I'm championing randomness and Darwin, then there's probably not much at stake. If we both walk away from our exchange with unchanged pictures, then it's no big deal. But if Ham is lobbying the local school board to censor the parts of biology textbooks that discuss random mutation, then I'm going to work very hard to block his move and get him to revise his picture. Much more is at stake in this second scenario.

On this picture theory of the mind, we can see that habituation is a crucial aspect. We do sometimes come to reject an old belief and adopt a new one. That's the good news. But the bad news, for the rationalist, is that such change is usually the result of new habituation (fresh habit patterns), not enlightening flashes of insight or computational crunching. The good news is in the realm of pragmatism—you can, with great effort, get an antisocial or antinomian group of believers to change their views by retraining them (habituation via carrots and sticks), but not by some simple exposure to "the truth." This suggests an unsettling dominance of rhetoric over truth. If you want to convert creationists to evolutionists, then you should make it "cool" or "profitable" to be an evolutionist, rather than comparing their competing theories. Of course, this cuts both ways, and also explains why evolutionists—like my Chicago students—believe in evolution, despite not really studying it much or knowing it explicitly. What they believe, I suspect, is that Bill Nye is cool, and Ken Ham and the other Bible thumpers are decidedly not cool. Moreover, ghosts and reincarnation are cool for them, when skepticism about such fun stuff is really killjoy. I'm not sure we can give them credit for accidentally agreeing with evolution theory.

I conclude from all this that creationists are not stupid or crazy, nor do they have flabby intellectual characters. Instead, our mental lives contain complex pictures that connect some beliefs with powerful emotions, and idiosyncratic personal (and cultural) histories. This picture theory explains why some people are deeply attached to some beliefs that have no evidence or even significant counterevidence. And it explains how our mental lives can be very compartmentalized. I can have very tight reasoning in one domain and very sloppy reasoning in another, depending on the mixed-in or interconnecting biases. Perhaps habitual cultivation of intellectual virtues has to happen piecemeal, in different domains, but it's not clear that all domains are influenced by some generic intellectual character.

REHEARSING TO BELIEVE

The critic of religion is always horrified by the idea that I can will myself to believe something, and I can accept an idea because it makes me feel good, or comforts me, or otherwise improves my psyche. It looks like cowardice to the brave secularist whose courage, he tells himself, steels him to sustain doubt until all the facts are in. The disdainful skeptic (not all skeptics are of this variety) sees himself entirely motivated by the unbiased search for truth, but there is a hidden affective or emotional component to this ascetic approach.

As William James pointed out, the skeptic has an emotional center, despite himself. According to James, “he who says, ‘Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!’ merely shows his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe. He may be critical of many of his desires and fears, but this fear he slavishly obeys.”³ He fears, more than anything, the possibility of being fooled, and he gambles that he would rather be inconsolable and suffer the pains of doubt, than become a boob. This withholding of belief is insurance against the final discovery that there is no God after all, or soul, or afterlife. The skeptic is afraid of humiliation, whereas the believer is ready to risk such humiliation. I hasten to add that such humiliation or vindication is a mental invention, given that the skeptic is proved right and vindicated only by being scattered into nothingness after his death—an event he cannot enjoy or lord over his duped colleagues.

Now the defense I am mounting of the believer is not just an appreciation of positive thinking, or a personality type. Instead, I want to suggest an important insight about the nature of knowledge. The ideal function of knowledge, for the secularist, is to ascertain the best possible description of nature. Among contenders like creationism or evolution, for example, the secularist thinks about knowledge as the accurate description of how nature works, and in this case, it is Darwin’s natural selection. Of course this is correct, and I myself have spilt significant ink promoting the Darwinian description of nature. Its description of the world is right. But notice something important. For most human beings, the purpose of knowledge is not to describe the world, but to help them navigate it. From Joe Six-Pack to the scientist (when he’s not explicitly “sciencing”), what most of us need are beliefs that help us *act* in the world, not *describe* it.

The secularist will protest that he has the correct model of the world and this helps him make accurate predications about nature, so it is useful and helpful in navigating the world. But is this really the case? In my classroom, I use Darwinian natural selection on a regular basis to describe the way birds’ wings evolved, or the way human skin color developed as

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an adaptation to environment, but I can't remember the last time I used natural selection to help me navigate a difficult social encounter, or hiking expedition, or real-time animal interaction, or any practical life challenge. I've used it many times to understand nature writ large, and I've used it to browbeat people at cocktail parties, and so on, but I don't need it much in the world of daily struggle. I submit that this fact is as true for Richard Dawkins as it is for me.

This isolates the key point about knowledge. It appears to have two different aspects, an indicative function and the imperative function. The mind itself has two mental pathways—dorsal and ventral, cold and hot, indicative and imperative. To appreciate the interwoven pathways of mind, consider briefly an experience like fear of a predator—part cognitive and part emotional. The emotion/cognition complex in predator fear is a two-faced experience, partly *imperative* (e.g., I should run away) and partly *indicative* (e.g., that creature is a snake). According to some philosophers, this two-faced representation is strongly coupled together in lower animals—mice, for example, simultaneously recognize cats as a kind of thing (in a category) *and* as dangerous (fear affect).⁴ A gazelle sees a cheetah as a specific kind of thing (i.e., not a crocodile, not a giraffe, etc.) but also as a fast approaching threat (imperative). Humans, on the other hand, can decouple these two pathways (indicative and imperative) and fear can be reattached to alternative kinds of creatures or perceptions.⁵ Sometimes the indicative face of “crocodile,” for example, can be so mentally decoupled from fear and active response, that we can simply study it in a cool unemotional way. This is the foundation of science.

Psychologists refer to these cognitive pathways, imperative and indicative, as “hot” and “cold” cognition, respectfully. Let's adopt this helpful language to capture the distinction I'm drawing. Knowledge that describes the world, and endeavors to describe it with increasing accuracy (science), is processed as cold cognition. It is slow, careful, reflective, deliberative, logical, and based in language and abstraction. Hot cognition, on the other hand, is fast, emotional, embodied, and more habitual than reflective.

The distinction I'm drawing between kinds of knowledge and belief is one we already recognize in other domains. Compare, for example, the way a good violin player uses musical knowledge. Her goal is not to describe the world. As she performs a piece of music, her beliefs and her habits of thought are enlisted for the imperative action of performing. Her beliefs and her habits of mind (and muscle memory) are adaptive, in the sense that they fit with the musicians around her and with the musical environment. But there is no meaningful sense in which her descriptive picture of the world is failing or succeeding against competing beliefs.

Now, let's be clear. Some people are indeed *acting on* (and *navigating with*) the correct *descriptions* of nature. They are applying the indicative knowledge to the imperative struggle. When a NASA physicist needs to calculate a launch trajectory, she uses the best description we have of nature, and when an immunologist works on a disease she uses adaptation models from evolution. That is not disputed. But you and I, and even these scientists, leave the office and reenter the fast spinning world of real-time problem solving and do not have the luxury of describing nature. Beliefs in that fast-spinning world are for something else, namely, survival.

I have no interest in defending the Creation Museum here. The problem with the Creation Museum, and creationism generally, is that creationists have made the error from the other side. They are trying to justify their imperative beliefs on the grounds of an alternative indicative description of the world (an Iron Age description). Why do some believers bother to do this? Many mainstream Christians, for example, are comfortable with imperative beliefs (e.g., moral norms, values) needing no validation in the indicative description of nature. Most moderate religious people accept some version of Galileo's famous division of labor: "The intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how heaven goes."⁶ Ironically, the creationist, and fundamentalist generally, has accepted the dominance of the indicative model of knowledge (which describes facts). Fundamentalists unknowingly embrace the logic that norms and values (imperative beliefs) must be built upon a description of the world (indicative beliefs). In that doomed project, creationists and atheists share the mistaken assumption that an accurate description of the world will unroll the rules of moral and social behavior.

I want to propose that it's the other way around. The imperative hot cognition approach to life is very ancient, predating the rise of language, logic, and even the expanded neocortex. It's how animals get around in the world. It's the limbic life of gut feelings, and rapid responses, helping us detect quickly who is a friend, an enemy, a sexual partner, and subtler social relations, such as who is a good hunter, who is reliable, who owes me, and how I should treat this approaching person right now.

In this imperative world, memories, instincts, and emotional systems guide me, not logic or science. Eventually, of course, we evolved language and developed symbol-based ways of navigating the world. But generally speaking, the symbols that rule this imperative world of action are *stories* and *images*, not the later descriptive language of science. Stories and images don't just describe the world, they inspire action in the world. They push our emotions in specific directions. They motivate us, rather than

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just label, organize, and model the world. From this perspective, a factual description of the world comes after the hot cognition interaction with the social world. Or at least they are parallel tracks of knowledge.

William James (1879) goes even further and argues that even our scientific concepts and descriptions only make sense in the context of our very human purposes and needs. Even a *concept* only has essential or defining properties in light of the goals or purposes we are pursuing. “What now is a *conception*? It is a *teleological instrument*. It is a partial aspect of a thing which *for our purpose* we regard as its essential aspect, as the representative of the entire thing.” “But,” he continues, “the essence, the ground of conception, varies with the end we have in view. A substance like oil has as many different essences as it has uses to different individuals. One man conceives it as a combustible, another as a lubricator, another as a food; the chemist thinks of it as a hydro-carbon; the furniture maker as a darkener of wood . . .” (p. 319).⁷ And following this logic, history also admits of alternative conceptions. For the believer, whose purpose is relating to God, history is a record of the Deity’s plan, while for the skeptic, history is a sequence of events, with causal connections but not destiny.

The religious person is living more in the imperative world than in the indicative one. We are all living in both worlds, but we tend to spend more time in one rather than the other. For the fundamentalist the world is a drama first and a material system second. Their world already is populated with good guys and bad guys, fates, destinies, sacred missions, and other literary and mythic aspects. For the secularist, the indicative mode is more dominant, and the material system of impersonal laws is primary. Norms, values, and the imperative life generally should follow the contours of the objective description.

The irony I mentioned above is clearer. Moderate religious people are happy to treat their imperative knowledge as a fundamental reality—needing no further foundation but faith, or social experience, or emotional validation. The average Christian, for example, doesn’t need the Moses story of Ten Commandments to be true in order to believe strongly in the value of telling the truth. But fundamentalists have incorrectly accepted the modern secular framework (despite their best intentions) by insisting on the objective “truth” of their Iron-Age description of the world. They betray their anxiety about their imperative beliefs by trying to tether them to the indicative world. It’s a bad strategy twice over. First, the Iron-Age description of the world can’t hold water in our era of upgraded description. And secondly, imperative beliefs about ethics and values don’t even need scientific or indicative validation.⁸ Their validation comes from the complex world of social emotions, but more on that later.

In many aspects of life we want to avoid make-believe scenarios because they smack of intellectual cowardice, but in some aspects we actively cultivate the primordial imagination. There's no reason why this has to be consistent—only the secular mind craves law-like consistency anyway.

An important feature of grown-up pretending is that it can bring about the real thing. In some cases, imagining and pretending may be the only way to realize an actual change in the world. Stanford anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann has separately studied the rich counterfactual lives of evangelical Christians and schizophrenics. The usual barrier between the counterfactual and factual world, which most of us maintain with ease, is not as robust or distinct in some people. When the counterfactual second universe bleeds too far into the factual world, we recognize pathologies like schizophrenia. But otherwise healthy minds also will voluntarily cultivate a breakdown of the barrier, in service of religious insight.

God has no face, no obvious form, no clear and unambiguous voice. When you pray, Professor Luhrmann points out, “you cannot look him in the eye, and judge that he hears you back.”⁹ This is a perennial problem for the believer, according to Luhrmann, but there is an imaginative remedy. For one thing, believers engage in a process of imagining that their dominant ideas, mental events, and feelings are coming from God directly, rather than just their own associational mind. This requires the believer to pick out dominant thoughts from the stream of mental events during reflection and prayer, and it also requires the believer to assign God as the agent responsible for those mental events. Both these requirements get easier with practice and cultivation. Luhrmann discovered that many evangelical women practice this process by doing imaginary “dates” and other “couples” activities, all the while in a virtual “conversation” with Jesus—their imaginary companion. Moreover, following a point made by Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, Luhrmann finds that many evangelicals “pretend” or imagine themselves to be Christ (or Christ-like) as they interact with people throughout the day.

I'm not sure that we can *choose* to believe things in a straightforward manner, nor am I sure this is an advisable path toward intellectual virtue. But this example of habituation (e.g., talking to Jesus) reveals how an initially counterfactual belief can be slowly normalized and added to one's cognitive/emotional picture of the world. Even some of our more respectable and seemingly justified beliefs may be the result of brute habituation, rather than investigation, logic, and method (e.g., my Chicago students who are habituated to evolution). But one thing is clear—pretending you are Christ (or Buddha, or Martin Luther King, Jr.) can transform the world of action and policy.

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If I pretend that I am a dog, I do not eventually become a dog. If I pretend that the world is only 6,000 years old, nothing changes in the structure of the universe. But if I pretend that I am good for long enough, I actually become good. Also, if I pretend that we are friends in the early days of our acquaintance, then slowly we become friends—not solely by an act of imagination, but by the activities that such pretending galvanizes. In the dramatic imperative world (which is primary in the religious person and secondary in the secular), imaginative habituation is transformative. It helps people survive tragedies, motivate action, and dance through complex social experiences.

Lastly, we need to briefly acknowledge a specific emotional nexus that nourishes and is nourished by being a marginal community. Creationists, conspiracy theorists, ghost believers, and more serious groups like jihadi fundamentalists share an emotional life. The pleasures of being a rebel, which were once the provenance of atheists, have now become the bread-and-butter of religious subcultures. Conspiracy and creationism give believers a great emotional sense of being elite cognoscenti, in a world of misguided sheep (and/or infidels). Moreover, it feels uniquely good to be right, in the face of tempting alternatives, and it activates the emotions of pride and resolution to wake up every day and resist. Feelings of outrage, aggression, vanity, as well as positive effects of gratitude, generosity, vitality, and so on, crystallize around the eccentric size of the group. We'll have more to say on these and other emotions in the coming chapters.