

Unbelievable - a conversation between an atheist and his imaginary religious friend.

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In the beginning

Hi, um, I need a religious person to talk to. Do you mind if I invoke you into existence?

No, not at all. After all, it's fitting that my desire aligns with your own.

Okay, so I've got some questions for you that I'd like you to answer in clear, simple terms. When I question you though please understand that I'm not trying to attack you as a person, but just to look at the beliefs you have rationally. Can we agree that truth and reason aren't things we should be afraid of?

I guess so, but that's kind of a condescending question, don't you think?

Um, yeah - probably. I just wanted to establish that I'm not trying to be aggressive or insulting.

Sure, but let's just call a spade a spade, shall we? It makes more sense if we're seeking truth to be straight-forward.

Fair enough.

Before you start though, I have a question for you - why are you writing this, invoking me and questioning these things? Why not leave well enough alone?

There's a few reasons, but ultimately it's because I think that religion is dangerous.

Actually it's not religion itself that I see as dangerous, but the malleable mindset that is necessary for someone to be religious. That's a really important point - do you mind if I repeat it?

Yes, I do mind. It would just be annoying and I got it the first time.

Okay then, I'll rephrase it which makes it sound like I'm saying something else.

I don't actually have much of a choice here, do I?

Not really, no. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that all the most awful things that happen, from mass genocide down, require that people relinquish their moral responsibility to someone or something else - to an authority above themselves - an ideology of sorts. For people's natural sense of empathy to be subverted, it requires that they believe fervently in some person or cause.

Now, 'the cause' might be on religious grounds as was the case with the 9/11 suicide terrorist attacks or the Christian crusades of the middle ages, or it can be on nationalistic, racist grounds like with Nazi Germany. What it requires, though, is that people behave like children with unformed minds and just do as they're told.

It requires that people don't question things.

But religion preaches love, tolerance and peace. Sure, you get some extremists here and there, but you can't apportion blame to every religious person because of the actions of a few nutcases. And it's also not very fair to not recognise all the good in the world that religion does.

Yeah, look, I do think that religious people do a lot of really wonderful things in the world, but I don't think that atheists aren't also as charitable and loving. Granted they're not as organised a group as religious people are (because trying to organise atheists is like trying to herd cats) but I'd actually argue that agnostics and atheists are more likely to behave morally when under pressure to behave immorally because they are more likely to think independently and not blindly follow what they're told to do.

Having said that, not as many atheists do give themselves entirely to charity as do devoutly religious people. So, religion can be used for good as well as evil but I maintain the point that the evil that a malleable mindset can be used for far outweighs the good that it can be manipulated to do.

Have you heard of the Stanford Prison Experiment?

Well, yeah. I mean ultimately I'm you aren't I? So anything you've heard of, I've heard of too. Were you just asking a rhetorical question?

No, I was asking it as a segue so that I could explain it. Go with me here.

How good sheeple turn bad

Oh, right. Okay, um... no. No, I haven't heard of the Stanford Prison Experiment. What was it?

It was a psychological experiment done in 1971 where 24 undergraduates were selected from 70 to play the roles of both guards and prisoners and live in a mock prison in the basement of the Stanford psychology building.

Those selected were chosen for their lack of psychological issues, criminal history, and medical disabilities in order to get a sample of people representative of the general population. Roles of either guards or prisoners were randomly assigned.

Both prisoners and guards adapted to their roles, and within a few days of the 6 week experiment some of the guards were engaging in unethical acts against the prisoners. The guards began exhibited sadistic behaviour and started to humiliate and attack the prisoners. They dehumanised the prisoners by assigning them numbers which they made them repeat over and over again. In short, the guards became sadistic, domineering control freaks.

The experiment was cut short only several days in, and the professor of psychology who was running the experiment later admitted that he lost objectivity and allowed unethical acts to happen under his supervision. It actually took someone else coming in and pointing out that the emperor wasn't wearing any clothes for him to realise.

What happened is that the guards became like the Nazis. We all have this idea that the Nazis were these evil, horrible people; but the truth is that given the right conditions any society is capable of the same atrocities and genocides. In fact many, many societies have done very similar things. The ethnic genocide in Rwanda where hundreds of thousands of people were killed is just one recent example.

Another interesting case study about how easy to manipulate our morals and minds are is the the Milgram experiments at Yale in 1963 in which students were paid to be participants in what was ostensibly called a memory experiment. The real purpose of the study was actually to see what lengths ordinary people would go to when ordered to do something by an authority figure, like a research scientist wearing a white lab coat.

The students were told to administer an electric shock to another participant in a different room if that person got a memory question wrong. The more answers the recipient of the shocks got wrong, the higher the voltage. In actuality there were no real electric shocks and the other participant was an actor, but our hapless subjects didn't know that at the time.

Despite the actor seeming to be in intense pain, banging on the wall for them to stop, and in some cases saying that they had a heart condition, 65% of participants continued to administer electric shocks right up until the maximum 450 volt limit. Most participants sought reassurance that what they were doing was right, but the research scientist told them that they wouldn't be held responsible and that they had to continue. So they did. Only one normal, educated participant out of the 60 refused to administer shocks before it got up to 300 volts where the actor was displaying that they were in considerable pain. None, not one, refused to administer high voltage electric shocks to another human being when asked to by a scientist.

So, my point is that the mindset that is an absolute necessity for religious belief to exist, is the very same mindset that has, is, and will be manipulated for genocide, torture, holy wars, terrorism, etcetera.

Ha!

What?

I've got you.

What do you mean?

The USSR. An atheist nation in which people committed horrible genocidal atrocities.

Well, before you cash in your philosophy chips and deposit your winnings in the moral bank of certainty, consider this: Stalin was quite God-like wasn't he? You see, the people of the USSR didn't become free-thinking, self-aware, intelligent atheists all of a sudden, they just replaced one tyrannical patriarchal authority figure with another.

It doesn't matter to whom we relinquish our minds, but that we relinquishing them at all. Like I said, religion itself isn't the problem so much a mind which does not think for itself. It just so happens that a mind that thinks for itself is incompatible with believing in the superstitious fancies that are the basis of all religions.

The Gulags were a righteous hell to send innocent people to, just like the Nazi ovens where the supposed sinners burned. The informants to Stalin's government were the same people who put Jews on trains to concentration camps, were the same people who humiliated and tortured prisoners at Abu Ghraib, were the same people who were assigned the roles of

guards in the Stanford prison experiment, were the same people who go to church and pray and smile and wave when they'd see you in the street.

Also another very pertinent point to consider is that it's not that has ever compelled someone to commit genocide, or blow themselves up, or go on a crusade. Atheists might commit horrible atrocities in the pursuit of power, or ideological delusion, or whatever, but it isn't atheism that those atrocities are committed in the name of, nor does atheism have any logical connection to compelling someone to do such things, whereas religious belief, unfortunately, has compelled people to commit awful atrocities and murder.

So what do you suggest, that we all go to Atheist School and learn how to believe in nothing?

No, what I suggest is that we educate people so that they can make their own informed decisions instead of being brainwashed at a young age into believing in a supposedly loving god who does things like kill children with bears, is vengeful, homophobic, sexist, condones rape and killing, and will make you burn in hell for all eternity unless you do as he says.

What I suggest is that we start openly and calmly questioning the validity of religion in our modern society. If we're to have any chance of not overpopulating ourselves to the point of massive human and environmental tragedy, if we're to have any chance of becoming a truly civilised and intelligent species capable of harmonious existence with the planet and ourselves, then it's about time that we grew up and stopped deferring to, and fearing, our 'father' in the sky.

Surely you must recognise that indoctrinating children into religion is wrong, right?

Um, no, actually. I think it's every parent's right to teach their children what they believe to be the truth. Whether that's the true morality of religious faith, or the selfish moral relativism of a godless atheist like yourself.

Godless atheist? That's a bit of a tautology isn't it? Anyway, I can see you're getting upset, so do you want to have a break for a bit?

Everyone's genitals are equal before God

No, I'm okay. But I do think that parents should be able to teach their children their beliefs, and to outlaw teaching religion to children would also be really wrong.

Who said anything about outlawing anything? I come up against this quite a bit and it annoys me no end - I don't want to outlaw teaching religion, I just want for it to be scrutinised. I want things to change as a consequence of truth, evidence, rationality, consideration and questioning things openly and honestly. I don't want to break down anyone's door and shoot them because they're teaching their children Scientology or Islam.

So you think I should be able to teach my children my own religious beliefs then?

I don't think you should be forcibly prevented from doing so, but I do think that many of the things that are foisted upon children, taught to them as fact and forcibly instilled into their developing minds, are ethically indefensible.

A child is incapable of understanding religious philosophies and the differences between them, which means that a parent essentially forces their particular religion upon their children. In the same way that a child couldn't accurately be described as libertarian or authoritarian; progressive or conservative, nor can they be described as belonging to a particular religion. Their parents belong to a religion, but they themselves don't have a choice so can't properly be labelled as such.

Ideally I'd like to see brainwashing children with religious dogma become incrementally less acceptable, like circumcision has. But the physicality of circumcision makes it much less defensible because medical associations, such as the American Medical Association and the British Medical Association, can and do state that there is no medical reason for circumcision and that they do not recommend it.

Hey, I'm circumcised, are you saying there's something wrong with me?

I'm not making a value judgement about the relative worth of your genitals - I'm sure they're very impressive genitals - I'm just pointing out that cutting parts of babies' penises off without medical cause is at the very least ethically questionable. Also it's a good analogy for how we've blindly accepted some religious dogmas as universal truth without really ever questioning them. I mean, you don't hear of many men who weren't circumcised volunteering to have it done as adults, do you?

Babies feel less pain, also it's more hygienic. Also, um, it makes sex better.

If you're really honest with yourself here, can you see that rather than looking at the situation impartially and making a judgement based on facts and logic, that you have an emotional investment in wanting to see this a certain way? You're making up your mind beforehand and then trying to find ways to form arguments that support your position after the fact.

For the record, new studies suggest that babies actually feel more pain because their nerve endings are more closely bundled, washing your genitals alleviates any concerns you might have about hygiene, and there is no evidence to suggest that circumcision leads to better sex.

Everyone is horrified about the idea of female genital mutilation in foreign countries, yet they readily accept our own form of a very similar thing simply because 'that's the way it's always been'.

Anyway, we're getting sidetracked - the point was that I think teaching children that they'll burn in hell if they don't do as God says, but they will get into heaven if they do as God says, is brainwashing in its most obvious form.

Well then how do you explain people who become religious as adults?

I think that that can be largely ascribed to the fact that we live in a predominantly religious society where there are both pressures to become religious, and benefits to doing so; and besides, I doubt too many people who were brought up by their parents to think logically, rationally and critically do actually comprise a large percentage of converts.

But every parent teaches their child what they think is right, and every parent is going to influence their child just by being who they are.

Yeah, I agree with that, but I think there are some important distinctions to make. Firstly, I think that it is better and more loving to teach your child how to think, rather than what to think. Secondly, I don't think that embodying the more positive philosophies of Jesus, Buddha or Mohammed are likely to be negative influences on a child's development. If a parent is loving, forgiving, tolerant etcetera, then of course the child will learn valuable positive lessons by example.

But that is a very different thing to brainwashing a child's mind with unsubstantiated dogma. It's not so binary, so black and white, that you either have to indoctrinate children into believing in your specific religion's dogma and myths, or the only other option is to not teach a child any form of morality, ethics, love or understanding.

It has been conclusively shown that our sense of ethics - what's right or wrong - is almost identical throughout all cultures. So this idea that a religion, or religion in general, gives us any morality that we otherwise wouldn't have is simply and categorically untrue.

Hang on a minute, doesn't almost every culture on Earth also have some kind of God?

Yes, but non-religious people have the same sense of ethics too. The problem with your logic here is that you're presuming religion to come first in terms of forming our sense of ethics, but our sense of ethics evolved long before religion existed, and then when we did form religions they were based upon our pre-existing morality.

It's not because someone comes down from a mountain to slay the astrological sign of Taurus and tell us that God says 'murder is bad' that we hold that value as truth. There are more obvious reasons for our ethics evolving the way that they have, which is why they do in all societies, and persist. Our ethics are beneficial to us, and all that religion does is take our pre-existing ethics, put it into an authoritarian dogmatic format and freeze it in time.

Um, what the fuck are you talking about Taurus?

We'll get to that later. Hey, didn't you just swear? Isn't that a sin or something?

No monkey ain't my kin

Nah, we've gotten a lot more tolerant of that sort of thing lately - everyone has this idea of religion being old-school and uptight, but it's actually pretty cool now.

You know, I find it amusing that religion survives by utilising a core mechanism of biological evolution.

Say what now?

Adaptation. Religion adapts to the current mode of society - things getting all pent up because of a minority group in your society? Guess what, it'd be a sin not to kill them all! What's that? Everyone's getting all liberal and tolerant? No problem, the church is now down with that. Oh, and the theory of evolution is now an indisputable fact? Well, guess who probably... nay, definitely created something so cool as evolution? That's right, God did it! Forget that stuff we said was literal fact and killed people who even suggested otherwise, 'cause now all that stuff is just a parable and your new-age post-60s baby-boomer God loves you very much and doesn't want to smite you at all.

Gonna have to pull you up on the contradiction there my godless friend. How can a theory be a fact?

Well, it's an unfortunate case of semantics. The theory of evolution isn't a theory like a 'theory' that peanut butter might be a cure for AIDS but, rather, an established branch of science that has literally millions of pieces of empirical evidence and observed, qualified, testable, repeatable, peer-reviewed supporting facts.

As far as something being factual is concerned, it doesn't get much more so than biological evolution. The validity of the theory of evolution is undeniable, irrefutable and unequivocal. Certainly there is more to understand about how the evolutionary process occurs, but that it does occur is a fact, not a fancy.

But, I mean, how can something as complex as the human eye, or brain, or the delicate intricacy of the ecosystem just happen randomly? It's ridiculous. You only need to look around to see that the universe we live in was designed, not just an accident.

I remember being in grade 5 and I had to deliver a message to a teacher in grade 7. I walked into the classroom and there was all this algebra written on the blackboard - and I just stared at it. I'd seen this sort of thing before in movies where people at universities scribbled As and Bs and Xs and Ys and square root symbols and things onto blackboards, but this was real life. I mean, this was what I was supposed to be learning in just a few short years... and it seemed utterly impossible, ridiculous even, that I would ever be able to understand something like the stuff that was written up on the blackboard in all of its cryptic complexity.

But as I began to learn algebra it all just fitted into place. Incrementally, it all made sense

- the more I understood, the less ridiculous it seemed. To the point where I actually enjoyed algebra and wanted to learn more about it.

You know, making out like understanding evolution is about as fun and easy as understanding algebra probably isn't doing a lot for your cause right now.

No, likely not... but the point is that all new ideas seem ridiculous until we understand them. Everyone was utterly incredulous of the idea that the earth might not be flat, or that women might be able to be educated, or that leeching blood from sick people might not be a good idea - the very notion of these ideas even being questioned resulted in extreme derision toward anyone suggesting them.

Galileo spent the last years of his life under house arrest by the Roman Catholic Church because he heretically contradicted the scriptures by pointing out that the earth was not, in fact, the centre of the universe and that the earth revolved around the sun instead of the other way around.

And of course the same was, and to a lesser extent still is, true of Darwin's theory of evolution. The idea that humans were in any way related to animals was, by many, considered even more ridiculous and implausible than the earth being round. I mean, despite the seemingly pretty obvious similarities between humans and animals, it was still nearly impossible for people to even consider the idea. We are lactating mammals who put food in our mouths, excrete, urinate, fight and fornicate. It seems much more absurd that anyone could have ever believed us to be so separate from animals.

Well, I mean I get that we're mammals and everything, but there are very important distinctions between humans and animals.

Yeah, you know what? I think we make a much bigger deal out of what differences there are than is actually warranted. I agree that the ability to understand things, plan ahead, use logic and be self-aware are very meaningful and useful things, but I also find it deeply ironic that by exercising these very same faculties we necessarily arrive at the conclusion that the differences between us and animals aren't all that great. I mean, the more we gain the things that actually do separate us from animals, the more likely we are to understand that we're not very different from other animals at all.

Most things in nature, it seems to me, exist on a continuum rather than as a black-and-white binary state. We like to put things into neat little boxes because it makes us feel safe and assured, but the reality of the world tends to be a lot more nuanced and complicated than it is convenient for us to believe.

If we look at the difference between ourselves and a single-celled organism, it seems absurd that we have much to do with one another, but if we look at the differences between ourselves and a chimpanzee, it seems absurd to think that we aren't very closely related. In things like language, culture, tool-making and even humour, other primates display very similar behaviours to our own.

I'm with you on the other ones, but humour? I haven't had any good jokes told to me by a monkey lately, I don't know about you.

Well, there's the case of Koko the gorilla who knows over 1,000 hand signs and can understand more than 2,000 English words. A researcher named Barbara Hiller saw that Koko had made a nest of white towels and asked Koko what colour the towels were. Koko signed that they were red. Ms. Hiller scolded Koko for being naughty when she knew very well that they were not red, and asked her again what colour the towels were, and again Koko signed that they were red. Koko was then given a small ultimatum and asked what colour the towels were, at which point Koko grinned broadly, picked up a small piece of red fluff on one of the towels and signed 'red, red, red!'.

From an evolutionary perspective, humour and laughter are social skills to relieve tension. We often laugh at things that we're repressed about; things like sex, genitals, faeces, urine, racism, sexism and God. Conversely we don't find things like tables or headphones very humorous subject matter because there is no repressed tension about them.

All in all we are very similar to other primates, and they in turn are very similar to lower order mammals, who are very similar to reptiles, who are very similar to fish, and so on until we get down to bacteria.

Yeah, look, I still don't buy it - the complexity and beauty of the world just doesn't seem like an accident or a random series of events to me.

Well, it's not a random series of events at all, it's an unimaginably long process of

natural selection. Mutation happens randomly, but natural selection determines whether a particular mutation survives or not. If the mutation helps survival, say it makes an animal's venom slightly more toxic, then that mutation might survive in the species. If, however, the mutation makes the animal's venom slightly less toxic then it might hinder survival and so be eradicated from the gene pool over time.

Evolution in the form of increasing complexity and improvement happens because mutations that confer benefits to a particular species make those animals with helpful mutations more likely to survive and pass on their genes. Conversely those animals who do not have helpful mutations are less likely to survive.

So why isn't every animal's venom as toxic as can be then?

Well, because there simply hasn't existed environmental pressures for it to need to be in order for a particular species to survive. It's a very common mistake that we make to presume that there's intent in nature, but there isn't. There's no one planning what happens next, it just happens as a matter of course and if it's beneficial, it survives. A snake's venom only needs to be venomous enough to kill its prey or its own predators, and if we look at each venomous animal's venom and the environment in which they've evolved, we can see how and why that particular animal has evolved in the way that it has.

Just as humans in hot places have dark skin to protect them from the sun, and humans in places with less sunlight have lighter skin to maximise the amount of vitamin D that they can absorb, so too all animals and their respective environments. It's all beautifully logical.

Having a physical characteristic such as the large antlers of a stag are taxing to the animal's mobility and need for food and energy, so there is a selection pressure being exerted to keep the antlers as small as possible, whilst there's simultaneously a selection pressure to make them as large as possible so that the stag will win its territorial fights and thus pass on its genes. Over time a species will come to a point of balance. The stag's antlers will become as big as possible without adversely hindering the stag's ability to survive.

Another thing to consider is that a lot of the evolutionary process is driven by what are called 'arms races' where two animal species, often predator and prey, evolve ways of surviving, for example by either avoiding being killed by, or by successfully killing, the

other. You might have a situation where, say, impalas are becoming better at running away over thousands of generations, whilst lions are getting better and running after and killing the impalas over the same thousands of generations.

At the end of it both the lions and the impalas are much faster and more agile animals, but the amount of successful kills and escapes may not have changed very much at all (though there are of course fluctuations in either direction at different points). And of course this works for all biologically-evolved phenomena such as eyesight, immune systems and brains with which to formulate sentences such as these.

That um... that's a lot to take in. I still don't entirely understand.

Yeah, look, it's a huge subject matter and it took me a while to really get my head around a lot of it too. I strongly suggest you read some of Richard Dawkins' books on evolution. Specifically *The Blind Watchmaker* and *The Greatest Show on Earth* both of which are highly illuminating.

You know, I'm starting to feel like I'm just the fall guy for your arguments. How about I grill you for a chapter?

Sure.

Science - isn't that what Tom Cruise is into or something?

Okay, so to my mind actively disbelieving in something without any proof isn't any better than actively believing in something without any proof.

I don't actively disbelieve in God, I just don't think that him existing is very likely. Most people think that atheists are sure of things, but we're not - most of us just assert that we should go by evidence rather than faith. The vast majority of us think that we should just be rational about things, instead of fanciful or narrow-minded.

So you don't necessarily rule out that God might be real? If you don't know, how can you call yourself an atheist?

I don't rule out anything, at all. I just base my judgements on evidence and probabilities. So, I think that there's a high probability that the sun will rise tomorrow, and a very low

probability that I will win the lottery, or that the universe was created and ruled by the father of some guy that lived near where Israel is now a couple of thousand years ago who throws temper tantrums and kills people, especially seeing as I haven't actually bought a lottery ticket. I don't believe in God, but I don't discount the possibility of there being things, probably lots of things, that I don't understand about the universe. Or the multiverse as the case may be.

Technically I could be described as agnostic, which means 'without knowing', but this term implies that I have ambivalence about belief in God, which is misrepresentative of what I think because I don't believe in God at all. If evidence comes to light that God or gods do, in fact, exist, then I will change my position. But until then I don't believe in God, so I am an atheist. Being an atheist doesn't mean that you think that God or gods are completely impossible, just that you don't actively believe in them.

Ha! So, for all you know I'm entirely right and you're entirely wrong.

Well, it's possible, but I don't think it's very likely. Black and white, binary thinking like that doesn't represent the reality of the situation or allow for any real understanding, whereas probabilities do. Let me ask you this - do you believe in any of the Roman or Greek Gods? Do you believe in Zeus?

I'm asking the questions in this chapter.

Okay, I'm just going to assume that you don't believe in Zeus nor fear his lightning bolt wrath. Dawkins, whom I mentioned above, posed this thought originally. I think he said something along the lines of "We are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further."

Next question. What happened before the big bang then? Where did the universe come from if not from a creator?

That's quite a loaded question. Do you mind if I have a slightly long answer?

Yes, probably, but what am I going to do? I can't leave, can I?

Right, no, I guess not. Well, seeing as time didn't exist before the big bang, I'm not sure it's even relevant to ask what came 'before' it, but I get what you mean. The short answer is that I don't really know, nor does anyone with any amount of certainty... but that does not

mean that we should jump to some spiritual conclusion, or even a vague presumption of something supernatural.

The reason that we shouldn't is that we have presumed at every point, before scientific inquiry showed us otherwise, that there were magical, mystical qualities to things, and we have been proved wrong every single time.

Before we understood astronomy and gravity we thought that we were the centre of the universe and that everything revolved around us, we thought that the earth was held up by an infinite stack of turtles amongst other things. Before we understood light we thought that the eye projected light out into the world so that we could see things. Before we understood biology and diseases we thought that there were devils inside us that caused us to die. And of course I could go on, but the point is that there is a pattern of us presuming mystical, magical, spiritual reasons for things happening throughout history, and wherever scientific inquiry has ventured, it has categorically disproved these superstitions and shown them to be completely false.

We like to invent meanings and reasons for things we don't understand. It's easy for us to scoff at the beliefs of people hundreds of years ago, or even a few generations ago for that matter, but yet we fail to recognise that we are those very same deluded fools to the generations hence.

Hmm, yes, I had suspected you were a fool.

Until we recognise that we might be wrong, we can never be right.

Now, I don't profess to have all the answers to all of the cosmological questions, but I do, however, profess to have the method - the scientific method. The scientific method consists of gathering observable, empirical and measurable evidence that is then subject to reasoning and a peer-reviewed process. This method has led us out of a state where we were extremely ignorant, to where we find ourselves now - which is also extremely ignorant, though comparatively far less so.

To answer your earlier question directly, I suspect that our universe is one of many, and that there are certain cyclic qualities to how universes are formed. To be completely honest, I have my own pet theory that the true nature of the universe resembles a hologram, but I would

never assert it as 'the truth' because I have no real evidence and it's kinda vague.

Well, you seem to be quite the fan of science, but from where I'm standing it's not all it's cracked up to be. Science has been heinously wrong and destructive - like with DDT, or nuclear weapons, or pollution.

You know, despite all the whining and complaining about how awful our modern western lives are, we are now enjoying the best living conditions and highest life-expectancy rates in history. By far. And almost all of it is entirely thanks to science. Well, science and exploitation of the third world, but that's another story.

The average life expectancy for almost all humans throughout history has been between 30 and 40 years, it's now around 75 years. If those people who lived in squalor and pestilence, with no electricity, no modern medicine, no cars, no clean water, no gourmet food, no television, no iPods and no recliner chairs could look in at us complaining about how difficult modern life is, they'd probably pray to their primitive gods to smite us with a violent and righteous vengeance.

We have these romantic notions of how great the simple old life used to be, but the truth is that the simple old life was largely miserable, terrifying, hard, punctuated by various unidentified illnesses and, consequently, quite short.

There is no doubt that scientists have screwed some things up, but usually that is because they haven't followed the scientific method. For instance you mentioned DDT, which wasn't properly tested on animals or humans before it was sprayed all over the place; nor were its broader environmental effects given much consideration. So in cases such as these, it is specifically because the scientific method was not employed that things went wrong.

In other situations science has certainly played a part in some pretty destructive scenarios - Zyklon B and nuclear weapons spring to mind. But again, it's not right to blame science nor the scientific process for the nefarious or destructive actions that people use scientific discovery for. It's like blaming a baseball bat company for someone getting beaten up with a baseball bat. No, actually it's more like blaming the tree that the baseball bat was made from.

I agree that science is both useful and destructive but,

Hang on, sorry, science is neutral - science is just knowledge, really. It's the pursuit of

understanding the natural world. What actions and value judgements we apply after the fact are a separate issue.

Okay, sure, whatever, but the point I want to make is that even if you're right, what do you get out of it? I mean, if there is a God I win and you lose, and if there isn't a God then we both lose, right?

Medieval French gambling problems and props to the emo kids

Ah, yes, Pascal's wager - this was bound to come up eventually. Blaise Pascal first put this idea forward in the mid to late 1600s arguing that we cannot know whether god exists or not using reason alone, so we should err on the side of caution because we've got everything to gain and nothing to lose.

Sound's pretty sensible to me too.

There's a few problems with the logic though.

I'm curious as to how you're going to try and get out of this one. Go on.

The first problem is the matter of all the world's religions past and present. If we are to take Pascal's wager to its logical conclusion, then we need to worship, pray to, follow the rules of, pay tithes to, go to the church, synagogue, mosque, and temple of, every single god and goddess that has ever existed. And seeing as quite a few of them say that you have to worship them and no other god otherwise the deal is off, it leaves you in an impossible situation where no matter what you do, you're going to hell, or you'll be reincarnated as a pustule on the bum of a diseased hyena, or whatever.

The second problem is that this proposition renders God no more probable than pink unicorns living on Venus with telepathic powers born in volcanoes who eat our souls for afternoon tea. It is a logical fallacy to assert that such a proposition affords any credibility to the idea itself.

The third problem is that God supposedly knows everything, and so knows that you're merely manipulating the situation to your own advantage by hedging your bets instead of having the blind, unquestioning faith that is the supposed true ticket into heaven.

The fourth problem is to suppose that if God did exist he would prefer to have people hanging out with him in heaven who blindly follow instead of using their powers of reason. Who, after all, is morally superior - the person who blindly follows orders, or the person who has moral agency and does what's right irrespective of what they're told to do?

As far as I can tell, it is only through really questioning how and why some things are moral and some things are not, that we can arrive at any real understanding of it. Otherwise it's just a reaction devoid of meaningful value.

What do you mean devoid of meaningful value? So you're saying that all religious people's morals aren't worth as much as non-religious people's morals? That's absurd.

Well, no, not exactly. A jesuit theologian who studies ethics is obviously going to have more of a developed sense of morality than an illiterate violent person who just sorta doesn't believe in anything, but neither of those people are representative of the average.

What's up with making a distinction between atheists and 'non-religious' people?

Well, I think it's an important distinction to make, although I'm not actually quite sure how to make it. See, thing is that there's a quite big difference between people who are free thinkers and people who don't think about anything at all. To the point where I'd say that atheists and religious people have more in common than atheists and people who haven't ever really considered morality in any kind of meaningful way.

And the other thing is that it's hard to define because it's not just atheists, but also agnostics, secular humanists, existentialists and myriad other philosophical categories that people fall into, so for the purposes of simplicity I'll label all of them 'free thinkers'.

I think I'm about to finally score a point against you here.

Yeah, I think you're right.

So, um, you think that religious people are morally superior to non-religious people who don't think about ethics or morals at all, right?

Yeah, I concede that it's better to have some moral framework as prescribed by religious dogma than it is to have only limited instinctual morality as a human living in a modern society removed from the small tribal social orders that we evolved to live within.

And I'll also concede that having religious beliefs of some description are naturally

evolved phenomena. They occur in every single human culture - perhaps because there is a convergence between our innate sense of ethics and justice, and our desire to give the world some sort of meaning.

So, if religion happens naturally and is better than having no religion, then don't I win this entire argument?

No, because being a free thinker is, I think, much better than being religious.

By what measure? I'm pretty sure I've read studies that confirm that religious people are generally happier and also live longer.

Well, to start with I question whether those studies have delineated between 'non-religious' people and free thinkers, like I have.

Whoa, hang on, so you're asserting to place your hypothetical conjecture over a peer-reviewed scientific study?

Hmm, you've got a point there. Okay, so let's assume for the sake of argument that those studies are right, and religious people are both happier and live for longer. I still maintain that being a free thinker is better for the individual, the human species and also the planet at large.

Yeah? How so?

Well, for individuals I think that there is some truth in the idea that ignorance is bliss, but I think very few people would want to be ignorant again once they had knowledge. The vast majority of us value truth, integrity and our own minds over an artificial state of mindless contentment. To use an extreme example to illustrate the point, would you prefer to have a full frontal lobotomy and be dribbling with happiness for the rest of your life, or would you prefer to maintain your own integrity of mind and suffer the confusion, doubt, sorrow and hurt that goes along with being human?

I'd choose the latter in that extreme example, but by the same token, there's nothing wrong with being happy.

No, certainly there isn't, but the point I'm trying to make is that being happy is just one aspect of being human. Experiencing the beauty of a sorrowful song, or the grief of losing someone you love is a part of it too. I read an excellent essay by Dr. Eric G. Wilson of Wake Forest University entitled 'In Praise of Melancholy: American culture's overemphasis on

happiness misses an essential part of a full life' a while ago, and I think it makes a lot of really cogent arguments. Do you mind if I quote a bit of it?

Not at all.

"A recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that almost 85 percent of Americans believe that they are very happy or at least pretty happy. The psychological world is now abuzz with a new field, positive psychology ... Mainstream publishers are learning from the self-help industry and printing thousands of books on how to be happy. Doctors offer a wide array of drugs that might eradicate depression forever. It seems truly an age of almost perfect contentment, a brave new world of persistent good fortune, joy without trouble, felicity with no penalty.

... Are we to believe that four out of every five Americans can be content amid the general woe? Are some people lying, or are they simply afraid to be honest in a culture in which the status quo is nothing short of manic bliss? Aren't we suspicious of this statistic? Aren't we further troubled by our culture's overemphasis on happiness? Don't we fear that this rabid focus on exuberance leads to half-lives, to bland existences, to wastelands of mechanistic behavior?

I for one am afraid that American culture's overemphasis on happiness at the expense of sadness might be dangerous, a wanton forgetting of an essential part of a full life. I further am concerned that to desire only happiness in a world undoubtedly tragic is to become inauthentic, to settle for unrealistic abstractions that ignore concrete situations. I am finally fearful of our society's efforts to expunge melancholia. Without the agitations of the soul, would all of our magnificently yearning towers topple? Would our heart-torn symphonies cease?

My fears grow out of my suspicion that the predominant form of American happiness breeds blandness. This kind of happiness appears to disregard the value of sadness. This brand of supposed joy, moreover, seems to foster an ignorance of life's enduring and vital polarity between agony and ecstasy, dejection and ebullience. Trying to forget sadness and its integral place in the great rhythm of the cosmos, this sort of happiness insinuates that the blues are an aberrant state that should be cursed as weakness of will or removed with the help of a little

pink pill.

I'm not questioning joy in general. For instance, I'm not challenging that unbearable exuberance that suddenly emerges from long suffering. I'm not troubled by that hard-earned tranquillity that comes from long meditation on the world's sorrows. I'm not criticizing that slow-burning bliss that issues from a life spent helping those who hurt. And I'm not romanticizing clinical depression. I realize that there are many lost souls out there who require medication to keep from killing themselves or harming their friends and families. I'm not questioning pharmaceutical therapies for the seriously depressed or simply to make existence bearable for so many with biochemical disorders.

... My sense is that most of us have been duped by the American craze for happiness. We might think that we're leading a truly honest existence, when we're really just behaving as predictably and artificially as robots, falling easily into well-worn "happy" behaviors, into the conventions of contentment. Deceived, we miss out on the great interplay of the living cosmos, its luminous gloom, its terrible beauty.

The American dream of happiness might be a nightmare. What passes for bliss could well be a dystopia of flaccid grins. Our passion for felicity hints at an ominous hatred for all that grows and thrives and then dies. I'd hate for us to awaken one morning and regret what we've done in the name of untroubled enjoyment. I'd hate for us to crawl out of our beds and walk out into a country denuded of gorgeous lonely roads and the grandeur of desolate hotels, of half-cracked geniuses and their frantic poems. I'd hate for us to come to consciousness when it's too late to live."

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense to me too.

That's actually just an excerpt from an essay that was adapted from the book he wrote called "Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy" published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. After reading that, it brought something into sharp relief for me - the very big difference between depression and melancholy, which I'd previously always kind of associated with one another.

The important distinction to make is that depression takes meaning away, whereas melancholy adds meaning to your life.

And that's the crux of it for me - a meaningful life, even a slightly shorter one, is infinitely more desirable than, as Dr. Wilson so eloquently put it, a "dystopia of flaccid grins". Ignorance is only ever a shallow bliss.

There's also the matter of what's best for both us humans and the planet to take into consideration too. Now, quite aside from the things I said before about how having intellectual and moral agency makes us less susceptible to authoritarian control and genocides etcetera, I think that there's also an argument to be made for self-preservation and how religion might be counter-productive to our own survival.

But didn't you just say before that religion is a naturally evolved thing?

Yeah, I did, but you're presuming that evolution has some kind of purpose in mind or is perfect. Just because something's 'natural' or evolved, doesn't mean that it's ideal. As far as we know, we're the first sentient, self-aware organisms to have mutated into existence on this planet, and so it may very well turn out that such a mutation is like most mutations - one that doesn't aid survival but, rather, hinders it.

I mean, obviously having a human brain is going to aid survival in terms of being able to organise, create advanced weapons, strategies to defend oneself, gather and hunt food etcetera, but in the longer term our own ability to consciously subvert our own instincts and the equilibrium with our environment may prove do be our undoing.

The way I see it we're at a crossroads. Either we'll continue to pollute and over-populate to the point of our own destruction, or we'll finally transcend our base, animal behaviours, grow up as a species and a real utopia will become manifest.

That sounds, um, well... kinda preachy man. Like something out of revelations.

Our father who art in trouble with child welfare

Yeah, I see what you mean. I think maybe the reason is that the context of what's about to happen on our planet is kind of intense. Things are coming to a head and polarising, and as we reach a point of critical mass, they're either going to go one way or the other.

The reason this is happening is that we're like a car that was made with no brakes; and

that was fine whilst we were travelling up the hill of evolution, but now we've taken away all of our natural selection pressures, so we're driving downhill. Very fast. With no brakes.

What do you mean we've taken away our natural selection pressures?

Well, our ability to scavenge for or hunt food, the robustness of our immune systems, our physical fitness, all these sorts of things used to determine whether we got to pass on our genes or not. Now that we have things like agriculture and modern medicine, though, those pressures are no longer keeping our population, and the quality of our population, in check.

In fact, now the exact inverse is true. The most successful members of our western societies are the least likely to procreate, and the least successful members are the most likely to procreate.

So what do you propose? Eugenics? Mass genocide?

No, of course not. What would be ideal is if the world was much more educated, because the more educated people are, the less likely they are to have lots of children. And that's ultimately what threatens us and our planet more than anything else - overpopulation. It's the elephant in the room that no politicians want to acknowledge because it's quite the ethical prickly pear.

Unless you're an authoritarian state like China.

True - the one child population control policy that they have is the only real example of us acting as a species to control our own population. And this is the insane thing, because for all the lip service that everyone pays to environmentalism, no one seems to be saying much about us voluntarily controlling our own population levels because it's too politically sensitive a topic. But if we did control our population as a species, that's the only thing we'd really need to do for the environment.

If we were to, say, make the total worldwide population of the planet somewhere around 750 million to 1 billion people, then we could do almost anything and use as many resources as we wanted and it wouldn't make all that much difference because the human population would be at a sustainable level for everyone to live with abundance.

Instead though we're procreating like rabbits whilst simultaneously creating a world where more and more people consume more and more resources. Our economies are based on

growth, not sustainability.

So all this garbage about being green and everything is just pointless anyway then?

No, sorry, I didn't mean to imply that at all. I'm an avid environmentalist because every little bit counts and it would be suicidal and stupid to just do nothing. It's also especially important that we demonstrate as much as possible the act of working together as a species in the interests of our own survival. The point I'm trying to make though is that the most important environmental thing that we can do is to control our own population levels over the next few generations.

We need to do this in addition to doing everything we can to limit our carbon emissions, pollution levels and resource consumption, but if we do not control our own population, then we're on a headlong collision course with disaster and possibly even extinction.

We're getting sidetracked here, right? This hasn't got anything to do with religion.

Well, here's the thing - I think it does. I think that religion keeps people in a prolonged state of intellectual childhood, and this means that we don't have the ability to make mature and responsible decisions.

What?

When people subscribe to a religion they're replacing their parental archetypes. I mean, when you think about it it's not even very disguised a psychological mechanism. We refer to 'Mother' Mary and our 'Father' who art in heaven. We follow our 'father's' authority, we defer to his judgement, we fear his anger, we crave his love.

I hadn't thought of it like that. Buy why just a father archetype? I know you just mentioned mother Mary, but she's not really on the same level as God, even for Catholics.

Well, I think the reason is that we live in a patriarchy. More ancient religions like paganism worshipped a goddess as the creator of life, which makes a lot more sense when you think about it.

Right, and so they weren't patriarchies.

Well, no, actually - they were patriarchies too, they just worshipped a goddess. Anyway, the point is that religion gives people a crutch that allows them to linger in this state of

intellectual childhood, and we really, really need to get to a point where we can act more maturely, with more foresight and wisdom than can ever possibly happen while we're still in that state.

And there's a lot of other things that go along with moving beyond the limitations of religious thought, because once humans start really thinking for themselves a lot of our less virtuous tendencies tend to go by the wayside. Things like territorialism and domination/submission behaviours tend to become less pronounced. They don't go away immediately or anything, but they start to wane.

I see it as quite a tragic irony that so many religions teach harmony, peace and love, but in reality it seems that religion is one of the greatest obstacles to us becoming truly harmonious, peaceful and loving as a species.

So you think that if we got rid of religion we'd all live more like religion tells us to live?

Yeah, maybe. Religion tells us to act morally because God told us to - thou shalt not steal, otherwise, presumedly, you're going to be punished. But fear of punishment isn't a particularly effective method of behavioural conditioning. Incentivisation is a better one, like promising heaven, but it's not ideal either.

If we can take the parental archetype thing and apply it here, God simply isn't a very good parent. Bad parents threaten their children, they smite them and become angry with them. But we know that parents achieve much, much better outcomes if they teach their children why something is wrong. Because then the children understand it and don't actually want to steal, as opposed to just telling them that it's wrong and punishing them if they do it, or rewarding them if they don't.

When we ourselves understand why something is right or wrong, then we can regulate our own behaviour. We become free and independent thinkers instead of mindless malleable automatons.

Atheists swing both ways

That's actually pretty blasphemous to call God a bad parent.

What does that mean, anyway? If I'm not religious, then blasphemy isn't a relevant concept to me. I'm not saying that to be rude, I just mean that you saying I can't criticise something or make a point because it disagrees with what you think is silly.

Well, I don't think that it's silly - I think it's just being respectful of other people's views.

No, I disagree. Being respectful of your view means listening to you and considering what you have to say openly and honestly. It's fine if you don't feel like talking about it, but telling me that I have to limit what points I make so as not to contradict what you think is just plain wrong.

I'm not saying that it's okay to just walk into a church on Sunday morning and start telling everyone that they're deluded about everything, but in the context of talking about religion and God, you can't reasonably expect people to avoid saying things that you arbitrarily decide aren't acceptable things to say.

It's not arbitrary, it's things which insult God. Why not just leave that sort of thing alone?

Well, because some of the things which you deem to be blasphemous are things which I think are relevant criticisms of religion. Just leaving things alone doesn't equate to peace, either. When people repress things and act out of fear it invariably ends badly in my experience. And the predominant softly, gently, let's not make anyone uncomfortable ethos is counter-productive in the long term, I think.

At the end of the day if you want to believe that there was a garden of eden instead of a process of biological evolution, that's fine, but let's be open with each other, let's be truthful and sincere in our quest for understanding.

Yeah, I agree with that, but I still don't think you have to insult God.

Perhaps we need to more clearly define what's an insult and what's a valid criticism. If I were to call your God stupid or ugly, then that would be an unnecessary insult, but if I were to say that I don't think it's likely that he exists, or that judging by the standards of parenting that he displays, he isn't very good because of this or that reason, then those are valid criticisms.

They're not intended to be derogatory, they're intended to show a relevant flaw in the validity of your position.

I think we should have a lot more open debate about things - it's healthy for a society to talk about things, and its repressive and unhealthy when we don't.

Okay, I want to go back just a little bit here. You said before that you think we should teach people why things are wrong, not just tell them that they are; and I get that in terms of, say, the ten commandments and some other stuff in the old testament for example... but Jesus uses a lot of parables to impart understanding, and lots of other religions do actually have a lot of real religious teachings. It's not all just authoritarian rules.

Yeah, look, that's a really valid point. I think that there are a lot of things in a lot of religious teachings that are very valuable. I think that Jesus and Buddha for example had many wise, intelligent things to say, as did many other religious teachers and texts.

You can't have it both ways. You can't say that religion is the worst thing in the world and then just turn around and say it's got lots of valuable lessons and wisdom.

Well, to start with I don't think religion is the worst thing in the world at all, I think it's just the mechanism that we've used to try and make sense of the world before we had science and reason. Now, though, it's largely outdated and counter-productive, and so it's time to move on. Like I said earlier I don't think that religion, or a lot of the teachings in religions, are the big problem, but rather the mindset that is a necessary prerequisite to be religious - to believe in a god and relinquish your moral responsibility and mind to it.

'It'? There you go with the blasphemy again.

Come on - you really think that the creator of the universe would have genitals? What would he or she use them for?

That whole 'man was made in the image of God' thing always seemed pretty backwards to me. Much more likely, I think, that God was created in the image of man - complete with a godly penis.

Anyway, to get back to the main point, I don't think we need to be so black and white about it. If Jesus teaches a lesson about showing compassion for those less fortunate than

ourselves, we don't need to throw that teaching away and do the opposite just because we use our reason to question the validity of things like virgin births, angry vengeful gods and supernatural ghost stories.

And this is one of the big problems, I think - we presume that it's either one way or the other, but the best way is very rarely so one-sided. Much more often it's a matter of balance - we can and should learn from the history of our moral and philosophical development. As we became more advanced, so did our religions.

To start with we worshipped quite philosophically under-developed sun gods and animal-related deities. Basically we were taking our cues directly from our environment. The sun in particular seemed a very obvious 'giver of life' so we attributed unto it various creation myths; we also interpreted a lot of meaning in the stars. For the most part our early gods were used to explain our existence rather than to provide moral frameworks.

Then we moved on to gods like the Christian old testament's God. Yahweh reflected our consciousness at the time and had more developed and complex rules, symbologies and meanings.

And when our societies became more advanced still, religion adapted too. Instead of an authoritarian, vengeful god, we were more receptive to more morally-advanced ideas like turning the other cheek, giving to the poor, questioning authority, loving thy neighbour and so on.

And now we find ourselves in a modern age and religion is trying to adapt to more modern ideas. Which is hard to do when your holy book says that it's the absolute, unequivocal word of God and that anyone who changes a word of it is going to have various awful things befall them.

Hang on a minute - there's still Jewish people, and they're not inferior to Christians.

No, certainly they're not, in fact the Jewish people are noted for being particularly intelligent and literate, however I still think that the old testament is less morally developed than the new testament is. The ideas in the old testament are a lot more authoritarian, prescriptive, absolutist and repressive. It's important to distinguish between people and the dogmas to which they subscribe.

Like with almost everything, there seems to be a continuum - you'll find people in our modern society whose moral development is less than that of most people who lived thousands of years ago. But anecdotal examples aren't representative of the average, nor of our general progress.

Yeah, I can see that the religions of the world and throughout history are products of their environment, but I still think that maybe that's because we all know God in some way but just don't know how to express it. I don't think anyone would profess to know the true nature of God, and I suspect that most religious people are like me and think that God is beyond our knowing.

I know what you're saying there and maybe you're right... but I really don't think so.

I think it makes much more sense that our primitive need for meaning and explanation for our existence resulted in creation myths and god concepts, and that those concepts evolved with our various societies. I think that a rational explanation for us inventing god concepts is certainly much more likely than there actually being a supernatural entity who wants us to perform in very specific, prescriptive functions in direct accordance with the values of the societies that each respective religion comes from at specific times in history.

If we attempt to look at human cultures and societies objectively, we can see how and why god concepts have occurred, and it becomes very apparent that we have projected our limited understanding of the world into these concepts. We keep revising them as our understanding of the world changes, yet at every point we tell ourselves that this particular thing that God says is absolutely and infallibly correct. But of course God hasn't written any of the scriptures of any of the world's religions - people have.

The evolution of religion

I want to talk a little bit about where religion, specifically the Christian religion, came

from.

Sure, why Christianity in particular though?

Well, because the facts of its origins are quite interesting and telling in light of the fact that the Christian religion is based largely on older religions.

Sorry, but you're going to need to qualify claims like that.

Absolutely. Okay, so to start with let's look at some of the big Christian traditions and ideas.

Christmas. December 25th is actually the winter solstice, the time of year in the northern hemisphere when the sun is lowest in the sky. This time was widely celebrated by many early societies long before Christianity.

Easter. This corresponds to the spring equinox. This time of year was also celebrated by many early civilisations, to which our current tradition of celebrating 'rebirth' at this time of year can be attributed.

So you're saying that the two biggest events in the Christian calendar are actually astrological events? Sorry, but that's ridiculous.

Do some research on it - it's really quite fascinating to see how our religious ideas dovetail and evolve into each other throughout history. The reason is that once people have formed attachments to ideas, they don't easily let them go. It's not like you can just start a brand new society with a new religion. No, the old ones become assimilated by the new ones because our societies are ever-changing things.

So let's have a look at a few other gods and myths that pre-dated Jesus by hundreds or thousands of years.

Krishna was a deity worshipped in India. Part of his story was that he was conceived without a sex act through a kind of mental transmission into his mother's womb - a virgin birth. His birth was signaled by a star in the east. He was mortally wounded by an arrow, but he arose again and is said to be immortal.

The Persian sun god Mithra's birth was on December 25th and was attended by shepherds. At the end of his life the gods leave him on the earth before he finally rises up into heaven.

The Egyptian sun god Horus' birth was also celebrated at the time of the winter solstice (as were many, many other deities).

So in this context let's examine the Jesus story. Jesus was born of a virgin, and his birth was signaled by a star in the east which was followed by three wise men to the birth place of the son of God. He was called the morning star and the light of the world. He was surrounded by 12 disciples. To save us all and give us eternal life, he died for three days and was then resurrected and ascended up into heaven.

Astrologically, Sirius is the brightest star and was and is called 'the star of the east'. On December 24th it aligns with the three brightest stars in Orion's belt, which are (and have for a very long time been) called 'the three kings, and points to where the sun rises.

The constellation of Virgo literally translates as 'virgin'. Virgo holds a sheaf of wheat and is referred to as 'the house of bread'. Bethlehem, where Jesus was said to be born, also literally translates as 'the house of bread'.

From the time of the summer solstice through to the winter solstice on December 21st, the days become shorter. For ancient societies this process symbolised the 'death' of the 'sun', until, on the 21st of December the sun reaches its lowest place in the sky.

At this point the sun seemingly stops moving south and seems to stay in place (or die) for three days before it finally rises again on the 25th of December, heralding rebirth and things 'coming back to life'. The sun shows us that we will have life again after the death of winter by rising back up into the heavens from whence it came.

Um, wow.

Now, in astrology the sun is represented with the cross symbol, and it is, of course, surrounded by the 12 signs of the zodiac; just as Jesus is represented with a cross symbol and is surrounded by 12 disciples.

Isn't that just a coincidence with the cross though? Jesus was, after all, crucified.

Well, actually it's possible that Jesus was actually crucified on an upright stake with his hands nailed or tied above his head. The Greek word 'stauros' which is used in the bible means 'stake'. It's possible that Jesus was crucified using two pieces of wood, but it's certainly not clear that this is the case.

Sun gods that predated Jesus, such as Horus, were known by the sign of the cross too as it was the universal symbol for the sun; and so it seems likely that this symbol was appropriated for the emerging Christian mythology just as the winter solstice and spring equinox pagan traditions were.

Hmmm.

Interestingly we also see in bible stories that Moses slays a bull. Unsurprisingly enough the astrological sign of Taurus is represented by the bull, and the timing of this event corresponds with the end of the age of Taurus. The next astrological age after Taurus, the age that we're still in today, is the age of Pisces - the symbol of which is the fish.

Jesus' symbol is also the fish - I'm sure you've seen Jesus fish bumper stickers, right? - and he said that he will be with us 'until the end of the age'. The age of Aquarius starts in the next hundred years or so, though it's somewhat contentious as to when it officially starts.

I think you'll find that the song clearly states that we are already in the 'age of aquarius'.

Actually the song says 'this is the dawning of the age of aquarius' but it doesn't really matter because there's no hard and fast rules. An astrological 'age' is supposed to go for around 2150 years. So when someone says that you are taking ages, it's literally an exaggeration of astronomical proportions.

The point of all this is that there is a documented historical record that shows that religions borrow a lot of things from each other and evolve their various superstitions and ideas in accordance with the way that each society is moving; and this fact undermines entirely the idea that any one religion is 'the one and only truth'.

Whether your Q'ran is telling to rise in holy jihad, a science-fiction writer is telling you that spirits were planted in volcanoes, or your bible is telling you you'll burn for all eternity if you don't perform various archaic rituals, it's all just a bunch of stuff that people made up. There's no compelling reason to believe that any of it is true.

The relative nature of subjective delusions

You only say that because you don't have the kind of personal relationship with God

that I do. It's not something that I can explain to you either. It's ineffable.

Yes, you said that before. You know, I was actually religious at one point in my life so I kinda do know what you mean. I believed that I was speaking directly with God, and that he had a special purpose for me, and that lots of things that were happening in my life were significant for one reason or another. After I stopped being religious I could see how and why certain things had appeared certain ways to me. My desire to see things through the lens of my religion made it a self-reinforcing construct, what psychology terms 'confirmation bias'. Everything that happened to me, right down to song lyrics, had some kind of meaning that was in accordance with my religious experience.

I had another experience in my life where I had a very similar experience - on drugs. When I was tripping or really stoned as a teenager I perceived special significance in many relatively mundane things. At one point whilst under the influence of drugs both myself and some other people I knew believed fervently that we were engaged in some kind of far-out spiritual warfare. All the songs we listened to had special significance - significance which seemed far too specific to be co-incidental - and we all thought that this was some pretty heavy, meaningful shit going down.

Of course in both instances I was entirely deluded. Like we were talking about a while ago with the Stanford prison experiment, or Nazi Germany, or with suicide cults - from the outside we all think that we're above susceptibility to such delusions because they seem ridiculous, laughable or inhuman to us. But whilst we're in the middle of our own cultural or personal delusions we can't see the forest for the trees. Everyone just presumes that they're in the driver's seat and that they know exactly what's going on in their own mind.

Here's an example: if you ask people whether they think they're affected by advertising, most people think that they either aren't affected at all by it, or are affected very little. But companies aren't actually very fond of spending millions of dollars on things which don't really affect people. Consequently, they don't.

Advertising categorically and absolutely affects people, often by subconsciously influencing rather than consciously convincing people. People's purchasing decisions aren't comprised of rational, objective, impartial decisions but, rather, emotional, subconscious,

irrational and malleable influences taking effect.

An example of this is that we humans have a tendency to be fearful of the unknown whilst conversely liking things that are familiar to us. So when we're standing in a supermarket aisle looking at two brands of rice, which are exactly the same product as each other but carry different brands, we are much more likely to pick up the brand of rice that has spent more money advertising to us because the familiarity we feel having seen that brand so many times makes us feel more comfortable with it. We perceive the brand we've seen more of to be more trustworthy, safe and desirable. Plus there's also all of the product benefits have been communicated to us about that particular product which our subconscious extrapolates to maybe not apply to competitor brands.

This decision is not only made subconsciously, but we don't even consider the fact that we've been influenced when we're picking up the bag of rice.

For us to attain any kind of objectivity it requires that we examine our own minds and seriously question a lot of things that we take for granted as 'the truth'.

But what is 'the truth' anyway? I mean we all have our own subjective experience of the world, and there's no objective measure of whether yours is better than mine.

Yeah, I get what you're saying, but I think the difference is that I'm not presuming to know what 'the truth' is. Instead I'm saying that we shouldn't presume that any particular specific thing is 'the truth'.

But you think that science is 'the truth'.

No, that's not true. I think that the scientific method is the best tool we have for understanding the universe and ourselves, but the current views of science I actually suspect to be largely flawed - primarily because at every point since the enlightenment, science has improved its understanding of the world. And that's the great thing about it, because science constantly disproves itself, or adds more depth of understanding to previously-held scientific 'truths'. But that word - truth - is something of a misnomer, because even amongst scientific laws such as gravity, there is still much conjecture and discovery going on about how it actually works. What has been learned so far is not invalidated by not having every answer to every question, but science is by its very definition always improving upon itself.

Individual scientists may have their own beliefs about a whole range of things, and sometimes they may even be as irrational and biased as a fundamentalist religious person is, but this does not mean that the scientific method itself is any less valuable.

I think that if you're not receptive to the idea that you might be wrong, then you're close-minded and, well, probably wrong.

Well, I think you're probably wrong.

Okay, sure, but instead of just agreeing to disagree here, it would make more sense if we examined why we think each other is wrong, and ascribed rational value to those reasons.

See, the reason I think that being unreceptive to the fact that you might be wrong means that you are probably wrong, is that improvement can only happen if we are open to new ideas. That sounds like a tautology, but I think it's an important point to make, and one that is often overlooked.

If we had remained close-minded to improvements in the area of medical science, we would still believe that we could cure all manner of illnesses by drilling holes into people's heads, or using heroin on babies, or leeches for blood-letting.

I agree that we need to be open to new ideas, but I maintain that your truth is your truth and mine is mine, and I don't think that we can necessarily tell whose is better than the other, ultimately.

Well, I think that depends on how you're measuring the value of our values. I recognise that things are ultimately subjective, but I think it's that same black and white, linear thinking to suggest that that's all there is to it.

You can say that a suicide cult is as good a life choice as, say, eating well and exercising, and perhaps by absolute subjective standards you'd be right. But as soon as you introduce any kind of rational judging criteria you begin to get a much more accurate idea of what's really going on. You won't get an objective measure, but you will get a more reasonable measure.

We like to have absolute answers because, like brands of rice with big advertising budgets, we like things that make us feel that we're in familiar territory - somewhere safe and easy to understand. It's a really quite a significant change in paradigm to question ourselves instead. Most of the time we all just go along trying to reinforce the ideas we already have

through our upbringing, culture, prejudices, beliefs and various other mental constructions instead of actually doing what it is that we presume we're doing - being truthful, aware and honest.

Most of us are oblivious to the fact that we not only see things the way we want to see them, but also actively seek to promote things in our own minds that agree with our prejudices, whilst dismissing (or destroying) things which threaten our preconceived ideas. The examples of the Stanford Prison Experiment or Nazi Germany aren't just outlying extremes, they're just more extreme manifestations of the irrational, delusional and erroneous behaviours that we engage in every single day.

We are impressionable, malleable, suggestible creatures, and it's only through attempting to examine ourselves with real honesty that we can hope to be anything else. I would suggest that anyone who presumes that they aren't a product of the influences that have surrounded them, without having attempted to understand and scrutinise those influences, is almost certainly deluded.

Einstein once said that "Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen". And each generation's prevailing common sense is the next generation's cause for incredulous mirth.

A cosmic Jewish zombie who can make you live forever

Right, what's next then? Should we go and insult some saints or something?

Well, I was thinking that a synopsis of some of the world's religions might be a good idea. You know, just to take things from the vague and reverent idea we have of various religious beliefs and put them into a more definitive and critical context.

That sounds, like, really boring.

I'll try and make it interesting by looking at some of the more absurd things that people believe to this day.

So you really are going to make fun of some saints then? I wasn't actually serious.

Well, I'm not going to try and insult anyone, but I will focus upon things that I think are

absurd to believe to highlight the point I'm trying to make.

And what point would that be?

You know, that not believing in religion is pretty great. The whole point of this little book, really.

Oh right. So you're trying to indoctrinate people to your particular way of thinking. Your dogma, so to speak.

Well, my way of thinking is for people to think for themselves, my smart-arse-pretend-religious friend, so yeah.

Go on then.

Right, so easy target first. Scientology. Part of me doesn't want to even mention them because including them with other world religions somehow gives them credibility... but screw it, they're fun.

Scientology is a religion invented by Science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard. Scientologists believe that an evil galactic overlord called Xenu implanted alien space souls into volcanoes on Earth and then implanted, ironically enough, the delusion of religion into humans so that they could be controlled. The space alien souls, called 'thetans', attach themselves to humans, and the only way to get rid of them is to pay the Church of Scientology money to have them removed. You also have to pay the Church of Scientology to 'learn' about these things that I've just told you, but today, for you - no charge.

Ha ha. What, the fact that the head of their religion is a science fiction writer didn't tip anyone off?

Well, yes, it does seem a bit ridiculous. But then consider this very succinct, if slightly inflammatory, definition of Christianity that I've seen a few times on the internets:

"Christianity: the belief that a cosmic Jewish zombie, who was his own father, can make you live forever if you symbolically eat his flesh and telepathically tell him that you accept him as your master, which will allow him to remove an evil force from your soul that is present in humanity because a woman made from a rib was convinced by a talking snake to eat from a magical tree 6,000 years ago when the earth began."

Hmm.

Another point I want to make about Christianity, and this relates to all three major Abrahamic religions, is that God being angry about things doesn't make any sense at all. For instance God got really angry when Adam and Eve ate the apple, but if as the bible states he is omniscient and knows everything, then surely he first of all knew that it was going to happen, and secondly could have stopped it if he wanted. It seems more than a little ridiculous to be angry about something that you created the conditions for, knew ahead of time was going to happen and could have easily prevented if you wanted to.

In fact much of God's behaviour seems a bit immature and ridiculous. The kinds of people who get jealous and angry aren't very wise, intelligent, aware and loving people, in my experience - they tend to be puerile, embittered, ignorant people, and I don't know about you but I would expect more of an all-knowing deity than that.

The basic idea of humans having free will is in contradiction to God being omniscient. If God knows everything ahead of time, then he knows what decisions you're going to make with your free will. If he doesn't know what you're going to do, then he's not omniscient, and probably a bit less informed than a decent behavioural psychologist. When God created humans from a lump of clay, he must necessarily have known exactly what was going to happen at every point henceforth, or else not be omniscient at all.

Well, I'm not God so I don't know why he doesn't know some things, but I know that he knows, you know?

No, not really. Anyway, moving right along, some of the more offensive, archaic and ethically abhorrent bible quotes include, but are not limited to:

- II Kings 2:23-24: In which some children make fun of a bald man called Elisha. Their punishment for this crime is to be mauled to death by bears. Seriously. Look it up.

- Deuteronomy 20:10-14: In this compassionate and ethically-advanced bible passage we learn of God's instructions to his people that "When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. When the LORD your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything

else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the LORD your God gives you from your enemies.” So basically invasion, slavery, murder and rape of people who dare to be sitting around living their lives not hurting anyone in their own city, because God said that one ethnic group is superior to another and therefore entitled to such things.

- Numbers 31:7-18: In this one Moses is angry with the righteous murdering army who killed all the men, but kept the women and children alive as plunder. Moses tells the army that “They are the ones who caused the plague to strike the LORD’s people. Now kill all the boys and all the women who have slept with a man. Only the young girls who are virgins may live; you may keep them for yourselves.” I don’t know about you, but if I was a young girl and someone had just killed my father, mother and siblings, I wouldn’t be too happy about then being raped. But apparently it’s cool, you know, because Moses said it is and he’s real solid with God.

- Leviticus 20:13: In this bible quote we learn that the infanticidal, pro-rape, murdering Judeo-Christian God is also homophobic: “If a man lies with a male as with a women, both of them shall be put to death for their abominable deed; they have forfeited their lives.”.

And of course there’s many more examples of what we would consider heinous crimes that are sanctioned by the bible.

But that’s all old testament stuff. Jesus said that all of the laws are replaced by ‘love thy neighbour’, and anyway you have to take those things in context of when they were written.

Sure, Jesus was a lot nicer about things, and I concede that there’s a lot of merit in his teachings from an ethical point of view. Jesus’ pacifism, rejection of materialism and compassion are all very admirable ideas.

However, those ideas about righteous murder, rape, etcetera are existing aspects of the Christian religion, and they’re in all the bibles which Christians are told is the word of God, so they’re relevant to criticise even if you, quite understandably, would prefer to dissociate yourself from them.

Having said that, even though the teachings of Jesus are far less archaic, they’re still

promoting a lot of very fanciful and ultimately destructive ideas; and they form the basis of the modern institutions of power like the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope recently said something to the effect that condom use adds to the problem of AIDS, which is categorically incorrect, and a good example of how religion provides a basis upon which falsities, ignorance and harmful ideas are perpetuated.

As for those things being written in a different time, I couldn't agree more. Which is why I propose that we divest of ourselves all these archaic ideas and stop clinging to fairytales about magical sky creatures written during a time before science.

Anyway, that's enough about Christianity - we've already discussed it quite a bit earlier on. Let's move on to Islam.

Jesus, Muhammad, Moses, Buddha and Krishna all walk into a bar - miraculously none of them are hurt.

Like most if not all religions there's quite a lot of variation within the Islamic religion. The most obvious divide is between the majority Sunni and minority Shi'a, and then you have moderate to extreme elements within both of those main camps, as well as a few outlying denominations.

Islam literally translates as 'submission to God'. Muslims believe that some guy called Muhammad, who was a religious, political and military leader living in the 6th to 7th century, was spoken to by an angel to restore the perfect scripture (which had gone awry for some reason despite Allah having ultimate power. Presumably he just wanted everyone to be confused and go to hell before Muhammad came along to sort things out about 1400 years ago).

So the angel psychically tells Muhammad where it's at, and some people around him write down all the inspired things he's saying. Some of these inspired perfect laws include:

- All women must hide the shame of their bodies and also cover their head and hair (which is also shameful, and not at all a consequence of a generally repressive, misogynistic,

patriarchal social order)

- All muslims must engage in ritualistic brainwashing practices like repeating prayers five times a day
- All muslims must believe that Islam is the only true religion and that all other religions are flawed and wrong
- All muslims must simultaneously believe that God has pre-ordained everything, but that humans also have free will (this is only really true of Shi'a muslims)
- All muslims must go to the holy city of Mecca at least once in their lifetime if they are able, whereupon they must walk seven times counter-clockwise around a very important piece of rock
- Muslim martyrs who die in holy jihad will be rewarded with materialism and virgin sex slaves in heaven

And then there's the most radical elements who think that all good Muslims should rise up in holy war with all other peoples on earth, and that everyone should either convert to Islam or be killed. Now, much fanfare is made by social commentators and moderate muslims to point out that these and other extreme elements, like Osama Bin Laden, are very much a minority and that the majority of Muslim people are peace-loving and vehemently opposed to such destructive philosophies and interpretations. And it's true - most muslims are much more moderate and peaceful.

However, what is overlooked by taking this stance is the fact that moderate religious beliefs create an environment in which extremist religious beliefs can exist. So like the economic and social conditions of Germany in the 1930s, moderate views can be, and eventually invariably are, made extreme by way of circumstance. And of course we're seeing more and more moderate Muslims being indoctrinated into extremist beliefs and doing things like going to engage in holy war in Iraq with US American troops who were sent there by a similarly extremist religious zealot in George W. Bush. You see how religion is destructive? You see?

If Jesus and Muhammad were in a room together, I think they'd probably get along really well. It's people who are at fault, not God or his prophets.

Yeah, maybe you're right, maybe they would get along. After all they both rejected their religions and rebelled against the church. Anyone who does that now, of course, is a blasphemous heathen.

Hilarious.

Anyway, getting back to religions, let's take a quick look at Judaism.

Much of the stuff about Christianity, of course, relates also to Judaism, so I won't spend too much time on it. Again, like both Islam and Christianity, there is a continuum from progressive to fundamentalist/extremist schools of thought in Judaism. This variation alone should be enough to alert any functioning human brain to the fact that they might be wrong, but you'll find that the vast majority of all varying denominations, schools of thought within those denominations and different religions in the world maintain that they, alone, are 100% correct and that everyone else is completely wrong.

Anyway, Jews believe that all the more repressive books of the old testament, which they call the Torah, are the true and literal word of God. And you have to admire their tenacity. Most modern Christians sort of dismiss the old testament as some stuff that Jesus probably wouldn't be into anyway and try to dissociate themselves from it because it's almost completely morally indefensible; but the Jewish faith makes no such apologies. Outmoded untenable archaic ideas it is all the way.

What about Buddhism? I'm interested to see if you're going to be quite so critical of it.

Well, I have to admit that I think Buddhism is more intellectually and ethically advanced than the Abrahamic religions, but it still harbors a lot of the same irrational beliefs that make humans susceptible to being controlled and manipulated.

There are two main branches of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana; the former being practiced primarily in South East Asia and the latter more in East Asia with an increasing number of devotees around the world following its various branches such as Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. There's a lot of disagreement between various Buddhist camps as to what Buddhism actually is, what Buddha actually said, and what practices should be followed; and there is no single Buddhist bible, but rather various written records of what Buddha

supposedly taught.

Buddhists believe in reincarnation, including the belief that if you're bad you'll get reincarnated as a 'lower' life form i.e. an animal. This is one of the more fanciful Buddhist superstitions, but it's not the only one. Buddhists think that there are demons, angels, spirits and deities - but because there is so much disagreement between the different camps, it's hard to make relevant generalisations.

There are, however, a few concepts in Buddhism which I admire. The concept of 'the middle way' seems to me to be a particularly intelligent ethos; it essentially states that one should avoid the extremes of things and have a balanced perspective, which fits well with rational and critical thinking practice. Buddha was said to have been fasting and engaging in various other forms of masochism when he realised that it was a bit of drag, whereupon he said that maybe being really self-harming was just as much of a shitty idea as being a selfish, gluttonous, egotistical idiot (or something to that effect).

I don't really want to bang on about how great Buddhism is, because I think that it's still a religion that feeds people false ideas, makes them engage in ritualistic brainwashing practices and perpetuates delusional beliefs in invisible realities, but I would like to quote one thing that Buddha is said to have said:

"Believe nothing merely because you have been told it. Do not believe what your teacher tells you merely out of respect for the teacher. But whatsoever, after due examination and analysis, you find to be kind, conducive to the good, the benefit, the welfare of all beings -- that doctrine believe and cling to, and take it as your guide."

Clinging to things doesn't seem like a very wise instruction, but that's some pretty sound advice, I think. Meditation, lack of attachment to materialism and a generally much less uptight way of being are also pretty cool... but I won't be believing that I'm going to be reincarnated as a rat if I don't shave my head and renounce my iPod any time soon, though.

Buddhism also teaches that we should try and entirely rid ourselves of our desire, and this is something that I think is quite a flawed philosophy. Our desire to achieve, advance and progress is responsible for everything good and worthwhile in the world, let alone our desire to procreate which is a pretty integral aspect of the whole perpetuation of the species thing.

Our desire is a naturally-evolved and extremely useful behavioural mechanism, especially when tempered by rational, civilised thought.

Ironically enough, I think that ‘middle way’ between unfettered gratification of desire and complete ascetic denial is a much more enlightened way to be in general. Perhaps the extremes of emotion are good to give us reference and perspective - ecstatic joy and deep sorrow are both meaningful and worthy things to experience.

So, what am I supposed to say here then?

Um, give me some sort of segue into Hinduism.

India sure is nice this time of year.

Yes. Well. Anyway, moving on to Hinduism, which is the third-largest religion in the world today after Christianity and Islam. Thing is, though, that it’s also the hardest to define because it encompasses adherents who identify as everything from monotheist, polytheist, pantheist through to atheist. Basically it’s a hodge-podge of India’s religious and philosophical teachings over the past few thousand years and has no unequivocal central doctrine or dogma. Suffice it to say that belief in multi-armed blue gods with several heads is about as silly as any kind of religious myth.

Do we want to go into the specifics of any other religions? I think we all get the general idea yeah?

Who’s ‘we’ - you’re talking to yourself man, get a grip.

I’ll take that as a yes, then. Hey, have you heard about the one million dollar prize being offered to anyone who can prove any kind of supernatural phenomenon?

Telepathic urine control and superstitious new age inter-dimensional light beings

Yeah, it’s a sceptics society or something right?

The main prize is from the James Randi Education Foundation. Here’s the blurb from their website:

“The Foundation is committed to providing reliable information about paranormal claims.

It both supports and conducts original research into such claims.

At JREF, we offer a one-million-dollar prize to anyone who can show, under proper observing conditions, evidence of any paranormal, supernatural, or occult power or event. The JREF does not involve itself in the testing procedure, other than helping to design the protocol and approving the conditions under which a test will take place. All tests are designed with the participation and approval of the applicant. In most cases, the applicant will be asked to perform a relatively simple preliminary test of the claim, which if successful, will be followed by the formal test. Preliminary tests are usually conducted by associates of the JREF at the site where the applicant lives. Upon success in the preliminary testing process, the “applicant” becomes a “claimant.”

To date, no one has passed the preliminary tests.”

And they’ve been offering the prize openly for over a decade without anyone being able to prove any psychic, telekinetic, clairvoyant or any other kind of paranormal ability nor activity. And many have tried - their website lists pages of applicants who agreed to the foundation’s conditions for testing and then categorically failed in every single instance. They list all of the correspondence, methodology, testing and results on their website, and it’s both interesting and amusing to see (check it out at www.randi.org).

The applicants who all agreed to the conditions of their testing include a guy who claims to be able to telepathically call to and land alien spaceships to specific locations, dowzers, psychics, astrologers, clairvoyants and a woman who claimed to be have the supernatural ability to make people urinate with the power of her mind.

Any luck with that last one?

Not a drop.

Ha!

I’d like to make the point here that all the new age stuff is the same as religions, it’s just somewhat less institutionalised. Believing in spiritual cosmic rays, secret psychic powers, astrology or talking to dead people is equally as irrational as believing in a major world religion. What’s ‘better’ about new age religious beliefs, though, is that many of them can be tested.

To date not a single case of any kind of supernatural or paranormal event has ever been documented under scientific conditions. There have been many, many tests of ESP, telekinesis, psychic ability etcetera under scientific conditions, and not any one of them has resulted in any kind of positive result or proof whatsoever.

There is one documented positive result under scientific conditions of homeopathic remedies having a positive result (the scientists conducting the test were setting out to debunk homeopathy once and for all, and got a rude shock) but this is not proof of spirituality or paranormal activity, just an oddity of chemical reactions that we're yet to understand.

Surely if any psychic, astrologer, clairvoyant or telekinetic urine controller were able to prove that they have the abilities that they claim to, they would do so. There's no reason why they wouldn't, and every reason why they would; and there's a huge market of new age believers who would be delighted to hand over their money and doubt to anyone who could prove such a thing. The fact that they haven't indicates pretty clearly that they don't, in fact, have any such abilities. And it's not even like they have the faith argument to fall back on.

What faith argument?

Well, the very convenient assertion that God doesn't show himself in any testable way because otherwise you wouldn't have to have faith to believe in him. New age religious beliefs don't claim any such thing. They claim that this or that person actually does have the ability to talk to dead people, bend spoons with their mind or talk to alien spaceships. Which means that we have the ability to put one of those people in a room under scientific conditions and ask them to tell us what the birth date of someone's dead grandparent was, bend a spoon or ask a spaceship to come down out of the sky and please land on the roof.

There's no doubt that many these people genuinely believe they have these abilities, despite the fact that they very evidently don't.

People who think that they can speak to alien spaceships are crazy, not religious.

Well, from where I'm standing most religious people could be classified as at least a little bit crazy. There's a scale, I think - I'd put believing that you can telepathically land alien spaceships on par with some of the more radical fundamentalist religious people, but belief in any kind of spiritual reality could really be quite fairly categorised as at the very least

irrational.

I think that it is, however, rational to expect that people would want to have a religion, but religion itself doesn't stand up to any kind of scrutiny.

Anyway, getting back to new age mumbo jumbo - it seems there's an insidious and erroneous perception amongst people who don't subscribe to major world religions that new age beliefs are more progressive, intelligent, free and good. Like they're somehow less archaic and bad than other belief systems.

This is, I think, wrong. To start with, many new age beliefs are based on very old religious ideas. Things like astrology predate all existing major world religions, and there's a hodge podge of various other esoteric beliefs plucked from history and thrown into the fanciful new age stew.

It might be true that very few people are rising up as new-age martyrs and killing themselves to receive crystals and organic juices in new-age heaven, or going into holy war with people who refuse to accept the literal truth of astrology, but to my mind it seems like new age beliefs are much more prone to perpetuating paranoid delusions. So in some ways perhaps new age beliefs are even more dangerous than mainstream religious beliefs, at least on an individualistic level.

Eh?

Well, because there's no real kind of institution within the new age church, it seems that there exists a complete lack of structure to the belief systems. Consequently, instead of people's beliefs being anchored to a holy book and beholden to hierarchy and tradition, they're allowed to go off in various unfettered directions. This is especially damaging to people who have pre-existing mental health problems or are otherwise psychologically vulnerable.

Even a 'normal' person's initial belief in the healing powers of crystals and astrology might develop into full-fledged belief in spiritual conspiracy theories involving secret societies infiltrated by inter-dimensional alien light beings who control us with psychic vibration waves through our collective aura.

There is also, I think, an attraction to novelty and the far-outness of things that fuels the

new age delusion process. It's almost as if the bigger the wow factor is, the more attractive the belief. Healing crystals are great and everything, but have you heard of the Mayan starlight consciousness crystals which were lost with the Mayan society and are prophesied to be found by the anointed enlightened one in 2012, just before the end of the world? They're our only hope.

Yeah, but you know what? Believing in science just doesn't seem like nearly as much fun though. In fact it seems kinda boring.

Well I think our world is quite amazing, and doesn't need any invisible magic or superstitious beliefs to make it more so. If anything it seems to me that those sorts of things detract from the beauty and meaning of the world around us. Even if you're not interested in the finer points of science, just appreciating the natural world is the most wondrous thing.

It does seem, though, that we are naturally inclined to be superstitious. I think it's our way of coping with things that we don't understand, and it's a method of pattern recognition. When we saw the sun rising every day bringing warmth and light, we ascribed powers to it and created stories around it. When we saw the stars at night we contrived patterns out of them similar to animals that we saw during the day time. Wherever we saw something we didn't understand, we looked to attribute meaning to it, to categorise it in some way.

Superstitions become entrenched in our culture over time. When a superstition like 'walking under a ladder brings you bad luck' begins, people who walk under a ladder and then have bad luck tell everyone about it. Whereas people who walk under a ladder and don't have bad luck don't tell anyone about it, and so the idea that ladders are inert and have nothing to do with whether you have good or bad luck doesn't spread. You know that poster with the picture of flying saucer on it that says 'I want to believe'. People do. They want to believe.

Yeah, to be honest I still don't step on cracks in the pavement for fear of hurting my mother in some way.

Right, and so fear is a great memetic motivational mechanism.

The who now?

Catchy ideas

Memetics is basically the idea that successful ideas are geared to replicate themselves, just like successful genes are. So instead of a gene, you have a meme (pronounced 'meem'), which is a unit of cultural information. Genes replicate themselves by transmitting themselves to another generation of humans through sexual reproduction. Similarly each idea, or meme, attempts to replicate itself in the same way that a gene, a bacterium, a virus or a human does. It's kind of like taking biological evolution and applying it in a cultural context to see how ideas evolve in societies; and when you break it all down, the essential building blocks of our societies are ideas.

So memetics is a meme then.

Right. Memetics was first proposed by Dawkins in the book I mentioned before - 'The Selfish Gene', and it's become its own field of study since then with various schools of thought, theories and proponents over the past few decades. It's still a very nascent field, but I think that it's the best model with which to understand social psychology and religion. Actually, I think it's a pretty fantastic model for understanding almost everything about us humans.

Um, are you saying that religion is like a disease or something and that we're all infected with it?

No, not really. The virus analogy is to demonstrate the function of memes replicating. The value of a particular meme, 'good' or 'bad', is a relative thing. If a memeplex (large constructions of memes) like racism or sexism becomes outmoded in a society then those memes are purged and replaced with more progressive ideas.

But racism and sexism still occur even if they're not as generally acceptable.

Right, it's often quite difficult to eradicate ideas that have become entrenched in a culture, particularly if there are vested interests for holding on to those ideas. When memeplexes exist in a society, they are connected to many other aspects of that society in many different ways, and the process of disentanglement can be a complicated and protracted one.

One of the reasons that this is the case is that each generation has a different set of memetic constructions, and sequence is important in memetics. The memes that we catch

when we are young determine which memes we'll be receptive to later on, and they tend to stay with us until we die, very often even though there may be much evidence to contradict them.

So if I am brought up by racist parents living in a primarily racist community, I will likely have caught a lot of racist, bigoted, prejudicial memes. Because of the nature of these memplexes, my mind is also primed for other bigoted, prejudicial memes. The meme of being prejudicial against homosexual people (or any other 'out group') consequently finds a fertile, agreeable environment in which to survive inside my already-prejudicial mind.

Conversely if I am brought up by liberal parents in a functioning multi-cultural community, a racist meme will find an environment in my mind that is very hostile to it, and in which it can neither survive nor replicate. Every time someone communicates an idea to me, a meme is trying to replicate itself by transmitting into my mind where it can survive and replicate again. If the idea being communicated 'helps' the memes that already exist in my mind by reinforcing them, then that meme will have a very strong chance of being accepted into my mind; whereas if the meme being communicated to me threatens my existing memetic mind, then it will be rejected and possibly even attacked.

What's all this got to do with religion anyway?

What it's got to do with religion is that religions are very successful memplexes. The age at which we are usually indoctrinated into religion is quite young, and so we tend to accept what is taught to us as being factual, especially if there are incentives to do so and disincentives for not doing so.

Young people are generally much more naive than adults, which is why you can convince a 5 year old child that the easter bunny, santa claus, angels, heaven or God are real.

Hang on though, there's lots of people who become religious as adults after having a religious experience or something, it's not just children.

Sure, but you have to bear in mind that we live in a religious society where religious ideas are the norm and are pervasive, so there's many incentives, such as belonging to a community and not being ostracised, that go along with the false promises of heaven and threats of hell.

If, hypothetically, our society was completely non-religious and you then tried to start up

Christianity or Islam or Judaism, you'd have no hope of success. It requires that billions of children are brainwashed into believing religious ideas are facts for it to become normal and accepted.

But at one point there was no Christianity or Islam - those religions did need to 'start up', and they did succeed.

That's true, but the difference is that we came from a state of complete ignorance and as a result of us attempting to understand the world around us, but not having any reliable or scientific means to do so, we came up with various religious myths and ideas. The situation I was posing was between a society that was non-religious, and so already rational and intellectually mature, versus our existing religious society. Once we transcend a state of ignorance, it's very difficult to go back - we can't just 'unknow' something.

This is why it's no longer socially acceptable for white people to keep people of colour as unpaid slaves, as property, because we have come to understand that such a situation is immoral. In the middle ages between acts at a theatre performance they would sometimes have a cat, hanging by a rope, which descended from above and was then set on fire and burned alive for the crowd's amusement. This was received with much laughter and merriment from the audience.

Such repulsively unethical conduct would result in outrage if you were to try it at your average theatre in this day and age. It would require a very big regression and entropy effect to return to a mindset where keeping black people as slaves or burning cats was socially acceptable again.

Similarly, for those of us who have unshackled ourselves from the immature ideas that are associated with religious beliefs, it seems equally absurd to entertain the notion of believing in vengeful gods, talking angels, fiery spiritual pits of torture or magical spirits. To those of us who have cast off the cloak of religion's untruths, these ideas seem equally as archaic and silly as what you would judge the beliefs of a tribe of people who believe in a sun god deciding whether their crops will be good or not relative to how many animals have been sacrificed on the altar.

Progress is inevitable, and we should bear in mind just how far we've come and also that

we're becoming more aware and civilised all the time.

What do you mean?

Well, there's this idea that we're all going to hell in a handbasket, that the standards of society are dropping and that everything is getting worse and worse. But the truth is that we who live in the Western world now live in the least violent, most prosperous and civilised conditions that have ever existed. Even in quite religious countries like the USA, more and more people identify as non-religious or atheist, and less and less people are going to church (with the notable exception of the evangelical movement). Progress and change happen, even if it seems like things are going backwards sometimes.

But we're getting sidetracked here. I wanted to explore the memetic model a bit further.

Sure.

So one of the interesting things about looking at our minds from a memetic perspective is to consider our ideas as being separate to us. If we understand our ideas as things that we've caught, rather than things that are intrinsic to us, then we can begin to look at them a lot more objectively.

There is, I think, a very strong tendency for people to automatically attempt to justify and defend whatever ideas they have as being 'the truth' without actually spending very much time at all attempting to find out if there is any truth to what ideas they presently hold as true. We automatically seek to protect the ideas we have as being true, because we feel that our ideas are us. But this is a fallacy because the ideas we had when we were 5 are very different to the ideas we have now. The reason is that we inevitably change.

Our memetic mind, that is every meme and memetic structure in our mind, is seeking to perpetuate itself on every level. Each meme is vying for survival, as is the collective of our ideas (us as individuals); and they act to defend themselves when something threatens them. And we just assume that our ideas are worth defending, because they're ours. The only way that we can ever hope to be anything approaching unbiased is to introduce a memetic structure in our minds that actively questions our ideas, both existing and new. I suppose the best way to think of it is like memetic immune system - if we don't have one then diseased, destructive ideas that hurt us and those around us are able to thrive. Any effective immune system needs

to actively patrol and check what's going on. So effectively, we must consciously presume ourselves to be wrong if we are to have any hope of actually being right.

But I don't want my mind to be a mechanical, logical, scientific robot. There's more to life than that.

That's not what I'm saying. You can still enjoy all of the emotional, artistic and wondrous aspects of human existence and be rational too - it's not an either/or situation. Someone like Leonardo DaVinci had a brilliant rational mind and understood science perhaps better than anyone at the time, but he was also an artistic genius and deeply appreciated music.

Understanding things doesn't make you into a robot at all, in fact I think it is much more of a robot-like way to be if you merely regurgitate the information that's been entered into your brain, as opposed to using the amazing capabilities of your conscious mind to exercise the full extent of your will and truly appreciate and understand both yourself and the world around you with lucidity.

Logical phallusies and the pursuit of truth

Well, the way I see it, it is an either/or situation - and you're either with us or you're against us.

You're giving me an example of binary thinking so that I can go and point out what's wrong with it, yes?

Obviously.

Right, well that's what's called a logical fallacy. What that means is that an argument put forth is wrong because it contains a false argument or premise of some description. Let's have a look at some of the more common logical fallacies:

Ad hominem: This literally translates as 'against the man' and means a situation in which you attack the person instead of their argument. For example:

Sarah: I think that the existence of God or any other supernatural being is highly unlikely because there is no proof.

John: Well, you're a godless atheist, have no morals and you're also wearing very unfashionable pants, so whatever you say is highly unlikely.

Anecdotal fallacy: John asserts that his friend Bob is an evolutionary biologist and is religious, so that blows Sarah's whole argument out of the water. Sarah replies that anecdotal evidence can exist on both outlying extremes of possibilities, and that we get a much better idea of what's actually going on if we look at the statistical averages, such as the fact that biologists are less likely to be religious than almost anyone.

Appeal to authority: Here John says that Sarah's argument is invalid because John knows someone who is an authority on the subject and they disagree with Sarah. Sarah points out that her arguments haven't actually been engaged or refuted, but John just looks at her haughtily, states that his friend is very qualified and asks what qualifications Sarah has.

Appeal to belief: Where John says that most people believe in God, therefore God must be true. Sarah points out that at one point most people believed that the earth was flat.

Appeal to fear: Where John says that you should believe in God, otherwise you'll go to hell. Sarah tells John that unless he believes in pink unicorn faeries, they will smite him with an eternal venereal disease in the afterlife, and that he will have to endure itchiness and rashes for all of time.

Burden of proof: In this one John asserts that Sarah has to prove that God doesn't exist if she wants to question God's existence. The problem here being that the burden of proof lies with the affirmative, not the negative. Sarah asserts that an invisible miniature elephant is orbiting John's head and that he has to accept it as being true unless he can prove otherwise. John calls Sarah a hypocrite.

Circular reasoning: Here John says that the every word of the bible is true, because the bible was written by God. Sarah sighs and stops talking to John for a bit.

Composition: John says that Jesus said a lot of wise things, like 'Love thy neighbour' and 'turn the other cheek', so therefore Christianity must be good and true. Sarah asks John if he thinks that Hitler is guilty of crimes against humanity, and, if so, whether these crimes would be negated if Hitler gave his mum a cuddle and told her he loved her this one time. John accuses Sarah of appealing to emotion and says that she is equating Jesus with Hitler. Sarah

gets very annoyed and says that she is just trying to point out the logical fault of equating and extrapolating one good thing with all good things.

Cause and effect: John cites some examples of atheists who were bad people and asserts that atheism leads to moral decay. Sarah cites some examples of religious people who did the same sorts of things and points out that a sense of ethics and morality are universal for all humans irrespective of belief or non-belief. John points out that some people are sociopaths and have no sense of ethics. Sarah concedes that this is true, but that it doesn't negate her point that human ethics are not exclusive to religious people. John looks a big smug anyway and does this thing with his eyebrows that's all like 'yeah, okay, sure...whatever you say'

Common cause: John points out that the world has gotten much better since Christianity was introduced - we live longer, we're more civilised, there is less war. Sarah wonders whether these improvements might have happened as a result of scientific progress, which the church often opposed. John raises his voice and acts in a domineering fashion, like an ape making a status display. Sarah quietly enjoys the irony.

Double negative: John quotes the bible and says 'an eye for an eye' is an acceptable moral position to take - if someone hurts you, you have a right to take revenge on them later. Sarah points out that if this were followed to its logical conclusion then any wrong done to anyone or any country would result in an escalation of violence to the point of complete destruction, and that maybe it might be a better idea to try to find a just and peaceful solution, like the person who hurt your eye being tried in court, instead of just reacting violently toward them or a member of their family.

Middle ground: John asserts that some people think that God definitely exists, and some people think that God doesn't exist, so if we are to be rational about it we should take a balanced view and agree that it is equally likely that God exists as it is that he doesn't. Sarah points out that half way between something which is true and something which is not true, is still not true; that having a balanced consideration of facts and reasons can lead to conclusions which are not exactly between two polar ideas, and that this is an insidiously misleading and very common logical fallacy. John says 'pffft'. Sarah gives an example - position A is that the Chinese flag is red, position B is that the Chinese flag is blue - by John's logic, Sarah says, it

would be correct to conclude that the Chinese flag is purple.

Post hoc ergo propter hoc (the fallacious assumption that because one event comes after another, that the first event is the cause of the latter): John says that his preacher was talking about how great God is, and just at that moment a ray of sunlight entered the church and everyone gasped at God's divine message to them. Sarah points out that most preachers are talking about God most of the time, so whenever the sun shone through the window everyone would have been impressed. John looks unimpressed.

Red herring: John asserts that almost everyone likes ice cream, and so Christianity is therefore a preferable state of existence to being an atheist who hates ice cream. Sarah says she likes ice cream and is an atheist, to which John replies that Sarah is using anecdotal evidence to misrepresent the reality of the situation as a general rule. Sarah asks John for some evidence to show that most atheists hate ice cream. John says that he's not the one questioning things, so why should he have to provide evidence. Sarah says that actually he is asserting that atheists hate ice cream and so the burden of proof lies with him. John, defeated, seethes - silly repressed man that he is.

Slippery slope: John says that if we allow women to have safe, legal access to medical abortions that we will end up with a situation where babies and small children are killed if there's something wrong with them; and that women will use abortion as a form of contraception. Sarah points out that where abortion is safe and legal that none of these things have actually happened, and that statistically speaking, making abortion illegal does not mean fewer abortions, but just fewer safe abortions.

Straw man: John says that he is disgusted with Sarah because she supports killing small children who have something wrong with them. Sarah says that she said no such thing, and that John is distorting her position and framing it in a negative, misleading fashion to attempt to discredit her.

Now, can you see what all of these logical fallacies have in common?

Um, they're all dumb?

Well yes, and they're also all quite disturbingly common, but the point I wanted to make is that in all of them John had an agenda before the fact. John is religious and wants to believe

that God is real, and so instead of arriving at conclusions based on rational understanding, he just uses what seem like rational arguments to justify what his position already was beforehand. He's not truthfully receptive to any idea that isn't what he already thought.

And this is the fatal flaw, the common evil that pervades the world: we humans see the world however we want to see it, whilst also believing that we are being truthful with ourselves. This is how the delusion of religion is able to continue.

To have your own mind, to have integrity, means to swear an allegiance to truth. Even if the truth you find is uncomfortable or not in your own interests... no, especially if the truth you find is uncomfortable and not in your own interests. We have to consciously and deliberately question ourselves and our motivations.

But why would someone do something that wasn't in their own interests?

That's a really good question. Because it actually is in your own interests in the long run. If there is an aspect of yourself, of your belief systems, which has a conflict with truth, and you must employ delusions and fallacious arguments like those above for them to continue to exist, then that aspect of yourself is corrosive to what makes human existence meaningful and good.

Let me put that another way: If there are thoughts that we hold to be true, which are not true, we must necessarily remain ignorant and/or living in fear for those untruths to remain with us.

Who we are is destroyed by truth and love if who we are beforehand is ignorant and fearful. And we all begin in ignorance and fear. How far we move beyond ignorance and fear is determined by how truthful we are with ourselves.

We become someone else when we grow, and it's often hard for people to let go of who they are now, because it seems that that's all they have. Like everything in nature we act in the interests of our own survival. We are geared to protect ourselves however we can. But if we are protecting ourselves from understanding and truth, then we never get to reach our potential. Instead we remain locked in a shallow and reactive state of ignorance.

All the hatred, violence and fear in the world absolutely relies on our ignorance, and cannot survive without it. The truth really does set you free.