

Religion for Skeptics¹

L. Karl Branting

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Members of *liberal* religions, like Unitarian Universalism, are often asked questions that members of more *mainstream* religions seldom hear, like: “How can something be a religion if you don't *have* to believe in God?”; “If there's no God, doesn't that mean that anyone can do whatever they want?”; and even “What's the point of life if there's no God?”.

On the other side of the religious divide, the fastest growing religious category in America is the “None of the aboves”. The challenge from them is more likely to be “Why bother with church at all if God is just a myth?”.

This morning, I'll try to answer these questions and others by viewing religion from four distinct perspectives:

1. The stance of religious skeptics typified by the so-called New Atheists, who think that you have to be crazy to believe anything religious
2. The stance of true believers of mainstream religions who think that religion flows directly from God
3. The stance of social scientists, who think that religion is a cultural adaptation for cooperative life in large societies, and
4. The stance of members of liberal religions, like most people here this morning.

I'll argue that the social science perspective can save us from a false choice between New Atheists and true believers by showing that, contrary to common belief, the key rewards of religious affiliation—meaning, morality, and community—don't depend on consensus about, or even belief in, the supernatural.

Let's start out with the perspective of religious skeptics. The so-called New Atheists are scientists and philosophers who are fixated on the absurdities and cruelties of religious beliefs and practices. For example, Daniel Dennet analogizes religion to a parasitic lancet fluke that finds its way into the stomach of its host, a cow, by coopting the brain of an ant and forcing it to climb to the top of a blade of grass where it is most likely to be eaten by the cow. In a similar way, Dennet says, religious memes coop human brains, inducing their hosts to act in a way most likely to infect other hosts, like door-to-door proselytizing and engaging in holy wars.² In a similar vein, Nobel Prize winning physicist Steven Weinberg says:

With or without religion you have good people doing good things, and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, it takes religion.³

Ouch! There is some truth to this perspective, yet these criticisms seem terribly one-sided. What about the comfort that mainstream religions bring to their members, what about all the religious charities, what about the tradition of humanism in mainstream religions? And regardless of whether these critiques are fair when applied to mainstream religions, do they apply to liberal religions? Can we

1 (c) 2018 L. Karl Branting

2 Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: religion as a natural phenomenon*, Viking Penguin (2006), pp.3-6.

3 Steven Weinberg, *A designer universe?*, http://www.physlink.com/Education/essay_weinberg.cfm

separate the good from the harmful in religion?

Let's turn now to perspective 2, mainstream religious belief. In the US, believers have, in fact, many different perspectives, as detailed in the 2010 book “America's Four Gods”,⁴ but typical views might include the following:

- True religion needs no explaining because it comes from God.
- Morality is expressed in God's rules. Morally unsophisticated believers try to follow these rules to avoid punishment; the morally sophisticated try to follow these rules because they think that they are the best and wisest ethical guidance.
- Life is given meaning by following God's plan. If a skeptic asks “What *is* the plan?” or “How any plan could possibly justify the sum of human suffering?”, the reply might be “How can a mere mortal expect to understand the plan of a supreme being? The key thing is that there *is* a plan even if you can't understand it.”

I think that it is a safe bet that relatively few people here this morning, even those who are theists, are comfortable with this level of unquestioning acceptance. The UU tradition insists that religion must make intellectual and moral sense and rejects beliefs based only on submission to authority or revelation.

But rejecting choice 2 in favor of choice 1 isn't an easy choice for everyone. For example, biologist Ursula Goodenough described how her contemplation of the vastness of space and the fact that Sun will one day burn out, ending all life on Earth, suddenly overwhelmed her with terror:

The night sky was ruined. I would never be able to look at it again. I wept into my pillow, the long slow tears of adolescent despair. And when I later encountered the famous quote from physicist Steven Weinberg — “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless”—I wallowed in its poignant nihilism. A bleak emptiness overtook me whenever I thought about what was really going on out in the cosmos or deep in the atom. So I did my best not to think about such things.⁵

In his book “Unweaving the Rainbow”⁶ Richard Dawkins tries to refute the idea that there is any pain in rejecting God in favor of science. He says, in effect, “We are the product of an amazing evolutionary process, and we get to learn cool new facts about science all the time! What meaning could life possibly have beyond that?” To me, this answer seems to be missing something.

So, are we forced to choose between the “poignant nihilism” that goes with rejection of all religion, on the one hand, and blind acceptance of fantastic religious beliefs on the other? I wouldn't be taking up your time this morning if I didn't think that there is an alternative that we can see by taking perspective number 3, a *social science* perspective sometimes called the *social-monitoring theory of religion*. Social science comprises many disciplines, and not every social scientist agrees with every views that I will describe, but if you pick up a random paper on religion in a journal of, say, social psychology or behavioral evolution or economics, it is very, very likely to be written from this perspective, which holds that religion is *social phenomenon* that developed and spread because it is beneficial to societies that adopt it. Now, perspective 3 differs from the first 2 perspectives in that it isn't about the *truth* or *falsity* of religion claims, but rather is about *why* people believe what they do. It's a scientific theory

⁴ P. Froese and C. Bader, *America's Four Gods*, Oxford University Press (2010).

⁵ Ursula Goodenough, *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, Oxford University Press (1998).

⁶ Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, Houghton Mifflin Co., New York, New York (1998).

that makes predictions that can be, and have been, tested and confirmed.

In this short talk, I can only give you the elevator-ride version of the theory, so here goes:

The idea, briefly, is that cooperative social groups work only if members are discouraged from freeloading and are encouraged to be altruistic, that is, to sacrifice their own short-term interests in favor of the group. In the hunter-gatherer groups that human beings are believed to have evolved in, social monitoring insured good behavior, but as societies grew larger and people began to regularly interact with strangers, this social monitoring role was taken over by moralizing Gods, whose surveillance permits strangers to trust each other. Extravagant or burdensome displays of belief developed to keep people from faking their commitment this divine behavior monitor. God's social monitoring also makes believers' lives meaningful by diminishing feelings of isolation or alienation. Societies that made this transition were more successful than those that did not and gradually displaced them.

OK, I've reached my floor, the elevator doors are open, and I have to step out. If you would like to know more details about this theory, I recommend "Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict," a 2013 book by psychologist Ara Norenzayan,⁷ or for a shorter version, to go my website for a July 2010 presentation that I gave here at UCC titled "A Creation Story for our Times: How Science Explains Religion."

To recap, I've presented you with three perspectives: you have to be crazy to believe anything religious; it's forbidden to question anything religious; and the social monitoring view. Now I'd like to explore the implications of the social monitoring view for each of the other 3 perspectives, starting with religious skeptics.

I think that the social-monitoring theory makes the New Atheists look naïve. It turns out there are entirely non-crazy reasons for religions to have tenets that seem crazy to outsiders. For example, there's plenty of evidence that in countries with weak institutions and little social capital, credible displays of religious commitment are in fact strong indicators of trustworthiness. Snarking over the absurdities of religious creeds is pointless; a creed would be worthless if just *anyone* could believe it. The benefits of membership in an exclusive club have to come with an admission price; and if the club is a credal religion, that is, one based on beliefs, the admission price has to be a sincere and public profession of a belief in something that makes New Atheists and other outsiders roll their eyes.

Moving on, does the social-monitoring theory negate the truth-believer position? Not at all. As I said earlier, social monitoring is a theory about *why* believers believe, not whether their beliefs are *true*. There are proponents of the social-monitoring theory who are believers and who say, in effect, "Peoples' conception of God has to come from *somewhere*. Human imperfections mean that we can't fully understand God, but social-monitoring helps us see where our limited conception of God comes from."

Now, the third and to me most interesting question is, "What are the implications of the social-monitoring position for adherents of a *liberal religion*?" I'll focus on three key aspects of religion affiliation I mentioned earlier: morality; meaning; and community. Let's start with morality.

A common trope of mainstream religions is that without God, anything goes, which is to say that

⁷ Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*, Princeton University Press (2013).

atheists have no reason to behave morally. There multiple refutations to this claim.

The first is empirical. Numerous studies have shown that in Western countries, unlike third-world countries, believers act no better than nonbelievers. Believers' behavior improves when they are reminded of God or when they believe that are being watched by their brethren, but the behavior of nonbelievers improves just as much when they are reminded of an honor code or are asked to consider the suffering of others. H.L Mencken once said that "Conscience is the inner voice that warns us somebody may be looking." Abundant behavioral economics research shows how true this is and that the "someone who is looking" can be your friends and neighbors, God, an honor code, or even drawings of eyes. So, when you look at people's actual behavior, the claim that without God, anything goes is just not true.

A second answer is biological. Frans de Waals and others have demonstrated that primates exhibit a basic moral sense,⁸ and all humans have neural apparatus that attunes us to the suffering of others as well as to hypocrisy and freeloading, and equips us for either altruism or selfishness, depending on the context.⁹

A third refutation focuses specifically on the UU religion, which has as a central tenet the inherent dignity and worth of every human being. Our forebears were prominent abolitionists; marched and were attacked by segregationists in Selma, Alabama; engineered the escape of children and intellectuals from Nazi-occupied Europe; and comprised many of the signers of the Universal Declarations of Human Rights. UUs have been a part of the human rights revolution since its inception in the 18th century. Our sense of right and wrong is anchored to a commitment to the inherent value and dignity of every person rather than in divine revelation, but these humanistic values have been largely absorbed into mainstream religions in the industrialized world, so the moral perspective of UUs is very similar to that of mainstream Protestants and progressive Catholics in the US.

Wait, wait, I hear you cry, doesn't the argument that believers are no more moral than nonbelievers contradict the theory that moralizing Gods arose precisely because without them there could be no trust between strangers? The answer is that humanistic social institutions can take over from God the job of insuring cooperation between strangers and adherence to shared social norms. In the memorable phrase by Norenzayan, some societies, like the highly atheistic societies like Scandinavian and northern European, "climbed the ladder of religion and then kicked it away when it was no longer needed." The social-monitoring theory tells us that big Gods developed when they were needed to insure cooperation between strangers, and that they can vanish when this role is taken over by other institutions that can play the same role. So, while many UUs believe in some form of the supernatural, our morality doesn't depend on shared belief in the supernatural.

Let's turn now to meaning. This is a topic of special interest to me because I experienced a major existential crisis as a teenager that led me to badger every adult I knew with the question "What is the meaning of life?" I visited many different churches and asked the ministers that same question. I figured that *every* older person must have had plenty of time to come up with a good answer to something so obvious and basic. Turns out, though, that most people, including ministers, were totally stumped. This was very disconcerting and didn't improve my opinion of adults! How could they just drift through life without having any idea of why they were alive?

In college, I learned that 17th century philosopher Gottfried Leibniz, like me, thought that everything

⁸ Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*, Princeton University Press (2006).

⁹ Robert M. Sapolsky, *Behave: the biology of humans at our best and worst*, Penguin Press (2017).

had to have a reason. Since the universe is a thing, it must have a reason too, and since the universe includes everything, something in the universe must be its own reason. That thing is God. Ta-da! Does that ease those existential willies? Well, not for me. Then I read contemporary analytic philosophers who focus on what kind of thing would count as a possible answer to a given question. They argued that “the meaning of life” was just not the kind of question that can have an answer. It's like asking “How can something be and not be at the same time and in the same way?” Nothing could count as a sensible answer to this question. “OK, then why does it feel like there should be an answer, Mr. Analytic Philosopher?” The answer from Mr. Analytic Philosopher is something like, “Don't ask me, I'm a philosopher, not a psychologist.” Then, of course, there is Douglas Adams, who boldly provided us with the answer, “42”! This makes us feel better by substituting a laugh for an existential sigh, but leaves the puzzle in place.

What about the social-science perspective? Can it give us any insight into this conundrum? Maybe the brush-off from the Analytic Philosopher was actually good advice. To approach the problem from this angle, we have to shift from thinking of this as a philosophical question—what does life mean—to an empirical question: what makes people feel like their lives are meaningful. This perspective dates back at least to Emile Durkheim, who is often credited with inventing the social theory of religion, and first came to prominence through his theory of suicide. He found that people from small communities seldom killed themselves even if they had big problems, but people who moved to the big city could become suicidal if they lost the social connections that make life meaningful, a condition he called *anomie*.¹⁰ In the more than a century since Durkheim's work, the view that the subjective feeling of meaning in one's life is tied to meaningful social ties has been confirmed countless times.¹¹

Under Durkheim's view, the idea of God not only promotes cooperation among strangers, but also fosters feelings of social connection in people who live among strangers. We may have left our ancestral hunter-gatherer group generations ago, but God is a proxy for the meaning-given awareness of our extended family and lifetime friends, who make our experiences meaningful by caring about our joys and sorrows, embarrassments and triumphs, successes and failures. Under this view, God doesn't solve the *philosophical* conundrum, but instead provides a meaningful connection to a social entity that extends beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of one's own life.

Where does that leave those of us who don't accept a supernatural God? We too need a meaningful connection to a social entity that extends beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of our lives, but that isn't supernatural. I believe that all people with meaningful lives have such a connection. For example, the New Atheists disdain God, but they themselves are often intoxicated with the sense of being part of a scientific enterprise that spans the generations, comprising countless individuals selflessly devoted to the common goal of expanding human understanding. This vast enterprise extends beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of any individual's small life, and everyone involved in it has a bond and kinship based on their shared devotion. Of course, we're not all scientists, but every member of a liberal religion like UUism is part of a great *Humanist* enterprise that started long before we were born and will continue long after we are gone. Each of us has a bond and kinship based on our shared commitment of this enterprise.

Meaningful connection can come from family and social identify as well. Scandinavians and members of other highly secular societies are amazingly free of anomie, apparently because their citizens know

¹⁰ Émile Durkheim, *Le suicide* (1897)

¹¹ Nathaniel M. Lambert, Tyler F. Stillman, Joshua A. Hicks, Shanmukh Kamble, Roy F. Baumeister, and Frank D. Fincham, *To Belong Is to Matter: Sense of Belonging Enhances Meaning in Life*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol 39, Issue 11, pp. 1418-1427 (2013).

that they belong to a society where each has a role and where they can be confident that their behavior and welfare matter to those around them.

In summary, understanding how God makes life meaningful to believers helps us to understand what makes life meaningful to non-believers. Liberal religion has this capacity, which depends on fostering a relationship to a social entity larger and longer lasting than oneself that involves other individuals who care about your actions and welfare.

Finally, let's turn to community. The social-monitoring theory posits that group cohesion requires public displays of commitment to mutual altruism. In the context of religions, this is often referred to as “costly signaling” or “credibility-enhancing displays”, CREDs for short.¹² The idea is to discourage freeloading by requiring a public action that is too costly for someone not sincerely committed. In the religious case, typical CREDs include dietary restrictions, distinctive clothing, painful initiation rituals, exorbitant tithing, missionary work, and even self-castration in the case of the Cybele cult of ancient Greece. The more burdensome these displays, the more fervent the attachment to the faith. A well-known study of 19th century religious communes found that their longevity was directly related the number of costly rituals and taboos imposed on members: the greater the burden, the longer-lasting the commune.¹³

In the case of credal religions, that is, those for which membership depends on faith in the supernatural, the required displays typically include public profession of beliefs that seem incredible or ludicrous to outsiders. How then is commitment signaled in religions that don't require professions of supernatural faith?

Well, there are many different ways to make a hard-to-fake signal of commitment that don't involve beliefs. For example, wearing a yarmulke, observing Jewish dietary restrictions, or observing Jewish holy days gives one a credible connection to the Jewish religion that doesn't depend on beliefs. I have a globe-trotting friend who treasures her ability to find a welcoming Jewish community wherever she travels, notwithstanding the fact that she is an atheist. For her, and for many others, being Jewish isn't about beliefs. Similarly, one can be a Buddhist simply by practicing meditation of an appropriate type without having to believe in anything supernatural.

Science isn't a religion, but membership in the collective enterprise of science requires lengthy self-inflicted hazing in the form of a Ph.D., together with public relinquishment of a high salary and abject submission to the caprices of peer review.

Another commitment mechanism is shared agreement or covenant with other members to recognize a common set of values and principles. UUism is a *covenantal* religion based on this approach to commitment. The social theory of religion predicts that the intensity of religious identification is proportional to the price of admission, that is, to the cost or burden of the public display of commitment. It may be a weakness of UUism that the cost of embracing it is so low. Indeed, Norenzayan jokes in “Big Gods” about how little danger there is of UU fanatics resorting to self-castration, like the adherents of the Cybele. Indeed, there is a whole genre of UU jokes, like:

Q: Why did the UU cross the road?

A: To support the chicken in its search for its own path

¹² Norenzayan, *supra*.

¹³ Sosis, R. and Alcorta, C., *Signaling, solidarity, and the scared: the evolution of religion behavior*, *Evolutionary Anthropology* 12:264-274 (2003).

Q: Why can't UUs sing very well in choirs?

A: Because they're always reading ahead to see if they agree with the next verse.

But seriously, it may be that the description of Unitarianism as “covenantal” understates the importance of demonstrations of commitment to the welfare of others through social action, pledging, and the other altruistic actions that many may feel is the essence of Unitarianism. A full commitment to the “inherent dignity and worth of every person”¹⁴ is actually very difficult for most people. Do you fully embrace the inherent dignity and worth of white supremacists, mass murderers, Right-wing activists? Not easy, is it?

To sum up, I've tried to describe to you this morning an empirical, scientific perspective on religion—the social-monitoring theory—that many of you may have been unaware of. While this theory was developed to answer a set of academic questions about the evolution of cooperation and the history of religion, I believe that it has much to tell us about our own liberal religion. I've argued that this perspective liberates us from the Hobson's choice between rejecting all religion, as the New Atheists counsel us, and accepting supernatural beliefs based on authority and revelation rather than reason and evidence, which is unacceptable to most of us. This perspective shows that both goodness and badness are inherent in what it is to be human, but that institutions that foster the habit of altruism improve our behavior, regardless of whether those institutions are built on supernatural or humanism foundations. The social-science perspective allows us to finesse the puzzle of the meaning of life by focusing on what as a practical matter makes people feel that their life is meaningful: connection to a social entity larger and longer-lived than themselves that provides awareness and judgments about their welfare and behavior. This entity can be one's ancestral tribe or village, a God who personifies that tribe or village, a humanistic religious congregation, a scientific community, or even a Scandinavian welfare state. Understanding the social theory of the meaning of life doesn't in itself provide that meaning; instead, we have the freedom, and the obligation, to work this out for ourselves. But it does enable us to understand both why theists insist that God is essential for meaning and why this needn't be true for us.

Finally, this perspective identifies why liberal religions tend to have much less fervent adherents than religions that have what we might think of as crazy beliefs. Fervency is a function of the cost of commitment displays. One would expect that professing a commitment to reason, evidence, and human rights will always be less costly than professing belief in something fantastic. And yet, standing up for reason, evidence, and human rights in the face of anger, social pressure, and fanaticism can sometimes be the hardest thing we ever do. And in the coming months and years, I fear that doing so may become an increasingly difficult and challenging act of courage.

And so, I close by wishing that each of us can find meaning and connection in our lives without sacrificing our intellectual integrity, that we have the strength and support to act altruistically, and that we never hesitate to publicly profess our commitment to reason, evidence, and human rights.

So be it.

¹⁴ <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles/1st>