



Scientists discover atheists may not exist.

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Opening words are [THE ETERNAL](#) By Stephen M Shick.

It sounds like an oxymoron that in this world there are religious atheists. If you doubt it, you are looking at one. If you still doubt it, look around you. They are sprinkled liberally throughout the congregation. Now there are all kinds of atheists out there. There are the Richard Dawkins variety who narrowly define what others may believe about God and then decimates it. What I know is that many who do believe in a personal god don't believe in the god Dawkins believes in either. What the Dawkins variety also believe is that religious institutions are a plague on humankind. They are definitely not religious atheists.

Then there are non-theists, like myself and Lloyd Geering who influenced me with his book *Christianity Without God*. They don't believe in a personal, sentient divine being that intervenes when it suits in human affairs. They share much in common with secular humanists, the third kind of atheists, who accept human responsibility for this world, its problems and to repairing it. Neither type necessarily carries much antipathy towards religion's institutions per se unless religion has done them harm. They may or may not see themselves as religious atheists.

Whatever kind of atheist comes here on Sunday, they are a religious one and based on an article I recently read in a science magazine we exist because of evolution. It argues that whatever kind of atheists someone identifies with scientists believe that they are all religious. I don't normally, in fact I don't think I have ever quoted extensively from an article before, but in this case, it seems worth doing. It seems worthwhile. It begins:

Cognitive scientists are becoming increasingly aware that a metaphysical outlook may be so deeply ingrained in human thought processes that it cannot be expunged.

While this idea may seem outlandish—after all, it seems easy to decide not to believe in God—evidence from several disciplines indicates that what you actually believe is not a decision you make for yourself. Your fundamental beliefs are decided by much deeper levels of consciousness, and some may well be more or less set in stone.

This line of thought has led to some scientists claiming that “atheism is psychologically impossible because of the way humans think,” says Graham Lawton, an avowed atheist himself, writing in the *New Scientist*. “They point to studies showing, for example, that even people who claim to be committed atheists tacitly hold religious beliefs, such as the existence of an immortal soul.”

This shouldn't come as a surprise, since we are born believers, not atheists, scientists say. Humans are pattern-seekers from birth, with a belief in karma, or cosmic justice, as our default setting. “A slew of cognitive traits predisposes us to faith,” writes Pascal Boyer in *Nature*, the science journal, adding that people “are only aware of some of their religious ideas”.

Scientists have discovered that “invisible friends” are not something reserved for children. We all have

them, and encounter them often in the form of interior monologues. As we experience events, we mentally tell a non-present listener about it.

The imagined listener may be a spouse, it may be Jesus or Buddha or it may be no one in particular. It's just how the way the human mind processes facts. The identity, tangibility or existence of the listener is irrelevant.

“From childhood, people form enduring, stable and important relationships with fictional characters, imaginary friends, deceased relatives, unseen heroes and fantasised mates,” says Boyer of Washington University, himself an atheist. This feeling of having an awareness of another consciousness might simply be the way our natural operating system works.

These findings may go a long way to explaining a series of puzzles in recent social science studies. In the United States, 38% of people who identified themselves as atheist or agnostic went on to claim to believe in a God or a Higher Power (Pew Forum, “Religion and the Unaffiliated”, 2012).

While the UK is often defined as an irreligious place, a recent survey by Theos, a think tank, found that very few people—only 13 per cent of adults—agreed with the statement “humans are purely material beings with no spiritual element”. For the vast majority of us, unseen realities are very present.

When researchers asked people whether they had taken part in esoteric spiritual practices such as having a Reiki session or having their aura read, the results were almost identical (between 38 and 40%) for people who defined themselves as religious, non-religious or atheist.

The implication is that we all believe in a not dissimilar range of tangible and intangible realities. Whether a particular brand of higher consciousness is included in that list (“I believe in God”, “I believe in some sort of higher force”, “I believe in no higher consciousness”) is little more than a detail.

If a tendency to believe in the reality of an intangible network is so deeply wired into humanity, the implication is that it must have an evolutionary purpose. Social scientists have long believed that the emotional depth and complexity of the human mind means that mindful, self-aware people necessarily suffer from deep existential dread. Spiritual beliefs evolved over thousands of years as nature's way to help us balance this out and go on functioning.

If a loved one dies, even many anti-religious people usually feel a need for a farewell ritual, complete with readings from old books and intoned declarations that are not unlike prayers. In war situations, commanders frequently comment that atheist soldiers pray far more than they think they do.

Statistics show that the majority of people who stop being part of organised religious groups don't become committed atheists, but retain a mental model in which “The Universe” somehow has a purpose for humanity.

In the US, only 20 per cent of people have no religious affiliation, but of these, only one in ten say they are atheists. The majority are “nothing in particular” according to figures published in *New Scientist*.

There are other, more socially-oriented evolutionary purposes, too. Religious communities grow faster, since people behave better (referring to the general majority over the millennia, as opposed to minority extremists highlighted by the media on any given day).

Why is this so? Religious folk attend weekly lectures on morality, read portions of respected books about the subject on a daily basis and regularly discuss the subject in groups, so it would be inevitable that some

of this guidance sinks in.

There is also the notion that the presence of an invisible moralistic presence makes misdemeanours harder to commit. “People who think they are being watched tend to behave themselves and cooperate more,” says the *New Scientist*’s Lawton. “Societies that chanced on the idea of supernatural surveillance were likely to have been more successful than those that didn’t, further spreading religious ideas.”

This is not simply a matter of religious folk having a metaphorical angel on their shoulder, dispensing advice. It is far deeper than that—a sense of interconnectivity between all things. If I commit a sin, it is not an isolated event but will have appropriate repercussions. This idea is common to all large-scale faith groups, whether it is called karma or simply God ensuring that you “reap what you sow”.

These theories find confirmation from a very different academic discipline—the literature department. Nury Vittachi at the Creativity Lab at Hong Kong Polytechnic University’s School of Design, has been looking at the manifestation of cosmic justice in fictional narratives—books, movies and games. It is clear that in almost all fictional worlds, God exists, whether the stories are written by people of a religious, atheist or indeterminate beliefs.

It’s not that a deity appears directly in tales. It is that the fundamental basis of stories appears to be the link between the moral decisions made by the protagonists and the same characters’ ultimate destiny. The payback is always appropriate to the choices made. An unnamed, unidentified mechanism ensures that this is so, and is a fundamental element of stories—perhaps the fundamental element of narratives.

In children’s stories, this can be very simple: the good guys win, the bad guys lose. In narratives for older readers, the ending is more complex, with some loose ends left dangling, and others ambiguous. Yet the ultimate appropriateness of the ending is rarely in doubt. If a tale ended with Harry Potter being tortured to death and the Dursley family dancing on his grave, the audience would be horrified, of course, but also puzzled: that’s not what happens in stories. Similarly, in a tragedy, we would be surprised if King Lear’s cruelty to Cordelia did not lead to his demise.

Indeed, it appears that stories exist to establish that there exists a mechanism or a person—cosmic destiny, karma, God, fate, Mother Nature—to make sure the right thing happens to the right person. Without this overarching moral mechanism, narratives become records of unrelated arbitrary events, and lose much of their entertainment value. In contrast, the stories which become universally popular appear to be carefully composed records of cosmic justice at work.

In manuals for writers this process is often defined in some detail. Would-be screenwriters are taught that during the build-up of the story, the villain can sin (take unfair advantages) to his or her heart’s content without punishment, but the heroic protagonist must be karmically punished for even the slightest deviation from the path of moral rectitude. The hero does eventually win the fight, not by being bigger or stronger, but because of the choices he makes.

This process is so well-established in narrative creation that the literati have even created a specific category for the minority of tales which fail to follow this pattern. They are known as “bleak” narratives. An example is *A Fine Balance*, by Rohinton Mistry, in which the likable central characters suffer terrible fates while the horrible faceless villains triumph entirely unmolested.

While some bleak stories are well-received by critics, they rarely win mass popularity among readers or moviegoers. Stories without the appropriate outcome mechanism feel incomplete. The purveyor of cosmic justice is not just a cast member, but appears to be the hidden heart of the show.

But if a belief in cosmic justice is natural and deeply rooted, the question arises: where does atheism fit in? Albert Einstein, who had a life-long fascination with metaphysics, believed atheism came from a mistaken belief that harmful superstition and a general belief in religious or mystical experience were the same thing, missing the fact that evolution would discard unhelpful beliefs and foster the growth of helpful ones. He declared himself “not a ‘Freethinker’ in the usual sense of the word because I find that this is in the main an attitude nourished exclusively by an opposition against naive superstition” (“Einstein on Peace”, page 510).

Similarly, Charles Darwin, in a meeting with a campaigner for atheism in September 1881, distanced himself from the views of his guest, finding them too “aggressive”. In the latter years of his life, he offered his premises for the use of the local church minister and changed his family schedule to enable his children to attend services.

Of course, these findings do not prove that it is impossible to stop believing in God. What they do indicate, quite powerfully, is that we may be fooling ourselves if we think that we are making the key decisions about what we believe, and if we think we know how deeply our views pervade our consciousnesses. It further suggests that the difference between the atheist and the non-atheist viewpoint is much smaller than probably either side perceives. Both groups have consciousnesses which create for themselves realities which include very similar tangible and intangible elements. It may simply be that their awareness levels and interpretations of certain surface details differ.

But as higher levels of education spread, will starry-eyed spirituality die out and cooler, drier atheism sweep the field, as some atheism campaigners suggest? Some specialists feel this is unlikely. “If godlessness flourishes where there is stability and prosperity, then climate change and environmental degradation could seriously slow the spread of atheism,” says Lawton in *New Scientist*.

On a more personal level, we all have loved ones who will die, and we all have a tendency to puzzle about what consciousness is, whether it is separate from the brain, and whether it can survive. We will always have existential dread with us—at a personal or societal level. So, the need for periods of contemplative calm in churches or temples or other places devoted to the ineffable and inexplicable will remain. They appear to be part of who we are as humans.

Furthermore, every time we read a book or watch a movie, we are reinforcing our default belief in the eventual triumph of karma. While there is certainly growth in the number of bleak narratives being produced, it is difficult to imagine them becoming the majority form of cultural entertainment. Most of us will skip Cormac McCarthy’s crushingly depressing “*The Road*” in favour of the newest Pixar movie.

When looking at trends, there’s also population growth to consider. Western countries are moving away from the standard family model, and tend to obsess over topics such as same-sex marriage and abortion on demand. Whatever the rights and wrongs of these issues, in practice they are associated with shrinking populations. Europeans (and the Japanese) are not having enough children to replace the adult generation, and are seeing their communities shrink on a daily basis.

Africans and South Asians, on the other hand, are generally religious and retain the traditional model of multi-child families—which may be old-fashioned from a Western point of view, but it’s a model powerfully sanctioned by the evolutionary urge to extend the gene pool.

“It’s clearly the case that the future will involve an increase in religious populations and a decrease in scepticism,” says Steve Jones, a professor in genetics at University College London, speaking at the Hay Festival in the UK recently.

This may appear as bad news for pro-atheism campaigners. But for the evolutionary life-force which may actually make the decisions, this may augur well for the continued existence of humanity.

In the meantime, it might be wise for religious folks to refrain from teasing atheist friends who accidentally say something about their souls. And it might be equally smart for the more militant of today's atheists to stop teasing religious people at all.

We might all be a little more spiritual than we think.