

A Thoughtful Humanist Responds

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In his column *Questions for thoughtful atheists* (Feb. 9), Bruce Tallman posed some good questions for thoughtful atheists. I'm responding as both an atheist and a Humanist.

If there is no God, why is evolution heading in an increasingly spiritual direction?

Looking back, it's tempting to think that we humans were the ultimate goal of evolution right from the start. However, scientists who have carefully studied the evolutionary record, including Catholic biologist Kenneth Miller (in *Finding Darwin's God*), note that there is no evidence of any direction or guiding hand in the process. Our species is just one small twig on a vast, multi-branched bush of life. The vast majority of branches on this bush have reached dead ends. As a Humanist, I stand in awe of the amazing process that has produced me, but I see no evidence for a divine energy at work.

Why have officially atheist states always engaged in mass slaughter? Any totalitarian state based on an absolutist ideology will commit atrocities, whether it espouses atheism or claims divine authority. We can argue about which is worse, but millions of people suffer either way. We must all work together to promote respect for human rights, democracy, and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Why has science not solved all our problems? Humanists view the scientific method as the most reliable means we have of attaining an accurate understanding of the world. However, there's no guarantee that humans, whether religious or atheist, won't use the discoveries of science to make a mess of things. Science needs to be coupled with ethical values.

Why is religion not disappearing? Humans seem to have a need to believe in something bigger than themselves in order to make sense of things and gain a feeling of security, whether it's scientology, Mormonism, or the worship of Prince Philip on a South Pacific island. Throughout human history, shared religious beliefs have bonded people into mutually supportive groups, increasing their chances of survival and reproduction. The fact that a propensity for religion is deeply entrenched in the human psyche does not make religious beliefs true; it only shows that they have evolutionary survival value. For those of us who are no longer able to sustain these sorts of beliefs, the challenge is to find ways of building caring, supportive communities free of delusion and superstition.

Why do atheists attack only fundamentalists? I for one am happy to dialogue with religious believers of all stripes. Scientific discoveries over the past four centuries have

made it increasingly difficult for thinking people to maintain traditional conceptions of God. Fundamentalists have responded by denying certain scientific facts, such as evolution, to retain biblical orthodoxy. Other, more liberal believers try to reconcile their faith with science by changing the traditional view of God into an amorphous, impersonal divine essence that mysteriously permeates nature. This approach tends to produce much fuzzy thinking, both scientifically and theologically. I empathize with those who take this approach, but I find it intellectually unsatisfying.

If there is no God, why is life foundationally good? Let's not forget "nature red in tooth and claw." I'd say life is fascinating, amazing, and wonderful, but not inherently good.

If there is no God, why is love the central thing in life? Humans are a social animal. We evolved in small groups whose members relied on one another for support, while warring with competing tribes. We give birth to helpless offspring that need several years of nurturance and protection from parents whose pair bonding helps increase their chance of survival. Love, compassion, loyalty, generosity, and cooperation are as much a part of human nature as envy, hatred, selfishness, and xenophobia. Religious believers have a profound fear that, without faith in God, humans would be brutish and vile, and life would be meaningless and empty. I empathize with this fear, but I'm glad to say it's a fallacy.

Why does everyone long for absolute love, peace and joy ... that is, God? You may call it God if you wish, but it can be explained by evolution. As a Humanist, my hope is that we can put aside our prejudices and come together in mutual respect, regardless of our religious beliefs or lack thereof, to work towards a world in which love, joy, and peace become the norm.

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