

Certainty in Your Atheism

There is an ongoing debate on the topic of “proving” there is no God or other supernatural creator. The one side has a backstop which says “you can’t prove a negative.” I’m not even sure what is meant by that turn of phrase. And that doesn’t matter.

This essay will explore certainty in the nonexistence of God as a practical matter. So, at the very beginning we will concede the point that one may not have absolute certainty in the nonexistence of God.

That is no different than conceding that it is impossible to prove that I am not living in some sort of computer simulation as imagined in the popular movie “The Matrix.” If someone asserts that we exist in an artificial reality like the one imagined in “The Matrix,” then it would be impossible to refute that assertion with absolute certainty. This is because the imagined Matrix is designed to hide its existence from the unwitting prisoner. All information available to the prisoner originates with the Matrix and this allows the Matrix to fool the prisoner into believing the artificial environment is reality.

However, I am not going to make any life decisions based on the notion that Morpheus or Neo are about to bust me out of my prison at any moment. This is because I have a practical level of certainty that “The Matrix” is just a manifestation of the imagination of man.

I do likewise with Christianity and its tenets such as the imminent return of Christ. I make no life decisions based on the idea that Christ is about to bust me out of this life at any moment. This is because I have a practical level of certainty that Christ is just a manifestation of the imagination of man.

A key factor in my certainty that Morpheus or Neo won’t be busting me out of the Matrix is that I have knowledge of the industry which created “The Matrix” and the subsequent sequels. Stated another way, I have information regarding the provenance of the notion that we are all prisoners in a giant artificial reality machine.

This is similar to having a practical level of certainty in the nonexistence of God. I have knowledge regarding the provenance of the notion of God. Knowing the origins of belief in God causes me to dismiss such beliefs as a factor in my life decisions.

Let’s now consider the idea of an asymptote in mathematics. There are functions which can be graphed and appear as a curve on a cartesian coordinate plane. Certain of these functions will graph as a curve which approaches but never quite touches some line on the chart. The line which is approached but not touched is an asymptote. One can employ computers to calculate fractions to hundreds or thousands of decimal places near where the graphed function approaches the asymptote. As a result, one can see the graphed function get closer and closer to the asymptote, but never reach it. Common asymptotes are horizontal or vertical lines at zero and one. But asymptotes may also be a sloped line.

When considering the certainty that you are or are not in “The Matrix” we should be thinking in terms of those asymptotes. We can be so close to absolute certainty that hundreds or thousands of decimal places might be needed to describe the space between our practical certainty and the elusive “absolute” certainty some may want. It is the same when we are talking about the non-existence of God - hundreds or thousands of decimal places to describe the miniscule space between the practical level of certainty we have and the elusive “absolute” certainty denied us by “you can’t prove a negative.”

It is very useful to distinguish between God and belief in God when considering the nonexistence of God. God does not exist in any way that can be detected, measured, or otherwise subjected to rational/scientific analysis. God could be compared to The Matrix in this regard - with the imagined God being the source for all information available to his hapless creations. In contrast, belief in God can be detected, quantified, and subjected to an array of rational and scientific analysis.

We can count the number of people attending church services of various denominations. When compiled, such data can be studied and conclusions drawn from it. We can consult historical records to review what people believed at different times and in different places. This is more data which can be studied. We can infer some information on certain beliefs in God (and certain beliefs in the Goddess) from artifacts created before recorded history. For example, the exaggerated breasts and labia of the “Willendorf Venus” suggests belief in some sort of fertility Goddess 25,000 years ago in the area which is now Austria. There are a great number of other artifacts connected with the religious beliefs of our ancestors.

Stonehenge was likely the focus of an expansive ceremonial center some 5000 years ago. We don’t know a whole lot regarding the details of what ceremonies may have taken place there. This is due in part to the climate of the part of the world now known as the British Isles. Dampness is not conducive to the preservation of artifacts when those artifacts are made of wood. Archeologists have uncovered evidence suggesting many wooden structures and earthworks surrounding Stonehenge. The wooden structures have long since decayed. Natural forces have tended to wear down the earthworks and fill in ditch-like structures surrounding Stonehenge. However, Archeologists have collected evidence of ceremonial cremation and burial taking place around this iconic monument. It is unlikely that we will learn much more about the details of those rituals because the people conducting the rituals left no durable or written testament to their beliefs or even how they moved the enormous slabs of rock to build Stonehenge.

Much more is known about the Great Pyramids of Egypt and other burial sites of ancient Egyptian royalty. These sites tell us quite a bit about the religious beliefs of people living in that part of the world at that time. The ancient Egyptians left a great many artifacts and many of those artifacts have symbols and drawings which reveal religious beliefs of the day. A dry climate helped preserve many of the drawings and decorations created by the ancient Egyptians. Consequently, we have much more information about the ceremonies and beliefs

connected with the construction of the Pyramids of Giza and other burial sites in ancient Egypt.

As we look at artifacts and writings from more recent generations we see evidence of changing beliefs over time. In a similar way, we have a fairly clear understanding of the recent conflicts between neighboring groups of humans as we examine the artifacts of war and the historical records of those wars. The details of the earliest conflicts are lost to the veils of time just as the details of the earliest religious beliefs are lost through the passage of the centuries.

Human history is often organized and studied as a series of wars punctuated by the brief intervals between wars. We generally know more about recent conflicts and less about earlier conflicts - with the details of the earliest conflicts obscured by the passage of time. But history could just as well be organized and studied as a series of religious beliefs that change over time and spread from one place to another. History may be arranged and studied as a chronology of religious beliefs just as well as it is arranged and studied as a chronology of war and the intervals between wars. Each perspective has similar limitations. There is less information available regarding the very earliest religious beliefs just as there is less information available regarding the earliest precursors to war. The history of warfare is often distorted because the victors most often write the history books while the vanquished have their perspectives purged from the historical record. Similarly, we see that aggressively spreading religious beliefs will actively try to erase religions which may have existed in the region being overtaken. One of my favorite examples of this is referenced in the novel "The Da Vinci Code." As part of setting the stage for the novel, the author (Dan Brown) wrote about how early Catholic operatives sought to displace the pre-existing religions of Europe. Neptune was transformed into Satan - with his trident being recast as a pitchfork. There are statues depicting the Archangel Saint Michael with his foot on the neck of the devil - and the devil's lower body is that of a fish with scales. Likewise, Brown mentions how the wise old medicine woman was recast as a witch - with her cats imagined as "familiars" and her folk remedies transformed into caldrons where evil was brewed. These examples were included in a novel, but they are historically accurate and helped set the stage for the remainder of "The Da Vinci Code."

If one takes a dispassionate view of religion - a view that does not favor any religious tradition over any other religious tradition - including any religious tradition into which one may have been indoctrinated, then a chart may be created. Most people will be at least somewhat familiar with religious traditions collectively known as "Abrahamic." Abrahamic religious traditions include Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Many people will also have at least a rudimentary understanding of the relationships between some of the Abrahamic religious traditions. If one begins to place religions on a chart with one chart axis used to denote time, then one might start with Judaism because it is older than Islam and Christianity. Islam might then be added as an offshoot of Judaism. Before we add Christianity

we might consider that Judaism is not, and has never been a monolithic belief system. There have always been variations of Judaism - with some of those variations being grouped together as Messianic Judaism. So we can add Messianic Judaism as another offshoot of Judaism. Christianity may be considered as claiming to have fulfilled the “prophecies” of Messianic Judaism, so Christianity is best added to the chart as an offshoot of Messianic Judaism. Islam is like Judaism in that it has mostly not existed as a monolithic belief system. Islam quickly splintered. Many people will know of the Sunni offshoot which predominates in modern-day Iraq as well as the Shiite offshoot which predominates in modern-day Iran. The Wahabi offshoot of Islam is likely familiar to fewer people and is the version of Islam predominant in modern-day Saudi Arabia. If we return to the Christian offshoot then we should add Protestant offshoots to that starting with the Lutheran religious tradition. Martin Luther did more than set the stage for the origin of the Lutheran Church. His challenges to the practices of Catholicism set the stage for the creation of every other variation of Protestant Christianity seen today. So, our chart can be quickly expanded to include all sorts of Methodist and Baptist religious traditions along with offshoots such as the group of religious traditions which are collectively known as “The Amish.” Like other religious traditions, “The Amish” have never really existed as a monolithic belief system. Add another subset of religious traditions as an offshoot of Protestantism and label it Mennonites. Eastern Orthodoxy and the offshoots of that are offshoots of the original Christianity. We could go on with this indefinitely, but at this point the structure of our chart bears a non-coincidental resemblance to the familiar charts seen in biology texts and depicting the relationships between species with one chart axis representing time. Now that we have glimpsed that basic underlying structure, we are ready to move on.

Charles Darwin originally proposed that all species were related and had evolved from earlier species. Darwin further proposed that evolution and speciation were driven by a mechanism which was described as “Descent with Change” and “Survival of the Fittest.” Because there is a similarity of the branching patterns seen in our chart of religions and the charts of species seen in biology texts, one would obviously search for a similar mechanism driving both. Before we do that, let’s look at how the idea of “survival of the fittest” has changed. Much of the modern evidence supporting Darwin’s Theory of Evolution was not available to Darwin. Darwin relied almost exclusively on taxonomy. This means grouping things together according to shared physical characteristics. Green things. Green things with flowers. Green things without flowers. Green things with seeds in cones. Green things with seeds in fruits. Things with vertebrae. Things without vertebrae. Things with fins. Things with feathers. Things with fur.

A chart of species based on taxonomy looks a lot like a chart based on modern-day evidence. But there were a few pitfalls. A commonly cited example was a taxonomic view that grouped things with vertebrae, fur, and hooves into two subgroups. Biologists refer to things with vertebrae, fur, and hooves as “ungulates.” The two subgroups were classified as ungulates with an odd number of toes and ungulates with an even number of toes. This classification system assumed that all ungulates with an odd number of toes were more closely related to

one another than to any ungulates with an even number of toes. The discovery of DNA and the means to analyze DNA changed this view. DNA analysis revealed that something called convergent evolution had been at work. Convergent evolution describes gene pools which converge on similar physical characteristics because there is some evolutionary advantage to that set of physical characteristics. In the case of ungulates it turns out that DNA evidence shows disagreement regarding how closely related species within the two groups really are.

With the discovery of DNA and the development of tools for DNA analysis came an updated understanding of the underlying rule driving evolutionary processes. That new understanding is DNA-centric where combinations of DNA which are best at getting copied into subsequent generations are the primary drivers of evolution. In shorthand, “Survival of the Fittest” became “Survival of the Fittest Genes where ‘fittest’ means best at getting copied.”

Unsurprisingly, there is an obvious and analogous rule governing the evolution-like process which gives rise to the structure seen in our chart of religions. That rule might be stated as: religion is subject to “Survival of the Fittest” where “fittest” means best at getting copied. The environment for religions is the human brain. There are a finite number of human brains, therefore there is competition for a limited resource. This means that less “fit” religions are crowded out of existence while the “fittest” religions spread to more and more human brains.

But, as with most analogies, this analogy is imperfect. But also, as with many other analogies, where this analogy breaks down is revealing in itself. In biology there is zero evidence for an “intelligent designer” - no matter how much advocates of religious tradition push the idea that there is. However, in studying the branching of religious traditions we can see the work of “intelligent designers” and in many recent instances we even know the names of the “intelligent designers.”

Let’s return to our chart of religious traditions and add a node. We’ll add it as an offshoot of “Protestantism” and label it “Mormonism.” Many will understand Joseph Smith as a con-artist, grifter, likely polygamist, and cult leader. But we should also understand Smith as an “Intelligent Designer” of a new religious tradition. Smith claimed to use “Seer Stones” viewed in a “Magic” hat to receive the latest revelations from the supposed deity. He created a new religious tradition based on characters and stories borrowed from earlier religious traditions. This is why “Mormonism” was added as an offshoot of “Protestantism.” This borrowing of characters and stories from older religious traditions and then embellishing is nothing new. In fact, the “New Testament” is really just an elaborate embellishment of the “Old Testament. Muhammad’s conduit to the supernatural was allegedly through an Angel named Gabriel. The resulting religious text included the familiar origins story borrowed from Judaism.

If we look at another “Intelligent Designer,” we can further break the analogy between biological evolution and the evolution-like process governing religion. Many will regard L. Ron Hubbard as an epic-level tax cheat and cult leader. As an “Intelligent Designer” of a new religious tradition he borrowed characters and storylines, not from a previously existing

religious tradition, but from his own science fiction writing. There is no analogous circumstance in biological evolution. Biological evolution is constrained by “Descent with Change,” but this is not true of the evolution-like process governing the prevalence and diversity of religions observed today.

So, the analogy between biological evolution and the evolution-like process governing the diversity of religious traditions isn’t perfect. But at the core, each is governed by a variation of “Survival of the Fittest” where “fittest” means success at getting copied. In the case of biology, transmitting as much DNA as possible into the next generation. In the case of religion, getting copied into as many additional human brains as possible.

A dispassionate examination of religion is not complete without considering the motives of the “Intelligent Designers.”

Several clues regarding motive may be drawn from the case of David Koresh. He may not have written a new religious text, but he certainly tinkered with pre-existing religious tradition to assign religious-based authority to himself. Koresh changed his name from Vernon Howell before becoming leader of the Branch Davidians cult located near Waco, TX. The name David may have been selected because it is an important name in Judeo-Christian traditions. Apparently, a condition of joining the Branch Davidians was to turn over all of one’s worldly possessions to the cult leader. Koresh was allegedly a millionaire as a result of this. Koresh allegedly “dissolved” all marriages of couples entering the cult. He then used religious pretexts to have sexual relations with women of his choice. In addition, Koresh allegedly used religious pretexts to justify sexual relations with underage girls.

David Koresh was hardly the first man to use his self-assigned status as a prophet or religious authority to sex-up underage girls. Joseph Smith was allegedly doing this prior to his murder. In fact, alleged sexual relations with multiple underage girls initiated the chain of events leading to his murder. The chain of events involved some dissidents of the cult who set up a newspaper. The first edition of the upstart newspaper printed allegations regarding Smith and underage girls. Smith then dispatched henchmen to destroy the printing press at the upstart newspaper. Later, Smith was in jail. A mob was approaching. Smith apparently thought it was his supporters coming to free him. In actuality, the mob was composed of supporters of the upstart newspaper. Smith died at the hands of the mob. Brigham Young was apparently able to convince much of the cult that he was now the true Prophet. Young then led a significant portion of the cult to Utah where the cult survives as “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” a.k.a. The Mormon Church. Young took advantage of his authority as a “Prophet” to take multiple new young wives whenever he became bored with the ones he already had.

Other likely motivations are similar. If one modifies a religious tradition to require that ten percent of income must be given to the church which that same person operates, then that represents a very lucrative situation. If one modifies a religious tradition so that sins must be confessed to a church representative, then that gives an overwhelming opportunity to

blackmail. Blackmail demands could be for money, exemption from taxation, or any number of other types of extortion.

So, from these examples we can see that power, money and sexual gratification are all potential motivators for “Intelligent Designers” driving evolution-like processes affecting religious traditions. This is likely traceable back to the dawn of civilization where some early humans saw “spiritual leader” as a means to avoid labor or being sent out to defend territory. That means our list of likely motivations should be expanded to include laziness and cowardice. These early “spiritual leaders” benefited from creating stories that were convincing, appealing and durable. The stories which were most convincing, appealing and durable crowded out less convincing, less appealing and less durable stories. Keep in mind that these stories would have been told, not read. Religion existed a long time before there was any written language. And even after written language was invented it was a long time before reading and writing were common skills. This allowed a rapid sorting out of the best variations of the best stories compared to how fast religion could change once it was written for a largely literate audience.

We can only guess as to the nature of the very earliest religious traditions. Artifacts suggest that fertility, rain, and good crops were important. Fire was likely regarded as a magical gift from the gods - meaning those who had the skills and knowledge to summon and control fire likely enjoyed a certain prestige. Our modern-day religions are probably not as far removed from all that as you might like to think. Favored religious texts describe God speaking from a burning bush which was not consumed by the flames. These same religious texts describe God leading his people - showing himself as a pillar of cloud (smoke) by day and a pillar of fire by night.

The point of all this is that we can see human nature interacting with religious traditions across the ages. Some religious traditions were crowded out. Thor, Zeus, Poseidon, and Athena represent but a few of the many religious beliefs crowded out by newer more viral religious beliefs. Yet these newer more viral religious beliefs have morphed over time and have roots traceable back to the very dawn of civilization.

Knowing the human origins of monotheism makes it impossible that I can harbor belief in God. This gives me the greatest possible certainty of the non-existence of God. “God” is nothing more than an artifact of the evolution-like process which has given us the mix of religions observed today. And that in turn means that there is no reason to consider “God” in any decision I make as I go about my daily life.