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## **The Cultivation of Uncertainty: An Atheist's Experiences With Agnosticism**

Kim Hall

“The Cultivation of Uncertainty: An Atheist's Experiences With Agnosticism.” That wasn't supposed to be the title of my presentation today. My intended title was going to be something like “The role of VMAT2 neurotransmitter proteins in self-transcendental experiences in epileptic patients.” This would have been a seemingly more appropriate topic for a biology student interested in genetics, as well as an inquisitive but hardcore atheist (one who does not believe in a god or gods) anxious to understand a strange phenomenon called faith. With this skeptical, secular mindset and my scientific background, the questions I was interested in for this capstone project were about the material and objective bases for religious belief. I wanted to figure out what was going on in what I thought of as the real world—the material, physical, observable world—that made some people believe that there was something else. Reading *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired Into Our Genes*, by Dean Hamer, inspired my original research topic. Hamer hypothesized that the levels of a particular neurotransmitter transport protein in the brain could affect feelings of self-transcendence, a mysterious feeling that formed the base of spiritual beliefs. I decided to vet this hypothesis by comparing it to the other primary literature on the subject, and then discuss the philosophical implications of a material basis (or lack thereof) for belief in God. I found a willing professor who liked talking about both biology and philosophy and happily started my project by sifting through psychology, sociology, and neurology articles, trying to get a good understanding of what the scientific community meant when it discussed things like “spirituality,” “faith,” “self-transcendence,” and “belief.”

Rather quickly this approach went to pieces. The papers I was reading could not settle on a consistent definition of any of these terms. Spirituality was defined in terms of self-transcendence and vice versa. Qualities like peace of mind and mental well-being were found to correlate with a spiritual mindset, but then people with greater spiritual tendencies were found to have increased mental well-being. The tests and scales scientists used to measure traits like belief in people were widely varied and none were given much credibility. I found this somewhat

frustrating—I had set out with what I thought was a clear question to ask and my research was not returning any answers. The scientific method places a lot of emphasis on finding a good question and phrasing it correctly in order to obtain a valid answer, so I thought the solution to my problem would be to come up with a new, better question. I returned to *The God Gene* looking for other terms to investigate and other hypotheses to evaluate, only to find that none of the ideas I was interested in pursuing went anywhere in the primary literature. In fact, I found more poor reviews of the science in Hamer’s book than anything else.

For a long time, my project stagnated as I tried to find an appropriate question that would yield a clear answer. I was loath to give up the pursuit of faith and equally reluctant to abandon the possibility of a biological explanation for it, but my research indicated more and more firmly that I could not examine both. The scientific community simply did not have a clear idea of what spirituality was, much less a reliable way to observe or measure it. Dr. Everett endured a lot of increasingly frantic scenes where I related my difficulties in finding a question to ask of this confused and uncertain community. Each time, he suggested not rebelling against this uncertainty, but stepping back, observing the hazy terms and cloudy uncertainties for what they were, and cultivating my own uncertainty. Letting go of the simple question, simple answer approach was a challenge for me, and it took me a long time to accept the idea that there was a phenomenon surrounded by many very complicated questions without simple answers from the realm of science. With encouragement, however, I managed to get some distance from this mindset, and toward the end of the fall semester I had concluded that my original project was just not going to work out.

I knew I was still interested in understanding spirituality and religious faith, but my trusted and familiar approach to problem-solving had failed me. At Dr. Everett’s suggestion I decided to try something radically different, and started simply talking to everyone who would listen about spirituality and their experiences with it. I was still trying to get a handle on definitions at this point, still hoping that with enough clear terms I could ask a good question with an answer to be found in the library (but you already know how this turned out). The atheists I spoke with talked about physical sensations experienced in the presence of natural beauty, but the Catholic students I talked to were much less specific when describing their faith. Many were taken aback by my questions about feelings of self-transcendence and physical reactions, instead comparing their belief to something like breathing, unconscious but vital. I felt

I was on to something after these discussions—the faithful do have something different going on! there is something to investigate!—but I still was not sure what it was.

Then another professor pointed me toward a book by Huston Smith entitled *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*. Smith, a prominent scholar of the world's religions, made a case I had never before encountered for the reasons to have spiritual faith. He said that the mindset of the scientific community had warped from a tradition of explaining natural phenomena to a cult-like worship of the infallibility of science, a cult he termed “scientism.” By worshipping science and attempting to use it to explain all questions, Smith claimed, the practitioners of scientism were flattening the world and arrogantly robbing it of any higher morality, purpose, or meaning. Science had a very important place in the quest to understand the world, but it was dangerous to make it the sole method of inquiry. Smith then advocated the retention of religious faith as a way to understand the world in terms that may not be as clear and articulate as those in science, but nonetheless true and valid.

This was hard for me to accept or even evaluate fairly. The idea of coming to a valid conclusion without using the tool set I had carefully acquired throughout my education in the sciences made me want to throw my copy of Smith's book against the wall more than once. But his argument was persuasive. His description of the cult-like devotion to science held by so many ontological naturalists sounded familiar, as I recalled my angst over not finding answers in the scientific literature and my crumbling certainty that an answer to the right question was there. While I remained skeptical that religious faith was a valid method for describing and comprehending the world, I had to accept that I was subscribing to the narrow and dogmatic principles of scientism myself, and that I had to step away from this devotion if I wanted to think critically about spiritual belief.

Abandoning scientism was uncomfortable. Without certainty in science's ability to explain everything in the world, I was grappling with questions that were new to me but familiar to any epistemology seminar—how do we know anything? How do we know we know it? What does it mean to “know?” How much can we know about anything? Specifically to my project, how do the spiritually faithful know what they do if they don't seem to be using the methods I use to know things? This was a frightening question for several reasons—had I been going about learning things the wrong way during my entire education? Was there something out there to understand that I wasn't able to see, much less comprehend and appreciate? How was I going to

make a project out of a question like this? But with patient encouragement from my mentor and from those I spoke with about spirituality, my fears subsided. I remembered that my uncertainty was something to be nurtured, cultivated, if my questions were to be articulated. Gradually, I recalled the original questions that prompted my research into the science of spirituality. I was a curious atheist who wanted to understand faith, who had started off by trying to understand it in the only way I knew. Dr. Everett and others persuaded me that this was a topic worth reading and writing about. The questions I settled on addressing from a confused atheist point of view were these: what is spiritual faith, why do some people have it and some lack it, how do we know who is right, and which kind of person am I?

Since the definition of faith was not to be found in scientific literature and not to be articulated by the student believers I spoke with, I started reexamining writings by people who sounded like they had a good, certain definition of faith and were not afraid of relating it. Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* are anything but reluctant to expound upon the wicked characteristics of faith. These "new atheist" works frame religious belief as a kind of rejection of logical processes, driven by a sickness of the mind or some primitive artifact of evolution from our distant pasts. Anything that leads people to believe in phenomena without "sufficient evidence" must be some kind of perversion and evidence of gullibility, of an inferior mind, or of dangerous, evil lunacy. Hitchens asserts the difference between this insanity and the more rational, nobler atheistic mindset thus: "Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not a faith. We do not rely solely upon science and reason, because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors, but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason. We may differ on many things, but what we respect is free inquiry, open-mindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake."

These words, in light of Huston Smith's allegations of scientism, seem to me to no longer uphold principles of free inquiry or open-mindedness. The tactic of the new atheists is not one that encourages open and free discussion; rather, it ridicules and demonizes those it purports to be engaging in dialogue. Dawkins, Hitchens, and their ilk single-mindedly attack religion and defend the scientific worldview, without considering the possibility that the faithful have a valid reason for being so, and without considering the idea that their method of understanding the universe might not be the only reasonable method—or, indeed, might have some evils of its own.

As I reread the new atheists' works, I realized that this scientism and the men who promote it sound almost indistinguishable from fundamentalist religious sects and their members—our way is the one true way, and the others who dissent are sinners, demons, and the damned.

Feeling disgusted with how long I had counted myself among such a dogmatic group of atheists, I switched to reading books by more philosophers and scholars of religion, something it is pointedly obvious Dawkins and Hitchens do not do. This was where I finally found some claims about religious faith that made sense to me. Unlike the new atheists, scholars like John F. Haught and Terry Eagleton seemed to me to be much more willing and able to uphold principles of open-mindedness. They were well acquainted with the arguments and grievances of the new atheists and were in perfect agreement with them on some points, such as past and present wrongs committed by people of faith and in the name of faith, and the need for a rational basis for holding beliefs. Also unlike the new atheists, these scholars argued that these points in no way decreased the validity of the reasons for having religious belief, and they made the (what seemed to me at the time) extraordinary claim that faith is something that must be arrived at with reason and logic. People of faith are not encouraged to disavow their rational principles; in fact, these believers encourage the use of reason to give meaning to belief. Eagleton uses an analogy of falling in love—if I say you love someone, I have to back it up with reasons why if the love is to be meaningful. Yet another person could agree with all the reasons—the pretty color of my beloved's eyes, for example—and not feel the same love. That love, greater than the sum of the reasons or evidence, is like religious faith. I had a hard time buying this but all of these authors pointed out how belief in scientific claims, or any kind of claim, works much the same way. I believe in evolution, I have many good and rational reasons to believe in evolution, for example, but the combination of those reasons alone is insufficient to justify my belief. There is a commitment and trust in the methods of science that I have no objectively measurable evidence for, and this trust is what makes my belief a conviction.

The allegation is made by the new atheists that people who believe are altered and deficient in some way. They do not possess all the facts or knowledge that the skeptics do, or their capacities for logic are diminished, or (as I at one point suspected) they are physiologically different from skeptics. I have come to believe that this is neither a rational conclusion nor a fair one. What evidence do people have that believers are sick or stupid beyond their faith? When a scholar like Terry Eagleton makes an elegant analogy for his beliefs that even an undergraduate

atheist like me can comprehend, what reason do I have to think he is a lunatic? It now seems to me not only hasty but ridiculous to write off an individual as irrational simply because they happen to believe something I do not when all other evidence points toward their rationality, a conclusion I am deeply embarrassed not to have applied to the debate between religion and atheism before.

If the proponents of religion and the proponents of atheism both seem to be rational, why do they end up at different conclusions? Good science is supposed to be replicable; identical procedures are supposed to yield identical results. A believer and an atheist may indeed be using the same sorts of logical processes and identical types of evidence to arrive at conclusions, but as Theodore Everett points out in “The Rationality of Science and the Rationality of Faith,” the content of that evidence is somewhat different. The faithful and the skeptical alike have trust in people whose convictions they rely upon, like parents, teachers, experts, or other persons of authority. When surrounded by trusted people who have faith, people who are trusted for good reasons (like a history of being right about other things they assert, or for being more likely to be right about a given subject), it would seemingly be irrational to suddenly buck the trend and start believing something different. The religious, the spiritual, the skeptics, and the scientists do exactly the same thing. They have a lot of good evidence for what they believe and they draw rational conclusions from it, but most of it is not directly observed and objectively measured data. For believers, the evidence may be based on the authority of a parent or priest who is trusted to be more knowledgeable. For scientists, it is based on faith in other scientists’ observations (theoretically replicable, but who has time or funding to check all the observations?), which are based on trust in other scientists. Freethinking, a rejection of trusted authority, may not always be the most rational choice as the new atheists claim it is.

So how do we know who is right?

I do not know. We all have our different convictions for reasons both rational and ineffable. We are mostly reasonable people, mostly not deficient or perverted lunatics. Beyond a trust I have built up in a certain set of authority figures, a trust that has eroded as my research has progressed, I do not seem to have a sufficient body of evidence to decide the matter. I have no idea if anyone does.

Faced with the rational behavior of believers, the dogmatic principles of the new atheists, the failure of my familiar scientific approach to resolve a question, and my inability to pick a

side in the debate between religion and atheism, I now feel I can no longer define myself as an atheist. Letting go of this label and belief set has been harder by far than coming up with a topic for this project. Often I feel like I am rejecting a skepticism I worked hard to develop and defend for years against its detractors, and I worry that I myself might be succumbing to the beautiful delusions the new atheists scoff at. Then again, I fear that I am failing to understand the truth about how the world really works, failing to comprehend what lies beyond the physical phenomena scientists like me try to measure. I do not know if I will ever resolve these doubts and questions. I do not know if it is even possible for anyone to resolve them. I cannot even call myself a strict agnostic, one who steadfastly maintains that the answers to these questions and the nature of the spiritual cannot possibly be known. I have cultivated my uncertainty to the point where I know a few more things that I do not understand, and they are all I can present to you today.

I owe many thanks to my mentor, Dr. Theodore Everett, for his encouragement and patience, to Drs. Herzman and Nicodemi for their feedback and support, and to everyone who shared with me their beliefs and convictions.