

# *Why We Believe What We Believe*

Peggy Wolfson

Not so long ago, over in the Elks Club Bar one Sunday morning, we held a forum on evolution and intelligent design. We took sides on the issue and acted out a debate. Some of us presented the facts of evolution. The evidence for evolution is etched in DNA, in the fossil record, in the relationship of all living things. Even bacteria possess 500 genes in common with human beings (in common, in fact, with all living things). 500. That is amazing to me, and for me it is also irrefutable PROOF that the mechanism by which all life developed is evolution.

My topic today is not the science. It rises out of the great discomfort I feel that our arguments easily persuade the choir, but for those whom we wish to convince, the arguments fall on deaf ears. I've known for a long time that if I try to explain to a devout member of the religious right the simple, scientific facts, I can never persuade them of anything UNLESS that person already possesses some seed of skepticism. Why is it so futile? I thought it might be worth looking into that.

There is nothing new here. This subject is really a branch of the classic clash between rational, humanist points of view and rigid theism. The appearance of Darwin's Origin of Species in 1859, mobilized a backlash from those who believed in the Biblical stories of creation. And that squabble rages on, 150 years later, Christians armed with their belief, evolutionists armed with their scientific facts. I can't give you any new insights that will suddenly quell a disagreement that has soaked deep into our collective bones. But maybe I can shed light on why this argument is so contentious.

I will examine some relevant aspects of what Unitarian Universalists believe, and then I will talk about the characteristics of belief itself. *“What Unitarians Affirm,”* is a marvelous intelligent essay by Rev. Charles W. Eddis. Eddis is minister emeritus of the Unitarian Church of Montreal. According to him, Unitarians are remarkably united in our basic values and beliefs. “Unitarians are people who want a straightforward, practical, ethical religion.” Historically, the Unitarian idea represents a comprehensive program for religious reform stressing free inquiry, tolerance, and ethical living. We are humanists, agnostics and atheists. We are Wiccan and Sufi and Pagan and Buddhist, or we are Catholics or Baptists or Jews who have rejected the tenets of our original religions. More likely we are such things in part, or we see ourselves as a blend—or none of them.

Faith is too often thought of as the acceptance of beliefs which are beyond question, not subject to the test of experience and individual reason. Rev. Eddis says, in the sense of beliefs that cannot be questioned, Unitarians have no beliefs. We hold that all beliefs must be open to question and examination, and that they may then be accepted or modified, or rejected. Unitarian views have evolved under the impact of science, philosophy, and the influence of non-Judeo-Christian religions.

Eddis expresses it this way: We believe in the world, the universe, our home. It is a source of ecstasy and joy. It is also a source of tornadoes, disease, pain and death. Yet the universe is dependable, orderly and, in its way, intelligible and predictable. We believe its evidence. We believe in evolution, because that is what the evidence indicates as to the origin of life on this planet. And we strive to function in an atmosphere of openness and mutual respect. Eddis says much more in his essay, and I could take issue with none of it. (Look it up on the internet and read it! It will give you respect and even pride in your own reasons for being a UU)

James P. Carse is director of the religious studies program at NYU. In his book The Religious Case Against Belief, Carse deals with all belief as being inflexible. Carse observes that, “The act of belief is always an act *against*; it requires an opponent who holds the contradictory belief.” He makes a distinction between open-ended, tolerant inquiry and a doctrine that knows what it knows and is not keen to hear about anything else.

Why We Believe What We Believe by Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman is a book that examines recent discoveries about the way the brain creates memories, thoughts, emotions and beliefs. Andrew Newberg is a physician, a professor of Radiology and Psychiatry, and a professor of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Mark Waldman is a fellow at the Center for Spirituality and the Mind; he’s a therapist, and the author of nine books. You might say Newberg and Waldman study the science of religion.

They discuss observations of their biological research into belief, and the analysis of these observations. For instance, they did functional MRIs on meditating Buddhist monks and found the same patterns in their brains as they found in praying nuns who described feeling the presence of God. A Pentecostal woman speaking in tongues did not show similar brain patterns. *However*, the material I will use today is taken mostly from the early chapters of the book, wherein the authors discuss general and societal qualities of belief. I will try to leave the science for another day. [For ease of discussion, I will attribute all quotes from their book to Newberg.]

As Dr. Newberg explains, *beliefs govern nearly every aspect of our lives*. They tell us how to pray and how to vote , whom to trust and whom to avoid. They shape our personal behaviors and spiritual ethics. Once beliefs are established, we rarely question their validity, even when faced with contradictory evidence. *When we encounter differing beliefs, we tend to dismiss or disparage them.*

That counts whether you are Unitarian or Pentecostal or anything else. Newberg confirms for me why disagreement on religious issues is so difficult, whether it is about evolution or abortion or the disagreements between entire nations. Ignorance, says Newberg, is only partly to blame. Our brains are prone to reject information that does not conform to our prior experience and knowledge. Old beliefs, like habits, die hard.

Dr. Phil Wolfson, my beloved, through his career in the State Department, observed the practice of intelligence – by which he means information about foreign developments and what is going on in other countries that concerns the U.S. He observes that there is a built-in flaw in the practice of intelligence, and it relates directly to my subject today. In evaluating intelligence you are guided by your own preconceptions, he says. If the new information does not conform to what you already know (or believe), you tend to downgrade it. In this way, your brain automatically modifies what you are finding out. It takes great care and a sense of discrimination to assimilate new information.

Newberg says, “If we understand the neuropsychology of the brain, our beliefs will be able to grow and change as we interact with others who have different views of the world. “ The beliefs to which he refers extend beyond religion to reality itself. I like to think that I am a concrete thinker and I adhere to reality. Yet Newberg says....“A profound chasm exists between the world ‘out there’ and our internal consciousness, and *this fundamental disconnection prevents us from ever truly knowing reality*”

Newberg engages in delightful speculation when he talks about seeming evidence that even the behavior of bacteria can be conditioned and changed. A certain amoeba seems to learn with repeated mild shocks. Enough shocks and it becomes a hermit, and retreats from its environment and dies. Newberg sees this as possible evidence of its sense of awareness. And what about rock,

he asks. It has no nervous system or cells, but there is a possibility that even the smallest subatomic particles of the universe could have a kind of consciousness or belief, which would then suggest that the universe itself is a form of life. I must tell you that for a long time I have been intrigued by this idea, and have written poems about it, but my own reasoning says that we are made of the stuff a rock is made of (which is cosmic dust) and since we can't definitively tie consciousness to the brain, then maybe it exists in all substance. This sort of free thinking or speculation is a far cry from the fundamentalist viewpoint that requires blind faith, that insists on a literal reading of the Bible. I do not think I exaggerate to say this *imprisoned* way of thinking leads directly to their inability— or refusal— to accept evolution as a factual explanation for how we got here.

So what are we to do? James Carse speaks of replacing belief with knowledge, which can be corrected, reformed, and improved. He says, "Life is much more fluid and contradictory than the ideas we sometimes impose on it."

Newberg, too, suggests adopting a skeptical, open-minded attitude. His definition of a skeptic is a person who simply chooses to examine carefully whether his or her beliefs are actually true. A skeptic keeps a willingness to consider both sides of an argument— and retains a sense of trust, *especially when it comes to those beliefs of our own that affect another person's life*. To me this sounds like he is advising people to become Unitarians. As Charles Eddis says, beliefs must be subject to the scrutiny and the revision of reason and experience.

In their churches, no one is telling those on the religious right about Newberg's advice, those who fervently push for laws that restrict abortion, or same sex marriage, or the right to die, or what is taught in our schools. They are not free to sign on to a broader, more tolerant way of thinking,

because to be skeptical is to admit that their beliefs may *not* be the absolute and only truth. This explains why such open-mindedness, such thinking-for-oneself is so dangerous to them.

We are born to believe, Newberg says, because we have no other alternative. Because we can never get outside ourselves, we must make assumptions—usually lots of them—to make sense of the world. The spiritual beliefs we adhere to *or reject*, and the spiritual experiences we can have, are influenced by our neural circuitry and its limitations. God may *or may not* exist, he says, but we can experience God or a sense of spirituality, or anything else, for that matter—*only* through the functioning of our brains.

Even Carl Sagan felt that the need for *spirituality* was innate. Perhaps that explains to me why, though I do not believe in God, I still find the need to come here on Sundays. Because I have a certain spirituality, and a need to express it with others. And a need to be among others who think in similar ways.

Sagan wrote [The Demon-Haunted World; Science as a Candle in the Dark](#). In this book he challenges the reader to critically scrutinize information professed by supposed experts, and to be more of a skeptic. Sagan notes the risks inherent in skepticism. He says, “Skepticism challenges established institutions. If we teach everybody, including, say, high school students, habits of skeptical thought, they will probably not restrict their skepticism to UFOs, aspirin commercials, and channeling someone from 35,000-years ago. Maybe they will start asking awkward questions about economic, or social or political or religious institutions. Perhaps they will challenge the opinions of those in power. Then where will we be?” According to Sagan, “the siren song of unreason is not just a cultural wrong turn but a dangerous plunge into darkness that threatens our most basic freedoms.”

Why do you believe the things you believe? Why are some people religious and others not? When there are contradictions between belief and reason, which one should be modified or give way? Are we to apply modern historical and anthropological methods to study the Bible, and accept the findings produced by them? Or must belief supersede experience, history, and personal judgment? This is the great watershed in religion, separating the religious liberals from the conservatives.

Because of the characteristics of belief, it will always be difficult to understand those with different mindsets. It helps to remember this barrier, when we Unitarians who claim to be fundamentally open-minded, discuss our different way of thinking. Newberg lists many functions of belief. Beliefs, he says, help us to flourish and survive. They help us to organize the world in meaningful ways. They give us our sense of ourselves. Beliefs help us take action in specific ways. They allow us to make goals and accomplish them. They help us to regulate the emotional centers of our brains. Beliefs guide us in our moral and educational pursuits, and they actually help to heal our bodies and minds. In the end, we need the things that our beliefs do for us.

But *reason is our inheritance*; not just for Unitarians but for everyone who possesses a human brain. To take away reason is to deprive a person of his or her humanity. Reason is our inheritance. Compare that principle with the position of the religious right, for whom faith demands the acceptance of beliefs which are beyond question. Because it short-circuits reason, and because they do not consider this stance a private personal matter, you could say it's akin to oppression. They are about the business of "saving" you and me as well.

It is the mission of the religious right to convert our thinking. Their faith prohibits any doubt. If they adhere to their faith, no argument, scientific or otherwise, can shake this belief. This is the

absoluteness we bang up against when we try to explain—by way of reason— the validity of evolution. For them, the issue of reason vs. faith is unequal from the first. Reason loses out. Thus, to teach intelligent design as an “alternative” to evolution makes no sense. It makes no sense to us, but it also makes no sense to them. They are fundamentally unable to see it as an alternative. Intelligent design, because it agrees with the word of the Bible, is their only choice.

I have to ask myself. What exactly is the harm of teaching intelligent design? Why should I care? I am an open-minded Unitarian. Why can't I just be tolerant? In the broadest sense, I am against imposing these religious beliefs on the general population, NOT because of separation of church and state, (although that is a very important American principle) and neither is it solely because it devalues and muddles science and the scientific method. I object because in a free country no one should be compelled to bow to the beliefs of any one religion.

When religion is used for destructive purposes, when religious beliefs become the basis for oppression, when beliefs of any particular religious movement are imposed on everyone— or *anyone*, I object. Many of us find that we must speak out against such intentions. It would help us to keep in mind how difficult it is for others to conceive of the way *we* think and believe.

So. Is the effort to be understood by our counterparts a futile one? Is there really a sea of deaf ears out there? No indeed. There will always be people for whom reason kicks in and the light goes on. Many, many Unitarians are examples of the triumph of reason over blind faith. And—as a Catholic friend reminded me, Unitarians are not the sole possessors of liberal thinking. James Carse says that as one goes on, a person often finds he is surrounded by ever more doubts rather than convictions. This natural evolution toward reason should be celebrated, should not be suppressed because it is the source of imposed guilt.

The contrast between intelligent design and evolution is clear. Religion (the starting point for intelligent design) addresses *why* things happen: Religion involves meaning, value, and purpose. *It's about belief*. Evolution is the result of science, which describes *how* things happen. Evolution is based on concrete, scientific knowledge gained through observation. *It's about reason*.

It is good, at the end, to take a step back and see what you have said. Today I've been dealing with the extremes: Standing at the left end of the spectrum and looking at the right end with my telescope. But religion embodies a spectrum of beliefs, and it would be better for me to realize that many people lie in the broad middle section of the curve, and many of *them* could benefit from a more liberal religious point of view. I think I tend to assume people are further to the right than they actually are. We have all heard that many Americans go to church on Sunday believing certain parts of what they hear and just dismissing the rest. Such people may be very comfortable among UUs — if somebody just talked to them about what we represent. And part of that is a religion in which science and belief are not mutually exclusive.

On February 18, 2006 I wrote a quote by Martin Luther King Jr., in my journal. I put it here again as an admonition to myself, and to conclude this talk. He said,  
*Our lives begin to end when we keep silent about things that matter.*