

Believers in God didn't start out that way

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Are you a born atheist? Whether or not you consider yourself to be an atheist, the correct answer is probably “Yes.” That is, whether you now believe in God or you presently do not believe in God, it is likely that you were born an atheist. Here I am using Webster’s New World Dictionary definition of an atheist as “someone who does not believe in God.” In computer terminology, one could say that the *default* position regarding belief in God is that newborn babies are non-believers or atheists.

Having stated this initial position, I should hasten to add that while we are born atheists, we are easily programmed to use readily accessible brain functions which are available to receive many different theistic views. In the words of Robert Buckman in his book, *Can We Be Good Without God?*, it seems true that in a certain sense we are “hard-wired” for interpreting the world in religious terms. Unless we are particularly skeptical, our brains can be easily programmed to believe in many gods or in many views of one God.

In Charles Taylor’s large tome, *A Secular Age*, Taylor is convinced that humans are searching for answers beyond their immediate grasp. Putting this idea in different words, we can say that people reach out into unknown and unknowable territory. We seek answers that go well beyond certainty and evidence. For Taylor, this search for certainty appears to be not only inevitable, but it is also a desirable part of the human condition. I might add that it is not only part of the human condition, but part of human “conditioning.”

Whether we accept Buckman’s view or Taylor’s, either position offers some answers as to why so many different religions exist. A quick search on Google indicates that counting both the larger religions and the smaller ones, which some people regard as cults rather than full-blown religions, there are approximately four thousand three hundred religions at the present time. Why are there so many? Such a plethora of religions exists partly because of the nature of religions. For the most part, religious believers rely heavily on faith and are not bothered by the lack of evidence to support their views. Such an approach allows religions to exist and co-exist even in the face of many contrary views regarding their own religions or other people’s religious beliefs. This reliance on faith also allows for many contradictory opinions within each denomination.

Like many humanists, I have been involved from time to time in debates about whether or not a loving God actually exists and whether the theory of evolution is well-supported by scientific evidence. I am often struck by the irony that my opponents require so little evidence to bolster their position. On the other hand, the same opponents are persistent in their demands for evidence from me wherever they perceive a possible “gap” in the theory of evolution. I wish my debating opponents would be equally concerned about the lack of evidence for God or for the lack of evidence for an afterlife. It is difficult to maintain a rational discussion when my opponent uses “the power of faith” as a substitute for evidence.

Imagine for a few moments that an intelligent young woman (or man) in her or his early twenties has grown up in a society and culture where the idea of God has never been mentioned in her relatively short life. This young person has not been exposed to religion and she sets her moral compass in such a manner as to follow the customs of the society in which she was raised. At the age of twenty this same woman travels to a university somewhere in the Western world to begin to study how things are done outside her own society. On the first day of classes she encounters a seemingly friendly Christian who asks her if she has been saved. Her new found friend tells her that she needs to accept Jesus in order to have everlasting life where she will be able to enjoy living eternally with the creator God and with Jesus his son. The young woman is understandingly a bit confused and skeptical about what she has just been told. She asks for more information about Jesus. In order to convince her, the Christian acquaintance is delighted to fill her in and begins by explaining that Jesus was born of a virgin. Jesus was able to turn water into wine, he calmed the stormy seas, and then was able to walk on the water. On some occasions Jesus was able to bring people who were dead back to life as he did on the occasion of his own death as well as that of others. Jesus was also able to heal people who were sick although he was rather selective in using this special miraculous power He restored sight to the blind. On another occasion Jesus fed multitudes of people by distributing a few loaves and a couple of fish which were sufficient to feed thousands of hungry people. The young woman is assured that nothing special is required of her even though she is told that she was born in sin. All she needs to do is believe what she has been told and she will be given the gift of everlasting life. She cannot bring herself, however, to believe all that she has just been told. It is all too mysterious and has been presented to her so abruptly that it seems incredible.

Herein lies an important lesson for Christian proselytizers. If they wish to be successful in converting others to Christianity they will need to begin much earlier. It will be crucial that they must spread the stories of Jesus to very young children who have not yet acquired the skills of critical thought. In fact, if they are to be successful in converting others, their task will be much easier if they can find children who attend private Christian schools, where the stories of Jesus can be repeated often at a young age. It is Christians who believe that children are born atheists and that's the way they will grow up unless considerable effort is made to change what is natural to them. Ironically, it is among such enthusiastic Christians that one finds support for the idea that we are all born atheists.