

## “I WISH I HAD A BELIEF SYSTEM” [PART I]

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.

“Do you believe in life after death, young man?,” asked the aging mother of suicide victim Alice Liddell.

“No. Sometimes I wish I could,” said Adam Dalgliesh of Scotland Yard, investigating the suicide.

“You won’t as you get older. If you’re like me, you’ll find you’ll pray for total nothing,” responded Mrs. Liddell.

[From P.D. James’ *Cover Her Face*]

It surely must rank as one of the saddest statements I’ve ever read. I was on an airplane, flying somewhere to speak, and reading (as I often do during my time aloft) in an effort to keep up with current events in my specific fields of interest. The cover itself first caught my attention. In big, bold, ugly gray letters across the front of the September 18, 2000 issue of *Time* magazine—right next to the frightful visage of an elderly man with rubber tubing snaking across his face and into his nostrils to provide the life-giving oxygen he so desperately required—was the mournful phrase, “DYING ON OUR OWN TERMS”

When I opened the cover and began to read the feature article—“A Kinder, Gentler Death”—by *Time* staff writer John Cloud, I was shocked. Not so much by the graphic images of people in the throes of dying. Not so much by the pictures of seriously sick people attached to a menagerie of machines. Not even by the photographic reproduction of the stark “Do Not Resuscitate” order for a terminal hospital patient.

What shocked me most was the heart-rending comment of Felice Gans, a 72-year-old retired psychologist and terminally ill patient who had been interviewed by Mr. Cloud for his article. Mrs. Gans was suffer-

ing from incurable pancreatic cancer. Her prognosis was, to be quite blunt, undeniably dismal. She had no hope of any recovery, much less of a cure. She tearfully acknowledged to the reporter that many days brought her “stark terror,” and that she spent “part of every day mourning my own death.” She then said, ever so sadly, “**I sometimes wish that I had a belief system**” (as quoted in Cloud, 2000, 156[12]: 64, emp. added).

I could not help but be struck by the excruciating emptiness of the poor woman’s addled admission. I wondered quietly within myself—as I watched out the window of that giant Delta jet—about how many people around me at that very moment might be able to make the same painful proclamation? In the muted silence of my own mind, I reflected on the question of how many millions of people through the millennia—facing the paralyzing prospect of their own imminent death, and the simultaneous cessation of their physical existence—must have expressed the selfsame sentiment (if not outwardly, at least inwardly) as did Mrs. Gans. I settled back in the airplane seat, soft drink in hand, and pondered the almost palpable pain of the sad souls who march stolidly through the machinations of life—watching at its end as the flailing fingers of finality enshroud their intended victim—and coming to the realization in their heart of hearts that it was all for nought. As a chill ran through my body and goose bumps made their way up and down my arms, I could not help but be reminded of the words of the poet John Greenleaf Whittier: “For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: ‘It might have been.’”

### YEARS LATER...

As I write this, it is 2003—almost three years to the month after I first read the article about Felice Gans, who died on October 7, 2000, at the age of 72. The obituary that appeared under her name in the *New York Times* on October 10 stated with elegant simplicity: “As she wished, there will be no funeral service.” What, you may ask, has caused me to put pen to paper **now** in order to record this event?

Actually, I began the research and writing of this article shortly after reading her obituary. But it was not just Mrs. Gans’ death that spurred me to write the article you hold in your hands. There were other factors as well, one of which was the death, on Friday, May 17, 2002, of Harvard University’s eminent evolutionist and agnostic, Stephen Jay Gould, who died of cancer at the age of 60. Dr. Gould’s professional career was perhaps the envy of all who knew him, and his accomplishments in the academic community were, to say the least, prodigious. In 1975, he won the Schubert Award, which is presented annually for excellence in research to a paleontologist under the age of 40. In 1980, his columns in *Natural History* magazine (which eventually reached an astonishing total of 300—written without missing a single month between 1974 and 2001) won him the National Magazine Award for Essays and Criticism. In 1981, his book, *The Panda’s Thumb* (his second collection of essays), received the American Book Award for science. Also in 1981, he was one of the first twenty-one “exceptionally talented” people from a variety of fields to receive the then-new MacArthur Foundation Awards (which granted

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to him \$38,400 a year for five consecutive years). By the time he died, Gould had been awarded no less than 41 honorary doctorates (see Shermer, 2001, p. 221). Compare that to the famed Harvard biologists Edward O. Wilson and Ernst Mayr (both of whom are decades older than Gould), with 26 and 16 respectively. And in 2001, according to the dust jacket of his next-to-last book to be published, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (2002), the Library of Congress named Gould as one of America’s eighty-three “Living Legends”—people who embody the “quintessentially American ideal of individual creativity, conviction, dedication, and exuberance.”

Six years earlier, on December 20, 1996, Dr. Gould’s fellow evolutionist and beloved friend, Carl Sagan of Cornell University, died at the age of 72—also from cancer (myelodysplasia, a rare blood disorder that often leads to acute leukemia, causing bone marrow to manufacture a large number of immature and displastic [misshapen] blood cells). Sagan’s life, too, in many ways, was the envy of all who knew him. And, like Gould, his worldly accomplishments were similarly prodigious. He had been awarded 23 honorary doctorates, had received 89 different awards, prizes, and/or fellowships, and was associated with 293 professional societies, advisory groups, etc. In addition, he had authored 500 scientific articles, and had authored, co-authored, edited, or co-edited 31 books. As Michael Shermer (who serves as editor of *Skeptic* magazine) concluded in his book, *The Borderlands of Science*: “Whether Carl Sagan’s life is measured qualitatively (through narrative biography) or quantitatively (through scientific biography), he really had a wonderful life” (2001, p. 238, parenthetical items in orig.).

But, sadly, none of this means anything when you are lying flat of your back on a hospital bed, dying of incurable cancer. While in just such a bed at one of the nation’s leading bone marrow transplant facilities (the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, Washington), and after hearing that thousands of people had been praying for his recovery, Dr. Sagan stated (in a remark found near the end of the last book he ever wrote):

If there were life after death, I might, no matter when I die, satisfy most of these deep curiosities and longings. But if death is nothing more than an endless dreamless sleep, this is a forlorn hope. Maybe this perspective has given me a little extra motivation to stay alive.... The world is so exquisite, with so much love and moral depth, that there is no reason to deceive our-

selves with pretty stories for which there’s little good evidence. Far better, it seems to me, in our vulnerability, is to look Death in the eye and to be grateful every day for the brief but magnificent opportunity that life provides.

While I do not think that, if there is a god, his plan for me will be altered by prayer, I’m more grateful than I can say to those—including so many whom I’ve never met—who have pulled for me during my illness. **Many of them have asked me how it is possible to face death without the certainty of an afterlife. I can only say it hasn’t been a problem** (1997, pp. 215, 221, emp. added).

But the same Carl Sagan also penned these words: **“I would love to believe that when I die I will live again, that some thinking, feeling, remembering part of me will continue.”** Yet, as Dr. Sagan went on to note, he could not make himself believe such, and felt it was nothing more than “wishful thinking” to do so (p. 214, emp. added).

Carl Sagan was not the only one, however, who wanted to believe that a part of him would “live again.” After his death, his third and final wife, Ann Druyan, wrote on the back dustcover of his last, posthumously published book, *Billions and Billions*:

I sit surrounded by cartons of mail from people all over the planet who mourn Carl’s loss.... Some of them say that Carl’s example has inspired them to work for science and reason against the forces of superstition and fundamentalism. These thoughts comfort me and lift me up out of my heartache. **They allow me to feel, without resorting to the supernatural, that Carl lives** (1997, emp. added).

And Ann Druyan was not alone in this feeling. In the postscript of what eventually was to become perhaps his most famous *Natural History* essay—an article titled “Nonoverlapping Magisteria” about how science and religion should be able to get along with each other since they are authorities (magisteria) in their own (non-overlapping) fields—Stephen Jay Gould wrote the following upon learning of the death of his dear friend:

I dedicate this essay to his memory. Carl also shared my personal suspicion about the nonexistence of souls—but I cannot think of a better reason for hoping we are wrong than the prospect of spending eternity roaming the cosmos in friendship and conversation with this wonderful soul (1997, 106: 62).

## “I WISH I HAD A BELIEF SYSTEM”

Notice any similarity in all of these statements? Felice Gans, mourning her imminent death from incurable pancreatic cancer, bemoaned: **“I sometimes wish that I had a belief system.”** Carl Sagan, realizing that he was dying from myelodysplasia, wrote: **“I would love to believe that when I die I will live again, that some thinking, feeling, remembering part of me will continue.”** And Dr. Gould admitted that while neither he nor Carl Sagan believed in the existence of a personal, immortal soul, **“I cannot think of a better reason for hoping we are wrong than the prospect of spending eternity roaming the cosmos in friendship and conversation with this wonderful soul.”**

Sad statements, these. Whether echoed by a woman who relatively few people knew, or by two distinguished scientists who were known by practically the entire world, the sentiment remains the same: Wouldn't it be grand to have a belief system that could sustain me through the “stark terror” that accompanies “part of every day mourning my own death” (to use Mrs. Gans' exact words)? Wouldn't it be terrific to have a belief system that could promise—and actually deliver on the promise—that “some thinking, feeling, remembering part of us will continue” in “friendship and conversation” (to use Sagan's and Gould's words)? Wouldn't that be nice? Indeed it would.

But the terrible triplets of atheism, humanism, and evolution cannot promise any such belief system. And if they could, they never would be able to deliver on the promise. They cannot even offer comfort or solace in the here and now—much less for an eternity to follow. And while the advocates of atheism, humanism, and evolution are willing to ridicule what they derisively term “religious fundamentalism” for its advocacy of the concept of life after death, they certainly have nothing better to offer. John R. Baker, writing under the title of “Fundamentalism as Anti-Intellectualism” in *The Humanist*, admitted as much when he stated:

Fundamentalism is part of a fantasy world that many people believe or wish to be true. These people wish that the reason for human existence is an after-life and that their lives are guided by a benevolent deity. In actuality, events in the universe may be based upon chance and physical laws that have always existed, and **human existence has no other meaning than that we exist** (1986, 46:34, emp. added).

The case of Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the world's most famous atheist until her unfortunate demise at the hands of one of her greedy coworkers in 1995, provides the perfect example of exactly that—life without meaning. On January 23, 1999, the Internal Revenue Service auctioned some of Mrs. O'Hair's belongings in order to satisfy the federal government's claims against her estate. Included on six different pages in her personal diaries was this forlorn cry: **“Somebody, somewhere, love me!”** (see *Leadership*, 1999, 20[2]:75).

Ask yourself: How many other sad souls scream that same sentiment daily? If the writings of those in the atheistic/humanistic community are anything to go by, the number must be legion. In the preface to his biography of Carl Sagan, Key Davidson provided some autobiographical material about himself when he wrote: **“By the 1960s I had ceased to believe in God. Without God, the cosmos seemed drab—just molecules and plasma—and quite pointless”** (1999, p. xi, emp. added). Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg, in his widely acclaimed book about the origin of the Universe, *The First Three Minutes*, wrote in equally depressing terms.

It is almost irresistible for humans to believe that we have some special relation to the universe, that human life is not just a more-or-less farcical outcome of a chain of accidents reaching back to the first three minutes, but that we were somehow built in from the beginning. As I write this I happen to be in an airplane at 30,000 feet, flying over Wyoming en route home from San Francisco to Boston. Below, the earth looks very soft and comfortable—fluffy clouds here and there, snow turning pink as the sun sets, roads stretching straight across the country from one town to another. It is very hard to realize that this all is just a tiny part of an overwhelmingly hostile universe. It is even harder to realize that this present universe has evolved from an unspeakably unfamiliar early condition, and faces a future extinction of endless cold or intolerable heat. **The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.** But if there is no solace in the fruits of our research, there is at least some consolation in the research itself. Men and women are not content to comfort themselves with tales of gods and giants, or to confine their thoughts to the daily affairs of life; they also build telescopes and satellites and accelerators, and sit at their desks for endless hours working out the meaning of the data they gather. The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little

above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy (1977, pp. 154-155, emp. in orig.).

In point of fact, such melancholic musings are quite common in the writings of evolutionists and those sympathetic with them. William Provine of the University of California lamented:

The implications of modern science, however, are clearly inconsistent with most religious traditions. No purposive principles exist in nature. Organic evolution has occurred by various combinations of random genetic drift, natural selection, Mendelian heredity, and many other purposeless mechanisms. Humans are complex organic machines that die completely with no survival of soul or psyche. **Humans and other animals make choices frequently, but these are determined by the interaction of heredity and environment and are not the result of free will.** No inherent moral or ethical laws exist, nor are there absolute guiding principles for human society. **The universe cares nothing for us and we have no ultimate meaning in life** (1988, 2[16]:10, emp. added).

Oxford University evolutionist Richard Dawkins commented on this very point in his book, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*.

[I]f the universe were just electrons and selfish genes, meaningless tragedies... are exactly what we should expect, along with equally meaningless good fortune. Such a universe would be neither evil nor good in its intention. It would manifest no intentions of any kind. In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. **The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but pitiless indifference** (1995, pp. 132-133, emp. added).

In his 2002 book, *What It Means to be 98% Chimpanzee*, anthropologist Jonathan Marks of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte admitted:

Science gives us authoritative ideas about kinship, which force us to reconceptualize our place in the order of things, which is by that very fact disorienting. But it doesn't stick around to explain it to us, to reintegrate us, to give new meaning to our existence. That's the problem with Darwinian theory, of course. It tells us our ancestors were kin to apes, the products of eons of ordinary biological processes of survival and reproduction, and not merely zapped into existence in the



Garden of Eden, **but it doesn't tell us what that means or what to do about it. It just walks away from the wreckage.** And the question of who and what you are is not trivial (p. 222, emp. in orig.).

Or, as Richard Dawkins put it in *The Selfish Gene*:

My own feeling is that a human society based simply on the gene's laws of universal ruthless selfishness would be **a very nasty society in which to live.** But unfortunately, however much we may deplore something, it does not stop it being true (1989, p. 3, emp. added).

He then added in *River Out of Eden*:

...[W]hen the utility function—that which is being maximized—is DNA survival, **this is not a recipe for happiness.** So long as DNA is passed on, **it does not matter who or what gets hurt in the process....** Genes don't care about suffering, because they don't care about anything.... This is one of the hardest lessons for humans to learn. **We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but simply callous—indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose** (1995, pp. 131,95-96, emp. added).

On September 11, 2001, America was attacked on her own soil by terrorists who commandeered commercial airplanes and flew them into the two World Trade Center towers in New York City and the Pentagon near Washington, D.C. Thousands of people lost their lives as destruction rained from the crystal blue sky of that beautiful Tuesday morning. Almost immediately, a religious awakening of sorts began in our country. Members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives stood on the steps of the Capitol and sang "God Bless America." Marquees at movie theaters, fast-food restaurants, businesses, and church buildings across the country rang out with the words, "GOD BLESS AMERICA!" Suddenly, it was fashionable to echo God's name again—without blaspheming it. Practically overnight, it was acceptable to pray—in public no less! **Unless, of course, you had no personal belief system.**

Sadly, many people do not. One such person actually chose to boast about it. Writing in the "My Turn" column of the December 10, 2001 issue of *Newsweek* magazine (where readers are allowed to express their opinions in a three-column spread), Linda Sapienza penned a response to the "religious awakening" in the United States. Under the title of "'God Bless America?'—I Just Like the Tune," Ms. Sapienza explained how, when she was just a young

child, her mother took her to worship on Sundays. She also talked about her father: "A scientist by profession, his world was one of physics and logic." And, she admitted, "[w]hile my mother endeavored to bring me to God, my father taught me about the solar system and Newton's laws of motion."

Then, one day a "watershed" event occurred in her life. When she was but seven years old, a Sunday school teacher forced her to relinquish the seat in which she had been sitting. She remembered all too well how, afterward in the morning worship assembly, "I sat next to my mother and sang 'Onward Christian Soldiers.' All the while my face grew hot under my Easter bonnet because I knew that someday I would have to confess my disbelief and disappoint her."

Three years later, at the tender age of ten, Linda reached the conclusion that the "religious life" was not for her. Thus, when she ran into the preacher one day during a trip to the grocery store with her mother, she told him forcefully: "I don't believe in God." She then explained: "That night, I told my mother about our exchange and waited for her surprise or anger. She just sighed. She had seen it coming all along."

All of that would be sad enough. But the story does not end there. As Ms. Sapienza went on to write:

**I appreciate the power yielded by faith. I just don't feel it myself.** My secularism doesn't exclude me from the sadness and mourning that all Americans have experienced since September 11. I am shattered, and yet I don't pray. "God Bless America" is soothing simply for its tune. **When the president invokes God or reads from Scripture it gives me no comfort.**

Ms. Sapienza ended her essay with a reference to the story she told in the first paragraph about the Sunday school teacher who made her give up her seat. She stated emphatically: "I'm hanging on to my seat. I won't give it up twice" (2001, 138[24]:14, emp. added).

### WHY WON'T PEOPLE BELIEVE?

That statement about faith—"I just don't feel it myself"—says more than perhaps Ms. Sapienza intended. It is illustrative of so many people in today's modern, twenty-first century society. "Faith" (i.e., a belief system) may be OK for others, but it's not something they themselves have any desire to possess. For whatever reason(s), they feel they simply have no need for it. Pascal Boyer, in his book, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, titled one of the chapters "Why Believe?" In the second paragraph of that chapter, he asked:

Why do some people believe and not others?... We would very much like to have a precise and meaningful answer to the question, Why does so-and-so have religious beliefs that leave others perfectly indifferent? (2001, pp. 297,318).

Good questions, those. More often than not, however, there is no "single reason" as to why people choose not to believe. Theologian James A. Pike, in his classic text, *A Time for Christian Candor*, addressed this point when he wrote:

Often, behind this calm attitude of indifference are specific factors in the personal histories of individuals which have set up blocks to current religious interest.... These roadblocks are: "Isn't religion unscientific?"; "Which is the true religion?"; "Isn't ethics enough?"; "Doesn't evil disprove God?"; "I have my own religion." ...Most people, however, are polytheists. They are under claim from various of these gods; no one single thing dominates, and their lives are torn.... One who worships many, is many (1964, pp. 14,16,23).

In his book, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Myths*, Alister McGrath observed:

Some people are searching for the meaning of life, for personal fulfillment, and for a belief system that will make sense of the world and their place within it. Others believe that they have found them and need search no longer.... It is quite possible that a person's life is actually based on a whole set of unrecognized presuppositions... (1993, pp. 81,86).

Indeed, some people **are** searching. And yes, it is possible that what they believe—or refuse to believe—is "based on a whole set of unrecognized presuppositions." I would like to explore here **why** this is the case. [NOTE: This examination of why people choose not to have a personal belief system is not intended to be exhaustive. Elsewhere (Thompson, 2000, pp. 59-141), I have discussed numerous additional reasons for men's unbelief—parents and upbringing, education, pride, immorality, intellectual intimidation, the hypocrisy of believers, unjust acts committed in the name of God, etc. The items below are intended to represent only a sampling of the excuses people frequently offer for their lack of belief.]

### "Where's the Evidence?"

First, there are those who believe there is no justifiable reason to believe in God and an afterlife because, quite simply, there is not adequate evidence for such a belief system. A prime example of such an attitude can be found in the 1973 *Humanist Manifesto*, whose authors wrote:

**We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural;** it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of the survival and fulfillment of the human race.... Promises of salvation or fear of eternal damnation are both illusory and harmful. They distract humans from present concerns, from self-actualization, and from rectifying social injustices. Modern science discredits such historic concepts as the “ghost in the machine” and the “separable soul.” Rather, science affirms that the human species is an emergence from natural evolutionary forces. As far as we know, the total personality is a function of the biological organism transacting in a social and cultural context. **There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body** (pp. 15-17, emp. added).

Lewis Thomas, the renowned medical doctor who served for many years as the director and chancellor of the famous Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan, lamented: “We do not understand the process of dying, **nor can we say anything clear, for sure, about what happens to human thought after death**” (2002, emp. added). Psychologist Steven Pinker, director of the Center of Cognitive Neuroscience at MIT, wrote in his book, *How the Mind Works*.

For anyone with a persistent intellectual curiosity, religious explanations are not worth knowing because they pile equally baffling enigmas on top of the original ones. What gave God

a mind, free will, knowledge, certainty about right and wrong? How does he infuse them into a universe that seems to run just fine according to physical laws? How does he get ghostly souls to interact with hard matter?... We feel cheated because no insight has been offered... (1997, p. 560, emp. in orig.).

Belief in God (or life after death) is considered by many to be not only “a pursuit of the inconceivable,” but “a quest of the unknowable” as well. As Pike noted:

One of the first major beliefs to go for most people when they jettison a conventional authority-based scheme of doctrine is the conviction about life after death. The rejection is commonplace, regardless of how the matter has been viewed or phrased in the religious tradition or semantics of the person: whether as the resurrection of the body, as eternal life, or as immortality (1967, p. 112).

The atheist, agnostic, skeptic, and infidel have jettisoned such beliefs, and have complained that evidence for God is sorely lacking. Furthermore, they suggest that God represents little more than some sort of “projected longing” on man’s part that no longer is defensible. As Pike went on to note, according to the cynics and critics, “[t]he cosmic projection of our ignorance and fears is no more” (1967, p. 177). Neither things nor deities, we constantly are reminded, necessarily exist just because **we desire them**. [I might hasten to point out, however, that just because we **do** desire something does not mean necessarily that it **does not** exist!

Additionally, one cannot help but wonder if the unbeliever cannot find God for the same reason the thief cannot find the policeman?]

### “Feeble Souls”

Second, there are some who are of the opinion that those who **do** possess a personal belief in God and an eternal afterlife are “feeble souls” who choose to believe in such things “from fear or absurd egotism”—to use the words of the late, world-class physicist, Albert Einstein. Interestingly, it was Carl Sagan who quoted Einstein’s words in his posthumously published book, *Billions and Billions*: “Many of them [people concerned about Sagan’s ultimately fatal illness—BT] have asked me how it is possible to face death without the certainty of an afterlife. I can only say that it hasn’t been a problem.... I share the view of a hero of mine, Albert Einstein:”

I cannot conceive of a god who rewards and punishes his creatures or has a will of the kind that we experience in ourselves. Neither can I nor would I want to conceive of an individual that survives his physical death; **let feeble souls, from fear or absurd egotism, cherish such thoughts**. I am satisfied with the mystery of the eternity of life and a glimpse of the marvelous structure of the existing world, together with the devoted striving to comprehend a portion, be it ever so tiny, of the Reason that manifests itself in nature (1997, p. 221, emp. added).

As long ago as 1878, anthropologist Max Muller noted that some people view faith as an “infantile disease.”

Every day, every week, every month, every quarter, the most widely read journals seem just now to vie with each other in telling us that the time for religion is past, that faith is a hallucination or an infantile disease, that the gods have at last been found out and exploded (as quoted in Evans-Pritchard, 1965, p. 100).

The famous satirist H.L. Mencken put it this way: “The most common of all foibles is to believe passionately in the palpably not true. It is the chief preoccupation of mankind.... Theology is the effort to explain the unknowable in terms of the not worth knowing” (as quoted in Pinker, 1997, pp. 554,560). Boyer observed:

As for evidence...whatever believers consider to be “evidence” for the existence of gods, spirits and ancestors, as well as their powers, has always struck all outsiders as evidence for no such thing. In fact, it is evidence only at the price of violating the requirement that we should only have refutable beliefs. ...Religious claims are not refutable at



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all in this sense.... [S]keptics tend to see belief as a form of mental negligence. People are said to believe in supernatural agents because they are superstitious, they are led astray by their emotions, **they are not mentally balanced**, they are primitive, they do not understand probability, they are not scientifically trained, they are brainwashed by their culture, they are too insecure to challenge received wisdom. In this view, people believe because they fail to (or forget to, have no time to, are unwilling to, or just cannot) censure ill-formed or poorly justified thoughts. The beliefs would vanish if people were more consistent in applying commonsense principles of mental management like the following: only allow clear and precise thoughts to enter your mind; only allow consistent thoughts; consider the evidence for a claim before accepting it; only consider refutable claims (2001, pp. 300,299, parenthetical item and first ellipsis in orig., emp. added).

The sad fact is, there are some people who think that belief in God is indicative of some kind of “inner weakness” based not on any actual **evidence**, but rather on a conspicuous **lack** of evidence. As one English schoolboy put it, “faith is believing what you know ain’t true.” Perhaps it was this kind of thinking that caused Steven Pinker to write:

People everywhere beseech gods and spirits for recovery from illness, for success in love or on the battlefield, and for good weather. **Religion is a desperate measure that people resort to** when the stakes are high and they have exhausted the usual techniques for the causation of success—medicines, strategies, courtship, and, in the case of the weather, nothing.... Believers also avoid working out the strange logical consequences of these piecemeal revisions of ordinary things. They don’t pause to wonder why a God who knows our intentions has to listen to our prayers, or how a God can both see into the future and care about how we choose to act. **Compared to the mind-bending ideas of modern science, religious beliefs are notable for their lack of imagination** (1997, pp. 556,557, emp. added).

Ah, yes. Religion—a “desperate measure” of those poor “feeble minds” that possess a “lack of imagination.” Or, as Karl Marx put it, “religion is the opiate of the masses.”

### “Who Needs God?”

Third, there are those who believe that man needs no personal belief system because he is able to say, as the infidel poet William Ernest Henley did in his famous composition, *Invictus*: “I am the master of

my fate; I am the captain of my soul.” Such people simply have no need for God. They can, as it were, pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and stand on their own two feet. The famed evolutionist of Harvard, George Gaylord Simpson, ended one of his books with these words: “Man is his own master. He can and must decide and manage his own destiny” (1953, p. 155). In his book, *A New Reformation*, John A.T. Robinson listed “three motives which have impelled men, particularly over the past hundred years, to question the God of their upbringing and of ours.” Included among those three reasons were these two: “God is intellectually superfluous” and “God is emotionally dispensable” (1965, p. 107; the third was that “God is morally intolerable”).

The late, eminent United Nations biologist, Sir Julian Huxley, wrote: “The God hypothesis is no longer of any pragmatic value for the interpretation or comprehension of nature, and indeed often stands in the way of better and better interpretations” (1957, p. 58). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while in a Nazi prison, wrote:

Man has learned to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis. In questions concerning science, art, and even ethics, this has become an understood thing which one scarcely dares to tilt at any more. But for the last hundred years or so it has become increasingly true of religious questions also; it is becoming evident that everything gets along without “God,” and just as well as before. As in the scientific field, so in human affairs generally, what we call “God” is being more and more edged out of life, losing more and more ground... (1958, p. 145).

Atheist Antony Flew of Reading University in England suggested that God no longer is required by the human race because for quite some time He has been “dying by inches”—what Flew referred to as “the death of a thousand qualifications” (1955, pp. 96-97). Or, as Carl Sagan put it, “there seems less and less for God to do” (Shklovskii and Sagan, 1966, p. 19). The famous French infidel, François Marie Arouet (better known to us by his pen name, Voltaire), once remarked: “If God did not exist, we should have to invent Him.” Today, that dictum has been reversed to say, “If God did exist, we should have to **abolish** Him!” As Boyer observed: “We humans are generally not very keen on **invisible hand** explanations” (2001, p. 298, emp. in orig.).

The late psychologist Carl Jung stated that “the decisive question for man is, ‘Is he related to something infinite or not?’”

(1961, p. 325). That may or may not have been considered an accurate assessment in Jung’s day, but in the view of many, it certainly does not appear to be such today. As Pike wrote in his volume, *If This be Heresy*: “The common response is the declaration—even by some theologians and clergy—that **it really doesn’t matter**, one way or the other” (1967, p. 164). As Pike went on to note: “If He was, He is; if He isn’t, He wasn’t” (p. 178). Sadly for many people today, He “isn’t.” End of discussion.

### “Science Makes God Unnecessary”

Fourth, there is a prevailing view—especially in our age of advanced technology—that science somehow has rendered God “unnecessary.” Our English word “science,” derived from the Latin *scientia*, means “knowledge.” The procedures of study and investigation that lead man to a proper understanding of the world in which he lives, we properly designate as science.

Science is indeed a wonderful enterprise, and those who are its practitioners are on an admirable quest. These dedicated men and women labor diligently to comprehend the intricacies and complexities of our Earth and Universe, and to explore and explain their multitudinous mysteries. The reward of their unending search—knowledge that can impart wisdom—is well worth the time and effort expended in the quest. Who among us can doubt the value of the scientific endeavor?

Within the past several hundred years, science has made great strides that have affected our lives in both a permanent and positive fashion. Germ theory was developed, antibiotics were discovered, vaccines were invented, and life-saving surgical techniques were pioneered. Within the lifetimes of many who read this article, science has performed feats so amazing that at times they seem to defy description and strain credulity. The genetic code has been elucidated, smallpox has been eradicated worldwide, successful manned space flights have been dispatched to the Moon, and robotic rovers have scoured the surface of Mars. Rarely does a day pass that we are not reminded of scientists’ successful search for the knowledge that has become so highly prized by the human race—and so beneficial to its continued existence on this planet. Hardly a day passes that man’s future does not grow brighter as a result of the passing of these scientific milestones, and the use of the wisdom they have imparted to humanity.



Scientific success stories, and the rewards they confer, arrive at practically breakneck speed. Today the citizens of most developed countries are better fed, better clothed, and healthier than they have ever been. Transportation, educational, medical, industrial, and even recreational facilities are vastly improved, compared to those of previous generations. We are the smartest, best-educated, most mobile people ever to have lived on the Earth. Deadly diseases are being conquered, life spans are being increased, and daily living is being made more pleasurable as a result of our continued scientific advancements. All should be well with us. But is it?

There are growing indications that as our scientific prowess has grown, our ever-increasing knowledge of the **creation** has diminished, or replaced completely, our knowledge of the **Creator**. As scientists have enjoyed increasingly more frequent—and more impressive—successes, an attitude has developed which suggests that science, and science alone, can provide answers to all of life's questions. As long ago as 1935, agnostic British philosopher Bertrand Russell advocated such a view when he observed: "Whatever is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know" (1935, p. 243). Almost thirty years later, the pre-eminent atheistic evolutionist of Harvard University, George Gaylord Simpson, echoed the same sentiment when he stated:

It is inherent in any acceptable definition of science that statements that cannot be checked by observations are not really about anything—or at the very least they are not science (1964, 143:769).

Thus, with pronouncements that practically rival divine fiat, we are informed that everything of ultimate importance must be addressed, studied, and defined by the scientist and his method. All knowledge, we are assured, flows from science, and "what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know."

Flush with one success after another stemming from his incursions into the natural world, and drunk with self-infatuation, man, in his egotistical pride, has drifted farther and farther from his Creator. As a result, humanity progressively struggles to cut itself loose from the moral, ethical, and spiritual apron strings of God, and from the objective standard represented by His Word. Finally, at least in the eyes of some, science itself acquired the status of a god. The Creator-God of heaven no longer was needed nor acknowledged. "Science" had replaced His infinite wisdom, and organic

evolution had replaced His creative power. "After Darwin," said Sir Julian Huxley, "it was no longer necessary to deduce the existence of divine purpose for the facts of biological adaptation" (1946, p. 87). At the Darwin Centennial Convocation held at the University of Chicago in 1959, Huxley boasted:

In the evolutionary pattern of thought there is no longer need or room for the supernatural. The earth was not created; it evolved. So did all the animals and plants that inhabit it, including our human selves, mind, and soul as well as brain and body. So did religion (1960, pp. 252-253).

This kind of thinking generally is known as scientific materialism—the concept which suggests that science is to be viewed as the **whole of reality** because it provides the key to **all knowledge**. Everything of ultimate importance in the world has been relegated to the discipline of science. [Such an attitude is based on what is known in philosophical circles as the fallacy of reductionism. In committing this fallacy, the advocates of scientific materialism have incorrectly reduced the **whole** to one of its **parts**.]

[to be continued]

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## NEW BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT

Dr. Bert Thompson and Dr. Brad Harrub have completed their new book, *Investigating Christian Evidences: A Study Course*, which is the new edition of our popular (but out-of-print) book, *A Study Course in Christian Evidences*. Watch next month's "Note from the Editor" for an announcement about the book's availability. Cost for the 396-page book is only \$8.95. Pre-order yours today (800/234-8558).

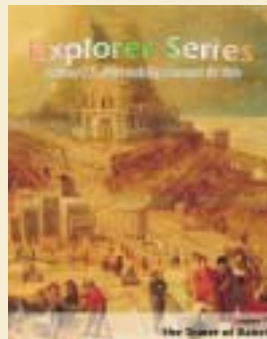


**ANNOUNCING: JOURNEY #2 IN OUR EXPLORER SERIES FOR KIDS**



In my “Note from the Editor” in the June 2002 issue of *Reason & Revelation*, I announced “Journey #1” of our new *Explorer Series*—“Christian Evidences for Kids.” For years, parents and teachers had been urging us to provide them with a Bible class curriculum that they could use to teach Christian evidences to their third through sixth graders. We listened, and complied.

The result is our 13-lesson *Explorer Series*, which takes curious young minds on a fascinating journey through God’s Word and God’s world. In Journey #1, beginning with lesson one, eager children can explore essential facts that will ground them in concepts oftentimes overlooked in regular Bible class settings. They will learn about apologetics. They can examine proof for the existence of God and the inspiration of the Bible. They will find facts from science that they can use to refute the theory of evolution (including false ideas about their alleged ape-like ancestry). They will be exposed to the evidence that dinosaurs and humans lived on the Earth at the same time. They will discover eternal truths about the deity of Christ and the uniqueness of His church. And so on.



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**Bert Thompson**

