

A guide to finding faith

In the modern era, there are reasons to find the idea of God more plausible than ever.

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“If appreciating some of the ideas in St. Augustine’s ‘Confessions’ was enough to make you a Christian,” a friend said to me some years ago, “then I’d be a Christian. But a personal God? The miracles? I can’t get there yet.”

Whenever I write about the decline of organized religion in America, I get a lot of emails expressing some version of this sentiment. Sometimes it’s couched in the form of regretful unbelief: *I’d happily go back to church, except for one small detail — we all know there is no God.* Sometimes it’s a friendly challenge: *OK, smart guy, what should I read to convince me that you’re right about the sky fairy?*

So this is an essay for those readers — a suggested blueprint for thinking your way into religious belief.

But maybe not the blueprint you expect.

Many highly educated people who hover on the doorway of a church or synagogue are like my Augustine-reading friend. They relate to religion on a communal or philosophical level. They want to pass on a clear ethical inheritance to their children. They find certain God-haunted writers interesting or inspiring, and the biblical cadences of the civil rights era more moving than secular defenses of equality or liberty.

Yet they struggle to make the leap of faith, to reach a state where the supernatural parts become believable and the grace to accept the impossible is bestowed.

For some, this struggle just leads back to unbelief. For others, it can be a spur to act *as if* they believe, to pray and practice, to sing the hymns or keep kosher and wait for God to grant them faith in full. This is often the advice they get from religious friends: Treat piety as an act of the will undertaken in defiance of the reasoning faculties, and see what happens next.

I’ve given that advice myself. But there’s another way to approach religious belief, harder in some respects but simpler in others. Instead of starting by praying or practicing in defiance of the intellect, you could start by questioning the assumption that it’s really so difficult, so impossible, to credit ideas of God and accounts of supernatural happenings.

The “new atheist” philosopher Daniel Dennett once wrote a book called “Breaking the Spell,” whose title implies that religious faith prevents believers from seeing the world clearly. But what if atheism is actually the prejudice held against the evidence?

In that case, the title of Dennett’s book is actually a good way to describe the materialist defaults in secular culture. They’re like a spell that’s been cast over modern minds, and the fastest way to become religious is to break it.

So let's try. Imagine yourself back in time, to an era — ancient, medieval, pre-Darwin — when you think it made sense for an intelligent person to believe in God. Now consider why your historical self might have been religious: not because “the world is flat” or “Genesis is an excellent biology textbook” (claims you will not find in Augustine), but because religious ideas seemed to provide an explanation for the most important features of reality.

First, the idea that the universe was created with intent, intelligence and even love explained why the world in which you found yourself had the appearance of a created thing: not just orderly, law-bound and filled with complex systems necessary for human life, but also vivid and beautiful and awesome in a way that resembles and yet exceeds the human capacity for art. Second, the idea that human beings are fashioned, in some way, in the image of the universe's creator explained why your own relationship to the world was particularly strange. Your fourth- or 14th-century self was obviously part of nature, an embodied creature with an animal form, and yet your consciousness also seemed to stand outside it, with a peculiar sense of immaterial objectivity, an almost God's-eye view — constantly analyzing, tinkering, appreciating, passing moral judgment.

Finally, the common religious assumption that humans are material creatures connected to a supernatural plane explained why your world contained so many signs of a higher order of reality, the incredible variety of experiences described as “mystical” or “numinous,” unsettling or terrifying, or just really, really weird — ranging from baseline feelings of oneness and universal love to strange happenings at the threshold of death to encounters with beings that human beings might label (gods and demons, ghosts and faeries) but never fully understand.

Got all that? Good. Now consider the possibility that in our own allegedly disenchanted era, after Galileo, Copernicus, Darwin, Einstein — *all of this is still true*.

I do not mean to claim that 500 years of scientific progress have left the world's great religions untouched or unchallenged. The Copernican revolution overthrew a medieval cosmology with a tidier celestial hierarchy than our own. Darwinism created still-unresolved problems for the Christian doctrine of the Fall of Man. Many supernatural-seeming events can now be given purely material explanations. And the modern experience of globalization has had an inevitable relativizing effect, downgrading confidence in any one faith's exclusive claims to truth.

But there are also important ways in which the progress of science and the experience of modernity have strengthened the reasons to entertain the idea of God.

The great project of modern physics, for instance, has led to speculation about a multiverse in part because it has repeatedly confirmed the strange fittedness of our universe to human life. If science has discredited certain specific ideas about how God structured the natural world, it has also made the mathematical beauty of physical laws, as well as their seeming calibration for the emergence of life, much clearer to us than they were to people 500 years ago.

Similarly, the remarkable advances of neuroscience have only sharpened the “hard problem” of consciousness: the difficulty of figuring out how physical processes alone could create the lived reality of conscious life, from the simple experience of color to the complexities of reasoned thought. So notable is the failure to discover consciousness in our dissected tissue that certain materialists, like Dennett, have fastened onto the idea that both conscious experience and selfhood must be essentially illusions. Thus the self that we identify as “Daniel Dennett” doesn't actually exist, even though that same illusory self has somehow figured out the true nature of reality.

This idea, no less than the belief in a multiverse of infinite realities, requires a leap of faith. Both seem less parsimonious, less immediately reasonable, than a traditional religious assumption that mind precedes matter, as the mind of God precedes the universe — that the precise calibrations of physical reality and the irreducibility of personal experience are proof that consciousness came first.

In fact, the very notion of scientific progress — our long track record of successful efforts to understand the material world — doubles as evidence that our minds have something in common with whatever mind designed the universe. As much as religious believers (and nonbelievers) worry about the confidence with which our modern technologists play God, the fact that humans *can* play God at all is pretty strange — and a better reason to think of ourselves as made in a divine image than the medievals ever knew.

I think there is some confusion on this last point among scientists. Because their discipline advances by assuming that consistent laws rather than miracles explain most features of reality, they regard the process through which the universe gets explained and understood as perpetually diminishing the importance of the God hypothesis.

But the God hypothesis is constantly *vindicated* by the comprehensibility of the universe, and the capacity of our reason to unlock its many secrets. Indeed, there's a quietly theistic assumption to the whole scientific project. As David Bentley Hart puts it in his book "The Experience of God," "We assume that the human mind can be a true mirror of objective reality because we assume that objective reality is already a mirror of mind."

The resilience of religious theories is matched by the resilience of religious experience. The disenchantment of the modern world is a myth of the intelligentsia: In reality it never happened. Instead, through the whole multicentury process of secularization, the decline of religion's political power and cultural prestige, people kept right on having near-death experiences and demonic visitations and wild divine encounters. They just lost the religious structures through which those experiences used to be interpreted.

Read the British novelist Paul Kingsnorth's recent account of his pilgrimage from unbelief through Zen Buddhism and Wicca to Christianity, and you will find a story of mysterious happenings that would fit neatly into the late Roman world in which Christianity first took shape. (Except back then he would have probably been a Platonist rather than a Buddhist.) Or read Barbara Ehrenreich's "Living With a Wild God," a memoir by an inveterate skeptic of organized religion, which describes mystical experiences that came to her unbidden, with a biblical mix of awe, terror and mystery.

"It was a furious encounter with a living substance that was coming at me through all things at once," Ehrenreich writes. "One reason for the terrible wordlessness of the experience is that you cannot observe fire really closely without becoming part of it."

So the bolt from the blue still falls on nonbelievers as well as on believers. The nonbeliever is just more likely to be baffled by what it all might mean, or more resistant, as Ehrenreich remains, to the claim that it should point toward any particular religion's idea of God.

Likewise with experiences that seem like hauntings and possessions, psychic or premonitory events, or brushes with the strange "tricksters" that used to be read as faeries and now get interpreted, in the light of science fiction and the space age, as extraterrestrials. In the 21st century, as in the 19th or the 14th, they just keep on happening, frequently enough that even the intelligentsia can't completely ignore them: You can read about ghosts in The London

Review of Books and Elle magazine; you can find accounts of bizarre psychic phenomena in the pages of The New Yorker.

You could see this resilience in the 19th century when Protestant belief weakened but séances and mediums came rushing in. You can see it today where institutional Catholicism is weakening but the demand for exorcisms is going up. It's something the secular mind now concedes and indeed expects. But if your claim is that religious experience is mostly just misinterpretation, it's a substantial concession to acknowledge that it persists through ages of reason as well as ages of faith, and endures even when cultural and medical and scientific authorities discount or dismiss it.

Similarly, when today's evolutionary theorists go searching for a reason people believe so readily in spiritual powers and nonhuman minds, they are also making a concession to religion's plausibility — because most of our evolved impulses and appetites correspond directly to something in reality itself.

Of course, religion could be the exception: a desire with no real object, a set of experiences with no correlate outside the mind, sustained by a combination of wishful thinking, the desire of mortal creatures to believe in the imperishable and the inevitability of what debunkers of supernatural fraud sometimes call “residua,” the slice of strange events that lie outside our current scope of explanation.

But today, in secular and educated circles, any natural human eagerness to believe coexists with the opposite sort of pressure, to dismiss supernatural experiences lest you appear deluded or disreputable — which in turn leads people to underestimate the scale and scope of that unexplained residua.

Take, as just one example, the case of near-death experiences, which were a culturally submerged phenomenon until Raymond A. Moody started compiling testimony in the late 1960s. After decades of research, we know such experiences are commonplace and surprisingly consistent in certain features — not just the tunnels and bright lights and encounters with dead relatives but also the psychological aftermath, marked by a shift toward greater selflessness, spirituality and cosmic optimism.

Maybe they are all just mental illusion (even if some of their features are not exactly easy for existing models of brain function to explain), the result of some evolutionary advantage to feeling peaceful at the brink of death. But just conceding their persistent existence is noteworthy, given how easy it is to imagine a world where these kinds of experiences didn't happen, where nobody came back from the threshold of death with a life-changing account of light suffused with love or where the experiences of the dying were just a random dreamlike jumble.

In such a world that absence would be a pretty telling point against religion: You say we should expect some sort of spiritual survival after death, but people who come close to the doorway just see Livia Soprano's “big nothing.” But then turnabout is only fair: In this world, where such experiences conspicuously do happen, you have to consider them a point in favor of taking religion seriously.

And if you read widely and with an open mind, I promise — those kinds of points have a way of piling up.

All of which is to say that the world in 2021, no less than the world in 1521 or 321, presents considerable evidence of an originating intelligence presiding over a law-bound world well

made for our minds to understand, and at the same time a panoply of spiritual forces that seem to intervene unpredictably in our existence.

That combination corresponds reasonably well to the cosmology on offer in many major world religions, from Christianity with its creator God who exists outside of space and time and its ministering angels and interceding saints, to Hinduism with its singular divinity finding embodiment in a pantheon of gods. Almost as if the old faiths had a somewhat plausible grasp on reality all along.

But wait, you might say: Given that Hinduism and Christianity are actually pretty different, maybe this attempted spell-breaking doesn't get us very far. Postulating an uncreated divine intelligence or ultimate reality doesn't tell us much about what God wants from us. Presupposing an active spiritual realm doesn't prove that we should all go back to church, especially if these experiences show up cross-culturally, which means they don't confirm any specific dogma. And you haven't touched all the important problems with religion — what about the problem of evil? What about the way that institutional faith is used to oppress and shame people? Why not deism instead of theism, or pantheism instead of either?

These are fair questions, but this essay isn't titled "How to Become a Presbyterian" or "How to Know Which Faith Is True." The spell-breaking I'm offering here is a beginning, not an end. It creates an obligation without telling you how exactly to fulfill it. It opens onto further arguments, between religious traditions and within them, that aren't easily resolved.

The difficulties of those ancient arguments — along with the challenge of dealing with religion as it's actually embodied, in flawed people and institutions — are a big part of what keeps the spell of materialism intact. For finite and suffering creatures, religious belief offers important kinds of hope and consolation. But unbelief has its own comforts: It takes a whole vast zone of ideas and arguments, practices and demands, supernatural perils and metaphysical complexities, and whispers, *well, at least you don't have to spend time thinking about that.*

But actually you do. So if you are standing uncertainly on the threshold of whatever faith tradition you feel closest to, you don't have to heed the inner voice insisting that it's necessarily more reasonable and sensible and modern to take a step backward. You can recognize instead that reality is probably not as materialism describes it, and take up the obligation of a serious human being preparing for life and death alike — to move forward, to step through.