



Do we need God?

Discourse on religion and science are often very incensed and polarized – and with no resolution in sight. The problem is there is no common platform for which religion and science can defend their respective arguments. For instance, religious people cannot be convinced by any amount of scientific evidence or reasoning that God does not exist because religion is, at best, weakly based on intellectual enquiries and rationalization. Religion is instead strongly based on justification from impressions and experiences, as well as from teachings and doctrines that have been passed down.



Special edition: “The God Issue” in New Scientist (17 March 2012)

The late [Stephen Jay Gould](#) called science and religion as “[non-overlapping magisteria](#)” to mean that science and religion exist in separate domains. Science and religion do not compete and have nothing to say to each other because they

each look at independent aspects.



Christians worshipping in a church in Malaysia (photo from gmc.org.my)

Prof. [Victor J. Stenger](#), from the Univ. of Hawaii, begs to differ. “The existence, or not, of God is very much a question science can address,” he says.



Science vs. religion. Science has found no evidence of God. (photo from thesundaydrivehome.blogspot.com)

If God is such a central contributor in the operation of the universe and in human lives, then we should be able to use science to detect God’s presence. Therefore, if a properly controlled experiment revealed that the observations cannot be explained by natural means, then science must consider seriously the evidence of a supernatural being or force.

But controlled experiments to determine, for example, the effectiveness of intercessory prayers and the existence of out-of-body experiences have failed to show any evidence of supernatural means. For the past millennia, many miracles,

God-answered prayers, and religious or supernatural experiences in which people are able to communicate with God have been claimed. By now, there should be scientific evidence that at least some of these claims have occurred. Instead, there has been none.

Furthermore, science have shown that religious people behave, on average, no better, and in some cases, worse than non-religious people. Instead, moral behavior appears to have evolved socially.

The origins and operations of our universe require no supernatural explanations. Science has not found any evidence of God in astronomy, physics, and biology. The [Intelligent Design movement](#) has failed to disprove evolution. For example, they attempted to show that some biological systems came about not by evolution but by a higher being or a Creator. However, their arguments, though presented as science facts, have since been discredited.



Despite a millennia of claims of miracles, God-answered prayers, and revelation from God to human beings, there have been no scientific evidence of even some of them occurring (photo from mormonbeliefs.org)

Prof. Victor Stenger points out the folly and danger of religion because it causes

muddled thinking in all areas of life. Religion causes us to think, behave, and act in an emotional manner without considering evidence. The danger particularly arises when people in the decision-making process, such as in politics, make decisions based on religious beliefs.

Well, if science has refuted the existence of God, why then do most people still believe in God? [Richard Dawkins](#), a well-known scientist and atheist, argues vehemently against religion, and he advises parents not to indoctrinate their children with religious beliefs. His advice could be in vain if [Justin Barrett](#), a Professor of Psychology at Fuller Graduate School of Psychology, is correct that we cannot help believing in God because we are all born believers.

Prof. Justin Barrett argues that children are naturally inclined to find religious claims and explanations attractive. The moment babies are born, they try to make sense of this world, and this includes trying to find explanations of events in terms of agents; that is, determining who or what have caused those events.



Born believers? Children are naturally inclined to seek explanations that invoke design or purpose (photo from newscientist.com)

Moreover, these agents are perceived by children to act for a purpose and not by chance - and these agents need not be visible. Children find it easier, for example, to accept that plants and animals are brought about for a reason rather than they arose by chance or for no reason. The ease in which children acquire these purposeful and agent-based explanations gradually makes children highly susceptible to religion. Moreover, Prof. Justin Barrett hypothesizes that young

children (before [theory of the mind](#) has been fully developed in them) find it easier to assume in a super-power or super-being. Young children tend to believe others have full knowledge and sense of everything. In other words, children's early default position is to assume some super-power or being is fully in charge in all events.

Children may be born with a tendency towards religion, but this does not mean they would be inevitably be pushed into any one religion or even be religious later in life. Formal education, culture, the environment, and experience would later shape a person's stance and understanding of religion.

In societies with religious majorities, the atheists are held in distrust. While some might not find this to be surprising, what is unexpected is to learn that the forces that drive a society's intolerance of atheists are one of the main reasons how past human civilizations have grown in terms of size and complexity.

For a society to grow, it requires cooperation among strangers. But what causes strangers to cooperate with one another for mutual benefits? Prof. [Ara Norenzayan](#) of University of British Columbia, Vancouver, argues that religions drive people together for pro-social behaviors such as cooperation, trust, and self-sacrifice through religious devotion and extravagant rituals and practices. They act as social glue, driving people to work together for better competition for resources and habitat.

For the society to become increasingly larger and more complex requires a religion with Big Gods - those powerful, omniscient, and interventionist watchers. People, Prof. Ara Norenzayan says, are nicer when they are being watched by some supreme being. It is commonly known that surveillance, be it by camera or a crowd, forces people to be better behaved. Likewise, a notion of being watched by some powerful being encourages cooperation and good behavior even among strangers.

As societies become larger and more complex, rituals become routine and are used to spread and reinforce doctrines. Concepts such as karma, supernatural rewards and punishment, heaven and hell, and damnation and salvation are typically found in modern religions, but infrequent in early religions.



Religions with all-powerful and omniscient Gods are needed for the further development of societies (photo from tulisanmurtad.blogspot.com)

Religions literally come-and-go. The average lifespan of a religion is 25 years. However, it would be unwise to think that staying power of science would ultimately surpass that of religion. [Robert N. McCauley](#) of the University of Atlanta, Georgia says that it would be unwise to assume that science could easily replace religion.

Religious ideas and actions spontaneously and inevitably arise in human populations. This is because religion, like that remarked earlier by Prof. Justin Barrett, is an evolutionary by-product of various human cognition, making us naturally inclined towards religion. We have a tendency to believe in religion because we naturally seek explanations of events caused by agents who act for a purpose. People may not be religious, but they can act or be influenced by religious beliefs.

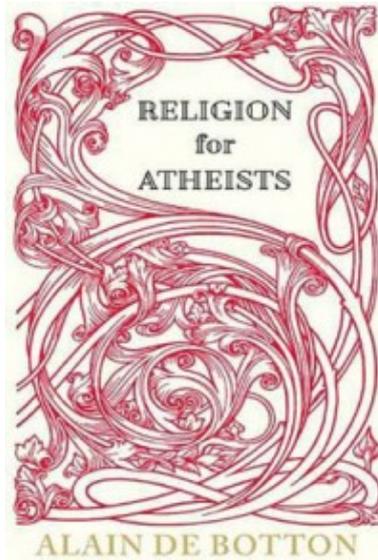
Another reason that science may have difficulty in supplanting religion is science is simply too difficult for most people to do. Science involves a great deal of intellectual undertaking that could be too sophisticated, elaborate, and intensive for some. So, although science may disprove the existence of God, most people

may find difficulty in appreciating and understanding the offered evidence. And even if they do, they may still find difficulty in changing their mindset to one that is based on science.



Is science too difficult to understand by the masses? (photo from ehow.com)

The cover story, The God Issue, in New Scientist ends with an interview with [Alain de Botton](#), a writer and television presenter in the UK. Alain de Botton has an intriguing (but, in my opinion, seriously flawed) idea that the issue isn't about either science or religion but about picking and choosing the lessons and principles found in religions that are useful but removing the role of God and doctrines from religions. He argues that religions do have good advice on how we could lead our lives, even if God is unfortunately in the way.



“Religion for atheists,” by Alain de Botton, talks about removing God from religions and adapting religious practices and teachings for secular societies.

Although the New Scientist interview did not cover de Botton’s book, I had read his book, [“Religion for Atheists”](#), some months ago. In “Religion for Atheists,” Alain de Botton presents ten areas derived from religious practices from which a secular society can benefit. Among the areas is the so-called Agape Restaurant where strangers come together to share a meal and to share their experiences, similar to how Christians might gather in a church to sing and share. de Botton also recommended that art and carefully designed building architecture be appreciated as a way to contemplate the beauty of life. Even universities should be restructured so that instead on focusing on scientific disciplines and technical skills, the focus is shifted to that based more on the “cultivation of human beings”; that is, people who are adept in culture, human relationships, and ethics so to live meaningful lives. Instead of going to temples to worship God, de Botton recommends that temples and museums be built instead and in such a way so that we could appreciate and marvel at humanity. Public signboards should be used, de Botton argues, to display messages of hope and encouragement and even to display anonymous confessions or troubles, akin to confessional in Catholic Churches.

The four articles (and one interview) in [“The God Issue” in New Scientist \(17 March 2012\)](#) are a fascinating read because they are the departures from the typical I-hate-religion or I-hate-science articles commonly found when science and religion are discussed. Even though science has disproved the existence of supernatural beings and causes, it would be unwise to believe that science would eventually and be easily embraced by people. Appreciation in science requires training, but religious beliefs come naturally.

Moreover, can one be moral without religion? Experiments have shown that even apes show altruistic behavior by sacrificing their own needs to avoid causing suffering to others. Perhaps the experience by Scandinavian countries would be helpful. Although the majority of their people are atheists, they are some of the most cooperative, peaceful, and prosperous in the world.

So, perhaps we do not require God after all.

Comments for this article are closed due to numerous hate comments from so-called religious people (whom ought to know better by reading this article more carefully). This confirms my stand that you cannot have a rationale discussion with religious people.