Skeptics and Critically Thinking People of Faith Share Common Ground

How We Believe: The Search for God in an Age of Science
by Michael Shermer

Review by David Myers

At the beginning of the last century, reports Michael Shermer in this provocative and well-written book, social scientists expected that scientific progress, soaring affluence, and increasing education would produce secularization. But at the century’s end 19 of 20 Americans expressed belief in God or a universal spirit. Indeed, “Never in history have so many, and such a high percentage of the population, believed in God” (p. xiii). During the 1990s, spiritual themes captured many magazine covers, notes Shermer, and from 1991 to 1996 religion-spirituality book sales rose 112 percent and were one third of 1997’s 15 best-sellers.

Why, in an age of science, does belief in God persist? As a one-time experimental psychology graduate student who now directs The Skeptics Society, edits Skeptic Magazine, and writes the “E-Skeptic” newsletter and a monthly skepticism page for Scientific American, Shermer wonders. In a previous book and in his public debates and media appearances, Shermer has offered explanations for why people believe weird things. In How We Believe, he offers more de-bunking of paranormal beliefs, including a compelling expose of how James Van Praagh has convinced millions of people that he can “cross over” and talk with the dead.

With such detours into parapsychology, and into Stephen Jay Gould’s theorizing about evolution, the book meanders. But mostly it aims to explain belief in God. “Sometimes I think we’re alone,” R. Buckminster Fuller reportedly said. “Sometimes I think we’re not. In either case, the thought is quite staggering.” “One either takes the leap of faith or does not” (p. 8), reflects Shermer. The question of why most people take that leap fascinates Shermer, a self-described born-again Christian turned atheist turned agnostic.

I am unabashedly interested in understanding how and why any of us come to our beliefs, how and why religion evolved as the most powerful institution in human history, and how and why belief (or lack of) in God develops and shapes our thoughts and actions. (p. xiii)

Such questions also fascinate many members of the American Psychological Association’s Psychology of Religion division, much as they fascinated William James 100 years ago in Varieties of Religious Experience (1902/1997). Moreover, as Shermer notes, although some religious believers are antiscience fundamentalists, others are empirically-minded skeptics, some of whom belong to The Skeptics Society. Indeed, many of the founders of modern science were people whose religious convictions induced their humility before nature, their skepticism of human authority, and thus their empiricism (Hooykaas, 1972; Merton, 1938/1970).

Shermer’s explanation of belief in God is part cognitive. “Humans evolved a Belief Engine whose function it is to seek patterns and find causal relationships” (p. 39). We are pattern seekers. Even given random events, we will discern order. For people living with uncertainty and stress, beliefs—even magical be-

liefs—control anxiety and enable one to blame bad outcomes on evil spirits or God’s will. Religion explains the “vicissitudes of life” (p. 44).

Shermer’s explanation is part biological. Given the seeming adaptive value of religious belief, natural selection helps account for the belief engine. So does behavior genetics. Twin studies reveal that religious interests, attitudes, and values are significantly heritable. Brain scans also reveal neural circuits that get “hot” as people have religious or mystical experiences. If there is a “God module” in say, the temporal lobes, does this support religion (because our brain is generally predisposed to perceive external reality) or undermine religion (as “nothing but” neural activity)? Shermer quotes scientists who conclude, rightly so methinks, that it does neither. Given that everything psychological is also biological, spiritual experience must reside in the brain. The people of ancient Israel assumed as much. The assumed psychology of their Old Testament writings differed from today’s psychology on the details, but agreed on the big idea: mind and emotion are linked to the body. People were said to think with their hearts and feel with their bowels. Pictures of the spiritually active brain tells us nothing about the validity of spiritual experience.

Shermer’s explanation of why people believe is also partly social. He notes Richard Dawkins and Susan Blackmore’s (1997) viewing religion as a meme—a culturally transmitted, self-replicating idea—though he winces at their likening religion to a disease, a scourge, or a computer virus, as in the “copy and distribute” chain letters that promise happiness and success. (Science itself is a meme, notes Shermer.)

To explore further why people believe in God, Shermer twice surveyed The Skeptics Society members. Among the minority who believed in
God, the top two reasons were “arguments based on good design/natural beauty/perfection/complexity of the world or universe” (p. 77, 29 percent) and the comfort, relief, consolation, and meaning and purpose provided by belief (21 percent). Others reported sensing God’s presence, needing something to believe in, or wanting a basis for morality.

Shermer also undertook, with Frank Sulloway, a survey of “a random sample of Americans.” Actually, with fewer than 1,000 people responding out of what Sulloway (2001) reports were 10,000 people who received the survey in the mail, and with respondents being 63 percent male and 62 percent college graduates, this was hardly a random sample of Americans. Still, it is noteworthy, if not stunning, that having religious parents who raise their children religiously promotes belief in God. Beliefs form in a social context.

When asked why others believe, people recognized the importance of social context. Twenty-two percent indicated that others believe because of how they were raised. Slightly more judged that others believe because of the comfort, relief, consolation, and meaning and purpose provided.

Asked why they believe, however, only seven percent pointed to their own rearing. (Shermer calls this “attribution bias.”) Social psychologists also will recognize the “third person effect”: people often perceive social influences, such as television, as affecting others, “but not me.” Many more people—29 percent—pointed to the design/natural beauty/perfection/complexity of the world or universe, and 21 percent pointed to their experience of God in their everyday lives (yes, the same percentages as among the skeptic believers). The respondents apparently tended to think that “Other people believe in religion for social and emotional reasons, but not me—I have more thoughtful reasons.”

In the remaining chapters, Shermer critiques classical philosophical and newer scientific arguments for God. He offers a historical and anthropological account of human pattern seeking, storytelling, myth making, and morality. He concludes that religious belief developed “to create and promote myths, to encourage altruism and reciprocal altruism, and to reveal the level of commitment to cooperate and reciprocate among members of the community” (p. 162). God enters as

a pattern, an explanation for our universe, our world, and ourselves. God is the key actor in the story, “the greatest story ever told” about where we came from, why we are here, and where we are going. God is a myth, one of the most sublime and sacred myths ever constructed by the mythmaking animal. (p. 169)

How We Believe extends a long line of skeptical explanations of religion, including those of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and, more recently Wilson (1978), who noted that “We have come to the crucial stage in the history of biology when religion itself is subject to the explanations of the natural sciences” (p. 192). Such efforts to explain religious “myths” may seem hostile to religion. Actually, as Shermer notes, they can be appreciated by atheists, agnostics, and believers alike. Myths, as my colleagues in literature occasionally remind me, can be true or false.

Moreover, as Shermer understands, explaining need not mean debunking. Still, Shermer is a master debunker, one who seemingly delights in debunking religious belief, much as others of us delight in debunking illusory intuitions (Myers, 2002). So, consider a thought experiment. Imagine that at some future time psychological science achieves a completed understanding of why some people believe in God, and why others do not believe. One cluster of researchers has completed the psychology of religion, and another cluster has completed “the psychology of unbelief” (an actual book title from some years ago). With an explanation of atheism completed, one might say, paraphrasing Wilson, that atheism itself is now subject to the explanations of the natural sciences and is therefore not likely to survive as a credible intellectual idea.

But hold it (there one rises to defend the plausibility of atheism as well as theism). If both belief and unbelief are explained, as would happen in a complete psychology that cannot mean they are both false. Either God in some form exists or God does not exist. Archbishop William Temple recognized the logical difference between explaining and explaining away when reportedly challenged after an address at Oxford University: “Well, of course, Archbishop, the point is that you believe what you believe because of the way you were brought up,” to which the Archbishop coolly replied. “That is as it may be. But the fact remains that you believe that I believe what I believe because of the way I was brought up, because of the way you were brought up.”

There is already at least one predictor of skeptical unbelief: gender. Looking at data from more than 40,000 people surveyed by the National Opinion Research Center since 1972 I found that 33 percent of women, but only 23 percent of men, reported attending religious services weekly. Nearly four in five of The Skeptics Society survey respondents were men. Likewise, the winners and runners up on the Skeptical Inquirer’s list of outstanding 20th-century rationalist skeptics (James Randi, Steven Jay Gould, and 22 others, including Michael Shermer) were all men. In the “science and the paranormal” section of the Spring-Summer 2001 catalog of Prometheus Books, the leading publisher of skeptical books, I counted 110 male authors and but four female authors. Skepticism, it seems, is strikingly male (and Shermer’s suffer-no-fools debunking is a case example). Women are more “open” to spiritual navigation (and are far more likely to author books on spirituality than on skepticism).

Few will read How We Believe without pausing to wonder, is “God” merely a word we use to cover our ignorance? Is spirituality an opiate of the people? Is it an illusory but functional adaptation that promotes health, happiness, and group-supporting altruism? Or is it human igno-
rance to presume God’s absence from the fabric of the universe? Are there more things in heaven and earth than we have so far dreamt?

If we are honest with ourselves, we cannot know which is right. In the dark of the night, the theist and atheist will each have moments when they wonder if the other might be right. Perhaps all spiritual intuitions are illusions. Or perhaps those missing a spiritual dimension are flatlanders whose myopia misses nonmaterial reality.

Lacking proof or certainty, one can straddle the fence. But sometimes, said Albert Camus, life beckons us to make a 100 percent commitment to something about which we are 51 percent sure. I credit Shermer for the courage to leap off the fence with enough skepticism to stir the public debate with his usual critical verve. It is understandable that the successes of scientific explanation, the cognitive and social influences on belief, and the superstition and inhumanity sometimes practiced in religion’s name might push some people off the fence toward skepticism (even if, as Shermer grants, more charity than evil has probably been practiced under religion’s influence). And it is understandable how those who practice faith-based skepticism might venture a leap of faith. They can do so mindful that they might be wrong, yet choosing to bet their lives on a humble spirituality, on a fourth alternative to what they perceive as purposeless scientism, gullible spiritualism, and dogmatic fundamentalism. As Shermer’s surveys show, some of them ground themselves in a spirituality that helps make sense of the universe, endows life with meaning and purpose, con-

nects them in supportive communities, provides a foundation for morality and compassion, and offers hope in the face of adversity and death.

Although we are all surely wrong to some extent—we glimpse ultimate reality only dimly, both skeptics and faithful agree—some will draw from both skepticism and spirituality. Such people anchor their lives in a rationality and humility that restrains spiritual intuition with critical analysis, and yet is open to a spirituality that fosters purpose, love, and joy. Skeptics such as Shermer and critical-thinking people of faith share much common ground.

References


