

Disbelief 101

**A Young Person's Guide
to Atheism**

S.C. Hitchcock

**Illustrations by
Leslie White**

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Introduction

*All humanity is here for one reason: to answer
the question of what the meaning of life is.*

— S.C. Hitchcock

Oh, to have found this book when I was thirteen.

I turned thirteen in 1968, by all accounts a momentous year. But never mind your Summer of Love, your Chicago convention riots, your Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations. For me 1968 was the year I first seriously questioned my Roman Catholic faith. To grasp what a big deal that was, you need to understand that the twelve-year-old me took his religion very, very seriously. Looking back, I'm not altogether sure where that came from: my parents were devout, but no one's fanatics. Perhaps I fell under the influence of a round-the-bend Sunday-school nun. Or possibly it was all me, a smart kid too determined to weave all the tall tales and impossible miracles I'd been commanded to embrace into an internally consistent whole, never mind that it couldn't be done.

Whatever the source, I was one of those Catholic kids who believed it all and when called upon to paper over some doctrinal contradiction supplied my own wallpaper paste. I embraced my Catholicism with a literalist ardor more characteristic of evangelical Protestant fundamentalism. Adam and Eve (not a big deal among many Catholics even then), papal infallibility, the propriety of God's sending to hell whomever he chose (he was God, for crying in the sink), the irredeemable perversity of such vicious

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heretics as, oh, Lutherans and Baptists—I bought it all. Some nights I'd lay in bed, my chest bursting with pride that I'd had the fabulous luck to be born into the only religious community that had all the details right, the only club whose members held passes into heaven. Your Episcopalians, Jews, Quakers: mere kindling for the fires of hell. Only Roman Catholics would Jesus save. And I saw no injustice in that. By whatever joyous fortune, when the angels poured out their sacks of souls on a night roughly nine months prior to my birthday, my soul had shimmied down a chute at whose mouth quivered a zygote that would grow up Roman Catholic.

The point of all this was that when the thirteen-year-old me entertained his first doubts about the veracity of his faith, that was Crisis One in my world for 1968.

And this book was nowhere in sight.

*Why religious believers often feel the need to
obsessively gather in large groups:
“How can I be crazy if everyone else
thinks the same thing?”*

—S.C. Hitchcock

I've spoken with hundreds of now-lapsed Catholics; their paths toward apostasy tend to fall into one broad category or another. My first question concerned those pesky other religions, Christian and otherwise. Granted that all other churches were man's work, not God's, what evidence could I discern in the world that divine favor rested uniquely on the Church of Rome? Mounting horror attended my inability to find any. Lightning struck non-Catholic churches no more frequently. Catholicism seemed no less heir to the corruptions of politics and sex and money. (Of course at this juncture I knew nothing of the spectacular venality and concupiscence of the medieval popes. And the

pederasty scandal was still decades ahead.) Just as I was obsessing on this, the reforms of the Second Vatican Council began to percolate into parish life. Watching rituals and practices I'd thought eternal uprooted by mere human choices, I conceded that my church was swayed by bureaucracy and politics no less than any other. With a hollowing fear I realized that if what I had just discovered were true, I could no longer . . . gulp . . . be a Catholic.

What a wonderful moment it would have been to discover this book.

One by one my doubts paraded. Deploy here the hackneyed metaphor of your choice: over years I planed my faith away. I peeled the onion of my superstitions. I opened one after another the nested Russian dolls of skepticism.

Okay, no more metaphors. The point is that on issue after issue, I realized that my former faith was bankrupt. With each new discovery I would stand frozen, terrified of what it implied. Why, if Catholicism is not obviously superior to the other denominations . . . if Christianity is not demonstrably superior to the other faiths . . . if the cosmos shows fewer signs of God than signs that there is no god . . . With each new realization painful weeks or months would pass until I came to terms with whatever fearsome implication had terrified me so. One after another the anguished milestones passed. I acknowledged that I was no longer a Catholic . . . then, no longer a Christian . . . eventually, no longer a generic theist . . . at last, not a deist of any sort.

Then came (yes, literally) the morning when I woke up realizing that I was emotionally comfortable with atheism. Being part of an unplanned, undesigned, mutely unjust cosmos that no more cared for me than it recognized my existence was suddenly a proposition I was happy to accept. I was twenty-three; shucking off my childhood faith had cost me the better part of nine years, a slow-motion

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marathon of deliberation and misery and sporadic courage that I ran entirely alone, confiding in no one, relying on few if any outside sources.

Losing my religion was an altogether interior process, at the end of which the twenty-three-year-old-me hauled ass to the downtown library (no Web yet) and looked up “atheism” in the card catalogue. Now that I was an atheist, it was time to know a little better what that meant. In a rush I found that others had preceded me down my lonely road. Profound thinkers had wrestled with the issues that had vexed me. There were atheist and humanist organizations, even freethinking books that could have handed me much of the knowledge I’d had to develop on my own. Wryly I recognized that if I’d known how to access these resources years earlier, my odyssey to unbelief might have unfolded far sooner, far less painfully.

Still, I found nothing quite like this book.

If [a punitive Old Testament-style deity] is your god, then his actions or lack of action describe a petty tyrant, a sick bastard who shovels souls into bodies without regard for fairness, love, or happiness. He’s a god who must enjoy all of the suffering in the world—otherwise it would not be here.

It’s a good thing he doesn’t exist.

—S.C. Hitchcock

With *Disbelief 101*, S. C. Hitchcock has given the world something achingly special: a book that addresses precisely the fears and obsessions that seize young people of rock-ribbed faith when they first begin to doubt.

You see, my experience wasn’t all that unusual. Today I know more atheists and humanists and freethinkers than just about anyone else I know, and I’ve spent years listening to them about how most of them lost their childhood

faiths. (Yes, some people grow up as atheists, but most non-religious Americans were brought up in one faith or another and had to think their way out of it.) Though each such odyssey is unique, broad patterns can be discerned. Slow, painful, jerky progress is common. Way too often, new-made freethinkers regard the just-discovered genre of freethought publications and say, "If only I'd found these books and magazines and web sites earlier—I could have saved years!"

And that's why I know *Disbelief 101* has a special contribution to make.

Understand this: If religions don't indoctrinate children, they will cease to exist. They can only survive by using childhood indoctrination techniques.

—S.C. Hitchcock

If you're a young person who used to believe it all, but now you're starting to doubt—or if you know a young person answering that description—this book may be a life-changer. I've never seen a volume that compresses into fewer words, or expresses in clearer concepts, the very things a young zealot needs to think about before beginning the personal truth quest that may culminate in unbelief.

Over the years I've discovered lots of books that made me say, "If only I'd read this book back when I first began to disbelieve." Of all these books, *Disbelief 101* does the most thorough job of distilling just the ideas, just the evidence, and just the exhortation a young doubter needs to complete the journey toward unbelief more fluently and with less pain.

Longtime (or lifelong) freethinkers may wonder at some of the things S. C. Hitchcock has chosen to include or leave out. They may think too much energy is invested in debunking sophomoric theological conceptions, too little

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in constructing the platform for living a life of humane values without religion. (Though in fact, S.C. offers vivid demonstrations why irreligion beats religion hands down at encouraging ethical living.)

If you are one who has never known the agony and wonder of dismantling a deeply held faith, please take the counsel of one who has. *Disbelief 101* is not a book for those who've always disbelieved. It addresses the specific terrors and confusions that come with shedding the husk of youthful certainties. Weird as this may seem to lifelong atheists, countless young apostates lose years trapped between the intellectual knowledge that God does not exist and the emotional fear of being pitched into hell for daring to think such a thing. S.C. Hitchcock gets that, maybe better than any other author I've read.

While reading *Disbelief 101*, I was envious to discover the explosive book that would best have addressed my own deepest fears and obsessions when I was a novice inquirer. Nothing could have spared the thirteen-year-old me more years, more torment, than to have somehow been able to crack open *Disbelief 101* across my lap in that tumultuous year of 1968.

I use the word *explosive* deliberately. S.C. Hitchcock's book has the potential to empower many, many, many young zealots to outgrow their infancy religions. Yet S.C. lives in Middle America. Sadly, I believe he is wise to write under a pseudonym. If this book winds up shaping as many young atheists as I expect it might—if, as it deserves, it someday joins Paine's *The Age of Reason* and the Bible itself among the books that most prolifically free young readers from their faiths—Middle America may not remain safe for its author.

I'm in my fifties now, inhabiting a different world than my 13-year-old self. I genuinely believe that before I die I

may see an America that accepts atheists, agnostics, humanists, and freethinkers as readily as Catholics and Lutherans now look past one another's differences. As I've often written, I think the key to achieving this is simply to foment disbelief among the young, and to encourage every young unbeliever to be maximally visible so our true numbers will be impossible to undercount. *Disbelief 101* has the potential to be a powerful weapon in that campaign.

*Religion relies and thrives on your fear. But don't
be afraid. God doesn't exist.*

—S.C. Hitchcock

If you know a young doubter, give her or him this book.

If you are a young doubter, keep reading. And welcome home.

—Tom Flynn

(Tom Flynn is the editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine and *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*.)



2

Atheism as “Belief”

Perhaps the most disturbing passage in the Bible is in the book of Job. In this book, the devil challenges god to a bet. The devil claims that he can get one of god's most loyal followers, a wealthy and happy man named Job, to curse god if only god will let the devil torture the man. God accepts the bet and the devil promptly kills Job's livestock, his family, and then curses the man with sickness. Job is furious and angry even at the very friends who tell him not to give up belief. Eventually, Job cries out to god for an explanation. Surely, if Job is the creation of god (after all, Job, like the rest of us, never asked to be born), he deserves one. Job is a metaphor for humanity, and he is asking this question: why must we suffer, be tortured, and die if god loves us and has the power to stop all of this pain?

The Lord himself decided to answer Job. In her great book, *Doubt: A History*, Jennifer Michael Hecht quotes a few phrases from this biblical chapter. These are the words from the mouth of god. This is how god chose to explain himself, to explain the evil he either allows or causes:

Have you walked the depths of the ocean? Have the gates of death been opened to you? Where does light come from? And where darkness?

Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow?
Hast thou seen the treasures of the hail? Hath the rain a
father? Who hath begotten the drops of dew?

Canst thou bind the sweet influences of the
Pleiades or loosen the bands of Orion?

Out of whose womb came the ice?

Who has put wisdom in the inward parts? Or who
hath given understanding to the heart? Who can number
the clouds in wisdom? Or who can stay the bottles of
heaven, when the dust groweth into hardness, and the
clouds cleave fast together?

Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion? Or fill the
appetite of the young lions, when they crouch in their
dens, and abide in the covert to lie in wait?

Gavest thou the goodly wings upon the peacocks?

Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast thou
clothed his neck with thunder? Canst thou make him
afraid as a grasshopper? The glory of his nostrils is terri-
ble. (p. 68)

As Hecht points out, god's answer is simply to bury Job in mystery, to make him feel small and insignificant so that he will not ask such inconvenient questions in the future. God does not want Job to ask why he (god) would allow evil, why he would punish all the humans of the entire world for the sins of Adam and Eve, people that they had never even met. God does not want Job to ask what kind of teacher uses the suffering and death of children as lessons. In effect, god stares down upon the lowly Job and says: "You have no right to question me. Can you explain any of the mysteries of the universe?"

What happens when Job (humanity) lifts up his eyes and says to the sky tyrant, "Yes, I can"?

Aren't the answers to these questions the rock from the slingshot that buries itself in the forehead of the giant? The rock is science, and the sling from which it is flung is disbelief.

Ironically, the first step towards answering the mysteries that god put before Job is to stop believing in the very god from whose mouth the mysteries supposedly came.

* * *

Many religious people view atheism as simply another form of belief, no different from Christianity or Hinduism. It's not. It's the absence of belief. However, for a moment let's accept the assertion that atheism is a form of religion. (I don't really accept the idea that atheism is another type of faith, and I'll explain why in a moment. But for the sake of argument let's accept the assertion that atheism is just another "belief.")

Imagine if, of all the world's religions, one of them, say some little-known Christian church buried deep in Alabama, began to work miracles. Let's say that the members of this church, when they prayed and did their rituals, were actually able to heal the sick in high, statistically verifiable percentages. Let's say this church eradicated smallpox, and through its members' prayers sent people halfway across the world in hours, and to the moon in days. Let's say that its ministers were able to stare far out into the cosmos and down at the tiniest particles. There would seem to be nothing, given enough time, that these believers couldn't accomplish through their religion's rituals.

Wouldn't this little church win converts from all around the world? Wouldn't a religious sect with this kind of real-world power become completely dominant? It would be considered the one true faith. According to those

who look at atheism as a belief, there is such a religion. It is called atheism, and it works precisely because it is so different from all of the other religions. Where the other religions assume that there are gods and a spirit world, atheism assumes there are not.

Let's define the "religion" of atheism in this way: "Atheism believes that questions of the natural world can be solved by beginning with the proposition that there is no god. Instead, the atheist looks at evidence before making a claim."

Okay, now let's assume that this "religion" of atheism has a ritual; it's called the scientific method. We've all learned it. One asks a question, sets up a hypothesis, runs an experiment, and then examines the evidence.

Atheism has now been defined as a "religion" with a core "theological" doctrine, and a "religious" ritual. We could stretch the metaphor to include labs as places of worship, etc., but it's unnecessary.

Let's now imagine our religion of atheism in the real world, where it must compete with other religions for followers. It's just one more piece of lettuce on the salad bar of religious belief.

The atheists, using their atheistic rituals, have conquered many of humankind's most destructive diseases. They have created artificial limbs, the telephone, flight, advances in agriculture and medicine. They have even managed to predict the weather. (Talk about prophecy!) They have created weapons technology capable of destroying the entire world many times over. Is this not a powerful religion? Has atheism not truly discovered the ways of god by simply assuming that there isn't one?

Imagine if any single religious sect could claim the kind of success in real-world results, for good or bad, that atheistic science has. Can you imagine if an evangelical

Christian church could pray a man into orbit? Would they hide this away and say that god works in mysterious ways, or would they scream it from the rooftops and win converts because of their supernatural miracle?

Atheistic science has been too successful. It makes the miraculous commonplace. If ever the world was destroyed nearly entirely, and some new race of intelligent beings, mired again in religious mumbo jumbo, discovered that we, the ancients, knew how to fly and how to prevent plagues, and could see hurricanes coming, wouldn't they think we had some powerful religion indeed? And if we could explain it all to this new race, wouldn't they be surprised to find that not a single one of our miracles was the result of prayer or religious ritual? That there wasn't a single word in any of our holy books about nuclear physics, about bacteria or viruses, about meteorology? We did the miraculous, we would have to say, by assuming that miracles don't exist and by ignoring the false teachings in our holy texts.

So if atheism is just another "belief," why doesn't atheism have a massive following? Why are atheists instead a small minority in America? Why are we reviled and pushed out of politics and public conversation?

It's because the advances of science are never described as being successful primarily because science assumes there is no god. Imagine a newspaper article that described a breakthrough in the creation of a smallpox vaccine:

A group of atheists, working under the always successful assumption that there is no god and that the natural world operates without any supernatural help, found today that smallpox is in fact created by microscopic entities called viruses. Now that this evidence is in, the scientists can work on the creation of a vaccine using weakened viruses to strengthen the body's immune system. Another victory for the atheistic world view.

Don't you see? Everything that works in the world, everything that humanity has created works because we assume there is no god. Cars work because we assume that no god will help run them if there's no gasoline or engine. Diseases are cured because we assume that god has nothing to do with them; so scientists look for other causes. Buildings stand because we build them strongly, knowing that the hand of god won't hold them up.

Imagine building a car with no engine, and assuming it's going to run on "god power." What irony! After centuries of priests and shamans praying for signs and praying that a god or gods interfere with human lives, the only thing that has worked in the real world is to assume that god doesn't exist! To assume there is no god is to get off on the right foot every single time.

Let's imagine a situation where a child is badly injured. The child's deeply religious parents, assuming there is a god who works miracles, pray over the child in their home and do not take her to the hospital. The child dies. In this case, aren't the parents guilty of a crime? Don't we all, deep down, know that it's criminal to pretend there is a real god in certain situations? That injured child should have been taken to a hospital, where the doctors, who would assume that there is no god (through their actions if not their beliefs) would hopefully be able to repair her body and keep her alive. If there is a god, why does he demand that we deny him in order to make anything work?

Why don't we begin to define atheism as a religion? Not only that, but let's define everything that works as atheistic. Atheistic car mechanics, atheistic doctors, atheistic custodial workers. We could go on and on. Not a single profession in the entire world achieves results by assuming there is a god. That is, except for the religious profession, which exists only to perpetuate its religious beliefs. But,

you might say, don't many religious professionals do a lot to feed the hungry, clothe the poor and all that? Don't religious people often do good things because of religion? Sure, but why do they have to do it? Because they know god won't. Religious people themselves have to achieve real-world results in the same way that everyone else does: by assuming there is no god who'll do it for them.

If we did define atheism as a religion, then maybe we'd start to win converts in the same kind of numbers that Jesus and Mohammed have.

But we don't. Atheism is not a religion. What is it then? It's an offshoot of scientific inquiry. Let me explain.

In the not so distant past, just a few centuries ago, people would look at the world and make guesses about how it worked. If a person was smart or well educated and wrote a guess down, then people began to believe it. Let's use an example you may have learned in your science classes: that of meat and maggots. It was once believed that if you left meat out in the open it turned into maggots. After all, that's what you saw if you left the meat out and came back a few days later. In fact, the idea that meat turns into maggots is just one of a seemingly infinite number of explanations for maggots.

Well, it's simple to test whether or not this is true. You put meat in two jars and put them both on a window sill. Cover one with a cloth and don't cover the other one. A few days later the uncovered jar will have maggots and the covered one won't. Interesting. Now you know that meat doesn't just turn into maggots. But you still don't know that maggots are fly larvae. It could be that the sun helps the meat turn into maggots. So try the experiment again with the jars in the shade. When the results are the same, you'll know that the sun is not a cause of maggots. But, if you're watching, you'll notice that flies are all over the meat in the

uncovered jar. Could there be a connection? If you watch long enough, and closely enough, you'll see that, yes, the flies are laying eggs in the meat. The hatched larvae must live off the nutrition in the dead flesh.

By collecting evidence, you found the truth. And the truth is useful because you can build upon it. Once you discover, for example, that maggots eat only dead flesh, you'll find that they are excellent for cleaning the dead skin out of gangrenous wounds. This is an effective, though disgusting, medical procedure.

We reason in such a way. You begin by understanding something concrete and then building on it. Let's say that we don't know how sound works and that several of us are sitting around talking about the problem. One guy states that sound is caused by tiny little angels flying out of our mouths and entering the ears of the people we're speaking to. Any time there's a noise, it's the work of angels. If it's a really loud noise, then there are bunches of angels. The problem is that the angels get tired. If they have to fly too far, they give up or just fall down.

So this man creates a device that he thinks will carry the angels, and the sound, for long distances. It's a complicated machine, a large pipe with holes on the sides. Every five feet, the inventor has placed strong but silent fans. The fans are at the holes to give the angels a burst of wind to help carry them farther on.

Once the contraption is built, the man stations himself at one end of the pipe and puts another person at the opposite end a mile away. He speaks and the powerful fans start whirring.

Now, let's imagine that this inventor is in competition with a man who closely studied sound and discovered that it has a tendency to smash into an object, like a tree, but then seems to wash around the tree so that some of it

comes around the other side. In fact, it acts rather like a wave.

This man realizes, because of previous scientific discoveries, that electricity, alternating current, is also a wave, and that it travels through wires. Well, if he wants to carry sound over long distances, it's not just a matter of turning the sound wave into an electrical wave, but changing it back into sound at the other end. So, he invents a device called a telephone that translates sound waves into electrical waves when you speak into it, and turns them back into sound waves when you listen to it.

Obviously, this is just a thought experiment. No one person could discover the nature of sound and invent the telephone. This is something that happens over generations, but it illustrates my point. If you start with a belief that has no evidence to back it up, then you'll get nowhere. The long-pipe/angel/fan machine obviously won't work, because there are no angels.

The telephone will work because there are sound and electrical waves. In the beginning, to say that angels carry sound or to say that sound is made of invisible waves may sound equally valid, or equally crazy, but one statement has the power of evidence to back it up and the other doesn't.

Likewise, if we begin with the idea that prayer really heals people, we will get nowhere. Prayer doesn't heal people. Prayer affects viruses, bacteria, and cancer cells about as much as ancient or tribal people dancing around a fire and killing animals for sacrifice does.

So, let's compare prayer with our example from above about the tiny sound-carrying angels. A contraption designed to convey sound-carrying angels over long distances doesn't work. Why? Simple: because there are no angels. Likewise, praying to god to heal someone doesn't work. Why? Simple: because there is no god.

The thing is, atheism is not a religion. Atheism is a simple statement of disbelief in any kind of supernatural force. This statement can be made with words such as "I don't believe in a god or group of gods." Or, it can be made with actions such as when someone goes to the hospital because he knows that god won't heal him. (And, I'm sorry, but the notion that god chose to heal a person through the creation of hospitals makes no sense. Where was god for the thousands of years that people got sick before hospitals existed?)

Once you've made that statement of disbelief, then you're free to think about every topic, be it moral or scientific, through the use of reason and your own intellect rather than by searching some holy book for the answers given by "prophets" of questionable sanity. Religions are an end. Atheism is a beginning.

Every religion claims that human beings are put on this Earth for the express purpose of discovering that religion. Atheism says no such thing. Atheistic scientific inquiry is merely a tool that anyone can use. It's like a hammer. And anyone can use a hammer. Scientific inquiry is like that. It doesn't require that you convert to any ideology in order to use it.

Even a deeply religious person can use the experimental method and have it work. To be an atheist merely means that you don't believe in anything, be it god, an Invisible Flying Clown, or sound-carrying angels, without evidence.

But wait! The religious person might be yelling at this point. You can't prove there is no god through scientific inquiry. He could easily exist and just chooses not to answer prayers. You can't prove that something doesn't exist! That's true. I can't prove that there aren't sound-carrying angels, either.

But, a liberal religious person might say, god does exist but he doesn't answer prayers or interact with the natural

world at all. Then, I, as the skeptic, would have to ask: "How do you know he exists?" After all, the burden of proof is on the person making the claim. Prove to me he exists. If he doesn't answer prayers, if he doesn't interact with the natural world, then how do you know he's there? And, given the fact that he is either actively involved in the evil of the world or completely detached and uncaring, why do you think he is good?

The religious person will undoubtedly answer with the most harmful word ever concocted in the history of humankind.

Faith.

3

Faith—A False Virtue

In our culture, perhaps no single word conjures up such positive overtones as the word faith. Religious people often proudly proclaim themselves to be “people of faith.” Children are taught that faith is an important aspect of their upbringing. “We’re raising our child in faith” is a common parental boast.

Faith is a central aspect of Christianity and Islam. But even religions that claim not to put a high premium on faith (that is, those that don’t claim it’s the golden ticket to heaven) still need faith. Religious Jews need to have faith that there is worth in carrying out the same rituals as people who lived and died thousands of years ago in a desert. They need to have faith that there really is a savior on the way. Hindus must have faith in myriad (it doesn’t hurt to look up a word now and then) gods and to have faith that good works will move them up the reincarnation chain to enlightenment. Buddhists have to have faith that the serene feeling that they get from meditation is somehow more spiritual than the feeling I get after going for a jog. In one way or another, faith, the ability to “believe,” is an important aspect of all religions.

But why is “faith” held in such high regard. What does it mean anyway? The Oxford Dictionary defines faith like this:

1. complete trust or confidence
2. firm belief, especially without logical proof.
3. a system of religious belief; b. belief in religious doctrines.

Isn't this a strange set of definitions? First of all, faith implies a firm belief. The person of faith is usually a person who strongly believes in something. People of faith have little or no doubt about what they believe in.

Okay, you would think that people would have this kind of faith in things that have been proven to work, that is, things that have been proven true. I have unswerving faith that dawn will come tomorrow. It's come every day for billions of years! And I have faith that the gravity which has kept the Earth swirling around the sun will continue to work tomorrow and the next day and the next. Why? It's always worked. It's easy to have firm belief in something that is proven by evidence to be true.

And yet, the next part of the Oxford definition makes the first part seem bizarre. Faith is not just a firm belief; it's a firm belief, especially *without* logical proof.

Now wait a minute. How can anyone have a firm belief in something without proof for it? If I were to say that I had a firm belief in the existence of sound-carrying angels or an Invisible Flying Clown, people would think I was weird. If I said I had firm belief that the Invisible Flying Clown would rescue me if I jumped off a building, I'd be considered insane. After all, gravity is known to exist. One can have real faith in gravity. If something goes up, it comes down (unless it leaves the Earth's gravitational pull), but to put so much faith in something for which I have no evidence, to the point where I'd wager my life on it, would be nuts.

Let's revisit a slightly different version of an example I used earlier, but go into greater detail. Let's say there's a

very religious farm family living out in the middle of nowhere, and the youngest boy has his leg mangled in a farming accident. The boy's mother and father, having been raised to have faith in the power of god, simply cover the boy's leg with a sheet and pray for him.

After one day of this, the boy is in extreme shock and delirium from pain and loss of blood. The mother calls her pastor who contacts the other members of the church, and they gather to pray for the boy's healing. The boy gets worse and worse despite the prayers. One of the members of the congregation finally suggests that the mother and father take the boy to the hospital. They don't, thinking that if they show a lack of faith in god he will take the boy's life. The boy is only appearing to get sicker and sicker to test his and their faith.

The boy dies.

Any rational person, even a deeply religious one, would consider the actions of everyone involved, except for the injured boy, to be criminal. Why? Isn't faith a good thing, and the more faith the better? Why should having so much faith in god be a criminal and negligent act? Why should it be considered child endangerment?

Many religious people would answer that, while they believe in a god, they also believe that he wants them to visit a doctor. Most people see no contradiction in taking a loved one to the hospital and then praying to god for his or her recovery while that loved one gets all the help of modern medical science.

But if you really have faith, why go to the hospital?

In his wonderful book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins, wrote about a study called "The Great Prayer Experiment." It involved 1802 patients in six hospitals. All were recovering from the same type of heart surgery. The patients were divided into thirds. One group was prayed

for and knew it; the second group was prayed for and didn't know it; and the last group was not prayed for and didn't know it.

It turns out that those in the two groups that were unaware of their prayer-status had no difference in their health or recovery. The only ones to show a difference were the people who were prayed for and knew it. They “suffered significantly more complications than those who did not [know they were being prayed for].” (p. 63) Dawkins attributes this to the added stress the knowledge brought.

This should have been an unnecessary study. A simple look at history shows that prayer does nothing. The infant mortality rate used to be much higher than it is now. Plagues used to ravage medieval Christian Europe and the Islamic nations of the Middle East. I presume that many people in these deeply religious societies prayed often and fervently and died horrible deaths regardless. Nobody in America dies of plague or smallpox anymore. Is it because we pray harder than our medieval predecessors? Or is it because science has given us better medicines?

Do we no longer have epidemics in this country because god likes us better than people in the past, or is it because we discovered that sanitation and hand washing are effective in preventing outbreaks?

Ask yourself why it is that you're supposed to have just the right amount of faith. You're not supposed to have so much faith that you actually expect god to do anything useful, like heal the sick or rescue the helpless, but just enough so that you believe in very old texts and in wild stories. Believe just enough, the church seems to be saying, to get your behind in the seats every Saturday or Sunday.

Why do all religions put such a high premium on faith? Why do they ask their followers to “grow in faith,” when clearly growing too much in faith can become a problem

and can even land you in jail? What do the religions want? They want your faith to grow, but only in certain untestable areas. Religious Jews want you to have faith that a messiah is coming to save the world and that the books of the Old Testament are literally or figuratively true. They want you to have faith that Jesus was not a messiah, or savior. The Christians want you to have faith that Jesus was the son of god and that he was born of a virgin, walked on water, healed the sick, talked to Satan, was crucified for the sins of humanity, and that he died and came back three days later. The Muslims want you to have faith that Jesus was a prophet, but not the son of god, that god is named Allah, and that his true prophet was Mohammed, who was visited by an angel in a cave and spent his life conquering territory to spread Islam, taking many underage “wives” along the way.

How can these linked religions all exist? Simple: none of them have any evidence for their claims, so there’s no way to test their validity. Each claim, without any real evidence to back it, is just as valid as the next. It is the absence of evidence, of logic, of reason, that forces all religions to put a high premium on faith. Because they have no evidence for their claims, they have to make it a virtue to believe in things that are illogical—even though in any other area to have faith in something without evidence is crazy.

Every single religion in the world teaches that you exist for only one reason: to find and believe in that religion, whatever it may be. They all teach that god went through all the trouble of creation just so you can have free will and discover his one true religion.

And most people believe that the one true religion is whichever one they grew up with.

How do the many churches of the world sell something as blatantly stupid, as sadistic, as faith? Well, they promise

a lot, don't they? These religions claim that faith is the one thing that god requires. Many believers of various sects of Christianity and Islam think that god requires that we believe in him despite all evidence against his existence and the truth of the scriptures. It is a virtue, for example, to believe in creationism and not evolution because of all the evidence stacked against the idea of creationism; and the fact that there is not a single shred of real evidence in favor of creationism is only a test of faith. God wants to see if you will trust your own mind over the ancient holy texts he had written on his behalf. If you trust your own mind, if you lose faith that these comically flawed documents are the actual truth, then you will be punished. If you keep your faith, then you will be rewarded.

What are the rewards for having such faith, we might ask?

Heaven. A place of eternal bliss.

When do you go to heaven?

After you die!!

Of course, our next question is obvious: If you don't go to heaven until after you die, how does anyone know it exists? I think you know the answer:

You have to have FAITH!!!

And if you don't believe in all of this nonsense, what do the many religions of the world say awaits you?

Hell. A place of eternal torment.

Take a wild guess when you go. That's right: after you're dead. (You're getting good at this.) And how do we know that hell exists if people only go there after they're dead.

Drum roll, please . . .

You have to have FAITH!!!

Oddly enough, these extremes of reward and punishment, heaven on one hand and hell on the other, are

enough to scare many people into being religious. Many people go to church and give money to it like they put money into a retirement account, hoping to do just enough to get into the nice gated community that is heaven and, perhaps more importantly, avoid that nasty slum called hell.

Isn't this insane? Isn't this a crazy wager? What if you picked the wrong religion? What if you're Catholic and god is a Southern Baptist? What if you're a Hindu and god is an African Animist?

What if god wants you to conclude he's *not* there, and the only people who get into heaven are those wicked atheists? Why not? If you believe in a god who enjoys playing little games, how hard is it to believe in a god who tells everybody he wants them to believe in his holy books, but who really wants them to buck the system and *not* believe?

Of course, I don't believe any of this for a second. Many Christian and Muslim religious people are put off by the notion that people of other faiths, billions of people, are going to go to hell. And yet, if religious people want to believe that god lets people of all faiths into heaven, then what's the point of believing in any particular religion?

You see the problem? If you can get into heaven being a Buddhist, Muslim, Jain, or whatever, then why should you come to—and give money to—some Christian church? From the point of view of members of any particular religion, it makes no sense to say that everyone gets into heaven; and yet it seems cruel to condemn most of humanity to hellfire for believing, with total faith, in whatever holy book and religion happened to be fashionable in the area in which they were born.

This is a real problem for those seeking to sell religion, so they mostly ignore it. In America, it is a social convention not to argue about religion. We seem to have a policy

of, “if you don’t mess with my nonsense, I won’t mess with yours.” It’s downright impolite to bring up the topic of logic to a religious person.

If you ever ask people who attend a “megachurch” why they give money to it, when it’s plain for anyone to see that the tax-free cash is being used to build media empires and to line the pockets of already wealthy preachers, they’ll probably look at you funny. The truth is they don’t care where the money goes. They give the money because they have faith that god is pleased with them for giving it, and is building them a nice retirement condo in the clouds.

Because religion is a business built on faith, it has to make faith into a virtue. Religions have to get to you when you are young and plow into your impressionable mind the idea that faith is a good thing, that it’s the only thing that matters, that it’s important. Not total faith, no, just enough faith to believe what god’s spokesmen (and it is almost always men) are telling you, even when what they’re telling you is complete rubbish.

Religions have to do this. After all, faith is their only product. Faith may consume your whole life and a good deal of your money and your intellect, but it costs religions next to nothing to produce it. And the best part? Every indoctrinated child grows up to sell the product to the next generation.