



the psychology of
religion

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Contents

How our brains are hard-wired for belief	3
Belief, emotion and reason	7
Faith versus reason – the battle rages on in our brains	8
God’s bothering me again!	10
Fundamentalist religion	15
Hypnosis in religion	25
Mass hysteria in religion: two case studies	46
Religion addiction	49
Religion, instinct and intelligence	52
How spirituality can lead to narcissism	54
Close encounters of the temporal kind	57
The mystic connection	58
Belief in the supernatural is here to stay	60
A Godless future?	61
God on drugs	64
Is religion a conspiracy theory?	65
The relevance of God in a secular world	66

How our brains are hard-wired for belief

After three million years of trial and error, of accidental and random mutation, the human brain has evolved enough to learn how to fill in the gaps. If you do crosswords, or 'join the dots' puzzles, or jigsaws, you'll already know what I mean...

For instance, *from left to right*,

- Is this a random collection of dots, or a Dalmatian drinking from a stream?
- A rocky outcrop or a horse's head?
- A face on Mars, constructed by Martians as a monument to their doomed civilisation, constructed on the surface so future space faring civilisations would know they had existed? Or perhaps a natural geologic formation...



In the same way we automatically fill in the visual gaps, we can just as easily fill in auditory gaps – think chicken-in-the-basket style comedian Colin Crompton's '*ther** somethi*** wrong wi** th** mic**phone*' routine.

And so it is with events that seem inexplicable – the things that go bump in the night, the rustle of a curtain, the snap of a twig in the forest...

Our minds automatically search for reasons why things that happen happen... especially if there is no immediate or apparent cause, which is why some people put things down to luck, or their guardian angel, or the gods, or evil spirits and such.

Reacting to strange or unexpected events is part of the human survival strategy. Unusual sounds, sights, or events cause us to be alert. Those that take action are more likely to survive and pass on their genes to the next generation while those that ignore danger signals get eaten and don't! Over millennia, these instincts have become hardwired into our brains and this has been a hugely important part of the human survival strategy and evolutionary process. If a strange or unexpected noise is heard at the back of the cave, or in the starlit savannah – the brain instantly begins the search for a rational explanation.

But what if it can't find one? There is a gap to be filled and where no rational explanation can be found, an irrational one can be provided by our own imagination – hence the event gets confused with the supernatural, inevitably leading to belief in ghosts, gods, invisible spirits, and more.

If you have no knowledge of astronomy, unusual events, such as the appearance of a comet – something that is outside normal experience – cannot be explained in rational terms. Thus it can be mistaken for a sign from the gods, or an omen of ill will! If you have no knowledge of geology or geography, then a catastrophic event, especially one harmful or frightening, such as a flood or the eruption of a volcano, in the absence of any knowledge of geography, any explanation becomes valid. Are the gods angry? What have we done to deserve this? Should we sacrifice someone... if so who shall we sacrifice? The gods must be satisfied with the sacrifice, so we will give them a beautiful virgin to make them happy.

Of course this belief system is a two way street. When the river floods every year and deposits fresh alluvium on the land that in turn provides fresh soil in which to grow food, then we can be thankful to whatever force has caused this. Conversely, if the rains fail and there is a drought and crops wither and die and cattle perish, without a rudimentary knowledge of meteorology or climate, it is easy (and dare I say logical) to believe that forces beyond our understanding are responsible. In the absence of real knowledge, what else are we to think?

Any solution to a puzzle provides relief. Where there is no rational explanation for why we must all die at the end of our lives, the irrational explanation as to why we must believe in an afterlife provides comfort. Thank God for God!

In more enlightened times, there is no practical need for these beliefs, but once an idea, however crazy, has been accepted by the group, it will be passed down from generation to generation, and most likely embellished along the way, at least until new information is presented. Until that time however, unbelievers will be punished and even killed.

Any confusion over whether an omen is a good omen or a bad omen, and more important, what must be done to appease the entity responsible for it, is decided by someone in the group who thinks he understands these things. His musings on the subject then serve to reinforce the erroneous and irrational explanation, and also confer more authority on that individual – especially if his predictions (guesswork) turn out to be right. To maintain cohesion within the group and cement his authority, simple belief is followed by the introduction of rituals that further reinforce the belief. Thus a new religion is established!

The end result is that the priest, as he is henceforth to be known, is invested with even more power and authority – a triumph of the imagination over reality! Before very long, the priest cements his authority further by dressing and adorning himself differently than the rest of the tribe. He is given special privileges because he has convinced the rest of the tribe that he has a special connection with the gods, spirits, ancestors...

Thousands of years of ritualistic behaviour becomes hard-wired into the brain in exactly the same way as the need to plant or harvest crops at certain times of the year. In fact, the two often go hand in hand, again reinforcing the belief system, all presided over by the one in charge of the rituals. This pattern of behaviour is easy enough to spot in other groups such as stone-age tribes in the Amazon or Papua New Guinea. We are amused by the spiritual beliefs of ancient Rome with their numerous gods for this and that, and slightly less amused with the blood-letting and live human sacrifices of the Aztecs... but that does not mean that modern day beliefs are any more accurate.

To understand how the human brain has developed in this way, we could look at an example from nature. The baby spider, when it hatches from its egg, instinctively knows how to spin a web – this knowledge has been passed down through millions of years and

billions of generations of spiders, so the ability to spin the web really is hard-wired in the spiders brain even before its birth!

Human beings are also born with certain instincts and understandings, again hard-wired in our brains, again the result of millions of years of learning. Even very young children understand that solid objects cannot merge together – they know for example that their pet dog is a living thing and not a collection of cogs and mechanical motors like their toys. They quickly begin to understand that water is wet, that fire is hot and their blanket is warm. They *know* these things and almost everything about their understanding of the world is logical and makes sense.

But what happens when children are confronted by something that *doesn't* make sense. What about a story about a man who can walk on water or a snake that can talk?

Stories like these stand out from a child's normal experience and understanding of the world by virtue of the story's illogicality. Because the stories are told by people the child trusts, usually parents, teachers, or others in positions of authority, these illogical stories are even more likely to be added to the child's collective understanding when they are presented as truth.

But here's the clever part... Because the stories are nonsensical, they stand out from other more real tales of cabbages and kings. As a result, they are separated in the memory from any other kind of learning experience. The child struggles inwardly with this new knowledge but accepts it as truth because it has come from someone the child trusts. Because the story doesn't make sense, it becomes endowed with greater significance, and so after millions of years of the evolutionary learning process, the ability to absorb myths and legends have become hard-wired into our collective conscious.

Sometimes belief is heightened by a peak experience – for example, if worship is combined with happy coincidence, even praise... and all children love praise.

Intense feelings of joy enhance the individual's experience of worship, stimulating the pleasure centres in the brain and compounding the experience, thus strengthening the belief.

The technique is simple once you understand it – it's a very clever association of worship with pleasure, and it makes people want more of the same! The brain produces the 'feel-good' chemical dopamine and the experience becomes something worth looking forward to.

The modern happy-clappy Christian churches go out of their way to provide peripheral family events, guaranteed to make their congregations even happier and clappier! Often these events are designed especially to appeal to children, with their fun and games and summer camps where religious indoctrination is thinly disguised as fun. Not even Ronald MacDonald stoops to these depths to get the kids hooked for life. At least with Ronald you get a burger and a plastic toy.

There is however another factor that comes into play. If humans dislike missing pieces, they love patterns. We like building in straight lines or in ways that are pleasing to the eye. To put it succinctly, we like symmetry. Which is why our ideas and suspicions about the supernatural become ordered over the generations, religion has become codified and we have developed sets of rules, rites and rituals which remind us of those beliefs.

It is this organisation of belief that can lead to extremes of behaviour. Of course that behaviour can often be for the good of the many, encouraging human beings to greater

altruism and higher achievement. For example, right now, as you read this, there are thousands of Catholic priests and nuns, living and working in the most dangerous and appalling conditions imaginable, in the hellholes of the world, bringing hope to people who would otherwise have no hope.

On the other hand, some organised belief systems can be pernicious, leading to pogroms, inquisitions, holocausts, religious wars, and an overwhelming desire to fly passenger planes into skyscrapers. Either way, it seems we will be stuck with religion for a while yet.

Belief has been a useful tool in the human survival strategy, but higher education and a better understanding of science is fast eroding blind belief as an important part of the human psyche. No amount of belief makes something a fact unless it stands up to scientific test – and there is no religious or supernatural belief that passes that test.

It is man who made god, not the other way round. And all because of something that a hundred thousand years ago went bump in the night...

Religious people are more likely to have a poorer understanding of the real world. People who believe in an all-powerful deity are also more likely to believe in the supernatural. These individuals' lack of understanding of the physical world means they apply their own rules and are more likely to believe in demons, spirits, ghosts, exorcism and the realness of Ouija boards. They also have a great fear of hypnotism – and the reasons for this, I will explain later.

A new study, undertaken by Marjaana Lindeman and Annika Svedholm-Häkkinen, from the University of Helsinki, compared religious people with those with autism, because both struggle to understand the realities of the world.

258 people participated in the study. Initially, they were asked how much they agreed with the statement '*there exists an all-powerful, all-knowing, loving God*' and also if they believed in paranormal phenomena such as ghosts and psychic visions. They were also tested on a range of other topics, including intuitive physics skills and an understanding of basic biology.

They found that people with strong religious beliefs tended to have an inadequate understanding of physical phenomenon, such as plate tectonics, meteorology, the solar system, the greater universe, and history – in particular, they were astonishingly ignorant of the history or the development of religion. The more the participants believed in religious or other paranormal phenomena, the lower their intuitive scientific skills, mechanical and mental reasoning abilities, school grades in mathematics and physics, and knowledge of physical and biological science.

The results strongly suggest that religious people tend to base their beliefs on instinct, rather than analytical and critical thinking.

Significantly, a study in 2013 by researchers at the University of Rochester suggested that religious people tend to have a lower IQ. That study suggested that people with higher IQs had greater self-control and were able to do more for themselves and so did not need the buffers that religion provides.

Belief, emotion and reason

Scientists think people have two distinct brain networks – one for empathy and one for analytical thinking, and that these two networks are at odds with each other. Healthy people's thought processes are able to switch between the two and use the appropriate network depending on the issue they are considering.

Atheists hold negative views about religion because they have more analytical brains. Religious people's views on the other hand are dominated more by emotion. Emotional involvement in an idea – no matter how illogical or erroneous – makes them cling to their views. Emotional resonance helps religious people feel more certain about their faith – even when contrary evidence is staring them in the face, which is most of the time.

This kind of empathy can be dangerous. For instance, terrorists believe they are highly moral because they believe they are righting centuries-old wrongs to protect something sacred. The more moral correctness they see in something, the more it confirms their thinking. Supporters of extreme 'woke' ideas are influenced by their emotions rather than political or biological knowledge, which is why those with their own agenda target the youth – easy to excite and bamboozle with false promises of an equally false utopian future... and thus easy to manipulate.

In someone who is militantly religious (or political) the empathetic network dominates, while in the non-religious mind, the analytical network rules. Appealing to a militantly religious person's sense of moral concern and a non-religious person's unemotional logic, the latter will be more likely to listen to your point of view.

Researchers studied more than 900 people. 209 participants identified as Christian, nine were Jewish, five Buddhist, four Hindu, one Muslim and 24 from other religions. 153 participants were non-religious. Each completed tests assessing dogmatism, empathetic concern and aspects of analytical reasoning.

The researchers discovered some similarities between strongly religious and non-religious people, finding that in both groups, the most dogmatic were less adept at analytical thinking and less likely to look at issues from other people's perspectives. The results showed that on the whole, religious participants had a higher level of dogmatism, empathetic concern and pro-social intentions, while the non-religious performed better on tests of analytic reasoning.

Although the study looked at the differences between the worldview of people who are religious and non-religious dogmatists, it could apply to any strongly held core belief.

Beliefs dictate behaviour and can apply to any mind-set such as eating habits – to be vegan, vegetarian or omnivore – or to political opinions and beliefs about race and religion. False beliefs are at the root cause of most fears and phobias, celebrity worship and 'wokeness'. Conversely, militant atheists cannot see positives in religion because they can only see that religion contradicts their own sensible, analytic and scientific approach to life.

The study might explain why extreme perspectives on religion, politics and woke culture are becoming more prevalent in society and why individuals cling to those beliefs – especially when they seem at odds with analytic reasoning.

Faith versus reason – the battle rages on in our brains

The role of religion in an increasingly secular world continues to be a fiercely debated topic, but a new scientific study suggests that children raised in religious societies perform less well in maths and science than their atheist counterparts.

Researchers and psychologists from Leeds Beckett University and the University of Missouri believe that standards in science subjects would be raised if religion was kept out of education. Lessons on religion on the other hand promote understanding between cultures and a wider view of the world – so long as humanism and atheism are included in the lessons.

It seems that the more religious the country, the lower its student's performance in these two key areas. In some American states, Creationism is still taught over Evolution in schools. For obvious reasons, religion really should not be permitted to subvert scientific fact, reason and knowledge – science and mathematics are key to the success of modern societies.

The study showed there was a negative correlation between the amount of time children spent on religious activities and time spent on educational attainment. The findings support the idea of a 'displacement hypothesis' that occurs when children spend more of their time studying the Bible or the Koran than they do studying science.

To examine this relationship, the scientists looked at data from a number of international assessments on religion and education. For country's educational performances, they looked at data from the *Programme for International Student Assessment and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study*. Then, they correlated this information with data on religious practices, using the *World Values Survey* and the *European Social Survey*.

On a scale of 0 to 10, they rated 82 countries on a 'religiosity score.' From the countries analysed, the five least religious countries were shown to be the Czech Republic, Japan, Estonia, Sweden and Norway – all of which have very high educational standards. One must also take into account that the culture in these countries stresses academic achievement and religion does not play a big part in education. The five most religious countries were Qatar, Indonesia, Egypt, Yemen, and Jordan. [I'm presuming figures were unavailable for Saudi Arabia and Iran.] The UK ranked at 14 while the United States came in at 51. In the majority of countries – including the UK – women were found to be more religious than men, but this was not found to affect differences in their educational performance. However, levels of economic development and time spent on religious education did play a role in students' attainment.

The research was published in the journal, *Intelligence*.

Given a strong negative link between religiosity and educational attainment, governments might be able to raise educational standards – and thus standards of living – by keeping religion out of schools and out of educational policy making. The success of schools and education in general directly translates to more productive societies and higher standards of living.

In a study conducted by psychologists the University of Rochester, researchers found that those with high IQs had greater self-control and were able to do more for themselves and

so didn't need the support of religion. The authors also say that they have better self-esteem and were able to build more supportive relationships. The study defined religion as involvement in some or all parts of a belief. These conclusions were the result of a review of 63 scientific studies about religion and intelligence dating between 1928 and 2016. In 53 of these there was a reliable negative relationship between intelligence and religiosity – in only 10 cases was the relationship positive.

Even among children, the more intelligent a child, the more probable it was they would shun the church and the same trend was found to persist in old age. The study defined intelligence as the *'ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly, and learn from experience'*.

In their conclusions, the researchers said that *'most extant explanations (of a negative relation) share one central theme – the premise that religious beliefs are irrational, not anchored in science, not testable and is therefore, unappealing to intelligent people who know better... Intelligent people typically spend more time in school, a form of self-regulation that may yield long-term benefits... More intelligent people getting higher level jobs and better employment and higher salary may lead to higher self-esteem, and encourage personal control beliefs.'*

Intelligence naturally leads to greater self-control, self-esteem, perceived control over life's trials and tribulations, and supportive relationships, thereby negating the need for religious belief.

Meanwhile, the battle between science and religion is being waged in our own brains – and it's a real physical punch-up! Research from Case Western Reserve University and Babson College (US) found that people who believe in a deity or other spiritual force, suppress the brain's ability for analytical thinking by suppressing the neural network that allows it. Instead, the brain's empathetic network is activated. Any kind of leap of faith, any kind of belief in the supernatural, pushes aside our ability to think critically or analytically. The upside is that it helps us achieve greater social and emotional insight.

The researchers conducted eight experiments involving between 159 and 527 adults. They found evidence that more empathetic people were also more likely to be religious, confirming previous findings that women tend to be more religious and spiritual than men and that this can now be explained by their greater empathy. The bad news is that it provides evidence that atheists are more likely to be psychopathic – lack of empathy being one of the prime traits.

The researchers also concluded that religious people tend to be less intelligent. It is possible that intelligence is not as important to religious people because they are more likely to put their trust in God. Religious people are more pro-social and empathetic.

The team looked at fMRI scans that showed human brains have both analytical and social networks that enable empathy. Humans are wired to use both networks as required. A maths problem or an ethical problem will trigger one network while suppressing the other. It's worth noting that 90% of Nobel Laureates believe in God, so we can assume that empathy does not interfere with scientific understanding.

As humans, we have to learn when to take that leap of faith and when to use our thinking brain. Science and the laws of physics enhance our understanding of the world, but our sense of wonder, our sense of awe, however illogical, makes life worth living. But we have to make sure that the two networks do not suppress each other so much that they create extremes. We need to remain balanced.

God's bothering me again!

Most psychologists believe – and even some theologians at least consider the possibility – that religious belief has been part of the human survival strategy for millennia. Religion, and along with it belief in a deity or deities, has served to codify laws and exhort populations to order and obedience. God sits at the apex of hierarchy.

Humans need rules and laws to prevent anarchy, and religion has been a useful tool to achieve this end. Rules and regulations have helped mankind cooperate with and respect human life – at least most of the time.

Our ability to predict the future, and with it our own eventual and inevitable demise has served to preserve belief in an afterlife. This belief partially mitigates the awful truth of an absolute, final, no way out, end of individual existence. It is extremely difficult to imagine that when we die, every thought and emotion, every memory we have, every opinion, moral and ethic we hold dear, will die with us. Never again will we see our friends or loved ones, no more will we enjoy the fresh air or the sunrise or catch up with the latest gossip – no more will we be a part of this world we love and cling to so much. It is impossible for us self-important, self-centred and self-absorbed humans to understand what it is like to cease to exist, never to wake up and see the light of day ever again... ever... in all eternity. So the promise of an afterlife just has to be a fantastically attractive proposition.

However, in the more developed West, as scientific knowledge has replaced blind belief, the need for a deity is rapidly evaporating because religion is often seen as being incompatible with evolutionary science. Fear of the wrath of God is a powerful incentive to behave, but it's worth noting that other intelligent animals, including those that work in groups, are also able cooperate without the burden of religion. The sense of being watched by an all powerful, all knowing, all seeing sky pixie may indeed have been responsible in part for making sure humans behaved with altruism – but altruism is only part of the survival strategy that has enabled us to cooperate to become a highly successful and organised species.

All major religions emphasise the importance of morality in avoiding God's wrath – the possibility that in the finality of death, everyone will be called to account, the possibility of severe punishment, especially the eternal fire and brimstone variety, is a powerful deterrent. For evolutionary reasons, it fosters respect and obedience, whilst at the same time lowering the risk of loss of liberty or reputation, and no one wants to take the chance of being ejected from the group.

The ancient Romans and Greeks believed their Gods meted out punishment to mortals when it suited them – as does the Christian God. Even pagan cultures hold that individuals and groups will be held to account by spirits that visit punishment on offenders, and even today, the vast majority of people have a nagging feeling that even when they are misbehaving on their own, without any possibility of being caught, there is still someone watching. Uncanny isn't it? It's certainly not logical or rational, but yet it persists, even in people who have no religious belief whatsoever. One of the paradoxes of religious disbelief is the deeply personal debate that goes on in our heads about the existence of God. The actor W.C. Fields, a lifelong atheist, asked for a Bible on his deathbed. Why? 'Insurance' was his answer.

Ignorance of the cause of lightening storms, floods, plagues, famines, invasions, may have been the catalyst for erroneous belief systems. Certainly belief in an all-powerful and moral God might be an attractive and comforting idea during times of hardship as it did in the Great Depression of the 1920's. People are more ready to seek supernatural help when times are tough and when hope is in short supply – and humans are prone to turning to religion when there are no other avenues open.

The current wisdom is that appreciation of reward and punishment connected to behaviour is part and parcel of Darwinian Natural Selection. Good behaviour has long-term benefits in terms of collective safety and security and economic benefit. Thus, over generations, the *idée fixe* of God has become part of our collective conscious – hardwired in our brains in the same way that protection of children and fear of the unknown is intuitive. There is evidence that negative events tend to have a more potent impact on our thinking and behaviour than positive ones. The events of 9/11 is a classic example of how the whole world's thinking changed overnight. On an individual level, loss has proved to have almost twice the effect on the psyche as gain. Humans don't like loss – they tend to dwell on loss much more than they do on gain.

Overall, women tend to be more religious than men and are more likely to pray than men. A survey in the UK revealed that 23% of women prayed every day compared to 14% of men. Conversely, the study showed that 56% of men did not believe in God compared with only 46% of women. This difference points to a link between religious belief and biological, physiological, hormonal, and psychological factors.

In Muslim countries, more men attend religious services than women but it is thought that the reasons for this disparity are cultural. In Christian countries, women could be more drawn to Christianity because its doctrine is one of protection of the powerless ('...*blessed are the meek...*') and women are more used to asking for assistance, particularly from other women. Women prefer company, which religion can offer.

Humans have a depressing history of religious wars. Religious wars promote religious leaders... leaders who in many cases started them in the first place! Religious unrest results in the establishment of a religious state. It is surprisingly easy for those with a gift for oratory and leadership to start a religious war! Islamic State was just the latest attempt.

Religion still exercises influence over states that at face value claim to be secular, for example Russia and France. Religion is most powerful where it has been longest established – eg Italy and Ireland. Religious influence often flies in the face of common sense – overpopulated Latin American countries being prime examples where citizens refuse to use contraceptives. Uncontrolled population explosion has resulted in poverty, thanks to a man in a pointy hat who lives in a palace in another country who has denied the right to birth control to those that desperately need it – holding back the economic development of otherwise technologically viable states.

Even so, there is no getting away from the fact that religious belief helps us to value other human beings – even those who hold different religious beliefs. But here's the irony... It cannot be denied that religion continues to cause conflict! If everyone were able to see the world from God's point of view – including non-believers – the world might just be a better place because God is supposed to value all people equally.

An explanation though, is within our grasp and owes more to scientific understanding than to moral choice. The answer lies deep within the brain. As we evolved into thinking beings, able to consider the meaning of our own existence, the temporal lobes stretched and expanded and with this expansion, our ability to visualise and imagine became sharper.

From praying to gods to meditating with gurus to being at one with the universe... entering into spirituality may be down to our brain's ability to daydream.

Throughout human history, many people have claimed to have had mystical experiences – from Moses' vision of the burning bush to Saint Paul's epiphany on the road to Tarsus to Saint Bernadette's vision of the Virgin Mary in a damp grotto at Lourdes – all are results of activity, albeit unusual activity, in the complex structure of the complex electro-chemical organ that contains our consciousness. Individuals who have experienced deeply spiritual connections often find their lives permanently changed. Researchers have found that the doors that prevent the rest of us from sharing these profound experiences may be temporarily or permanently closed by inhibitory mechanisms in the brain. This makes sense, but to fully understand the mechanisms of spirituality we must also try to understand how to access them.

According to scientists in the US and New Zealand, our ability to enter into spirituality lies in a specific region of the brain which is associated with religious experiences. Working in tandem, researchers at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago and Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, believe that instead of a specific area of the brain being activated, it is rather the suppression of the brain's regulatory and inhibitory functions which enables it to open up to mystical and hitherto unexplained spiritual or mystical experience.

Of course the existence of such an area and its function is not enough to prove God exists. It is however a pointer to an evolutionary 'god spot.' In any case, a single area of the brain is unlikely to be responsible for these experiences. More likely, other areas must also come into play, including those responsible for memory, imagination, and emotion. This is backed up by other researchers who also realise these experiences are by their very nature, complex.

The researchers in Chicago looked at over a hundred brain-damaged veterans from the Vietnam War, all of whom had undergone a battery of cognitive tests both before and after the war. Comparing brain scans with the veterans experiences of unity with their comrades, instances of profound joy or feelings of being able to transcend time and space, the researchers found that those with damage to the 'god spot' region of the brain (in the frontal and temporal lobes) were more likely to report mystical experiences compared with those without damage to these regions. Their report was published in the journal *Live Science*.

The brain's frontal lobes are the most evolved areas of the brain and help us make sense of the perceptual input we get from the world. When the frontal lobes' inhibitory functions are suppressed, our perception of mystical experience can be increased. Other brain states associated with stress or distress, extreme circumstances, prior strong beliefs, and heightened emotions could all lead to a higher probability of having a mystical experience, since all these states may affect the key frontal lobe regions involved in interpreting perceptual experience. The findings were published in the journal *Neuropsychologia*.

However, this research points only to mystical experiences associated with damaged areas of the brain and takes little account of those people with no brain damage. But in 2009 a study of a multi-faith group showed the same areas of the brain used to interpret the feelings and intentions of other people lit up when volunteers were asked to ponder some religious and moral problems. When asked to concentrate on statements like 'God's will guides me' or the idea that the world is guided by God's will alone, the lateral frontal lobes of the brain (also those used when we empathise with each other) were indisputably activated. When they were asked to think about God's emotional state or God's wrath and

vengeance, the medial temporal and frontal gyri also lit up. These are the same areas that help us to judge the emotions of others. So... it begs the question, is this why we believe in God? Is belief in a deity simply a matter of evolution and the way our brains have developed?

Religion may be a way of satisfying some basic human needs and desires. These desires may even go some way to explaining why religion and religious doctrine is so often contradictory. Religion may have developed as a philosophical approach to meeting human contradictions rather than evidence of the divine. Certainly religion serves to bring families closer or make people feel part of a group and this theory is backed up by Psychologist Professor Steven Reiss.

Reiss goes one step further and claims that religion is often contradictory because its greater meaning has to appeal to so many different facets of human nature. People who have nothing might take comfort from the promise of eternal salvation in Paradise, whereas those already blessed with wealth and power may draw comfort from the fact that they are already being rewarded for their righteousness. The same might even apply to those who seek forgiveness or even vengeance.

Professor Reiss says 'It doesn't matter whether God exists or not as religious belief is aimed at fulfilling our basic human desires. If you want to build a religion that will have a lot of followers, you have to address all of the human desires in strong form and weak form. If you insist the only way to reach God is through meditation and study then extroverts will stay away while if you teach the opposite then introverts will stay away. You have to have a religion that will support the values of all these people... Previous attempts to explain religion in terms of psychology have been too narrow by focusing on its provision of a moral framework or a way of coping with death.'

Researchers at North Carolina State University also found that belief in all-powerful and moralising gods tended to appear at times of hardship in human history. The researchers studied the origins of 583 religious societies around the world. Comparing these to climate, rainfall and plant growth data for each area to build an historical picture of the conditions each society was living in. Their findings may help to shed light on how religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam first emerged and why stories of hardship in those religions play such a central role – wars, floods, famines, enslavement, plague... that sort of thing.

For penitent people, the wrath of the Biblical God will have some meaning, but if you are a pacifist, it's more likely you will be turned off by the idea of a wrathful god – a god that turns the other cheek would probably be more to their taste. Differences in individual desires can influence certain people and their choice of one religion over another. The teaching of the Catholic Church, specifically the idea that we are all part of a 'flock' for example, is a big draw card for those who have a strong desire for family and community. A strong desire for independence on the other hand pushes individuals towards self-reliance and often atheism. I have always been independent and self-reliant and although having received a superb private education at a Catholic School, I was eventually able to work it all out in a logical, rational and scientific way. Conversely, people who require low levels of independence may be attracted by the community spirit of religion. **LIGION**

So why, and how, in this modern era of scientific discovery and increased knowledge of the vastness and emptiness of the Cosmos, do people rationalise their religious belief. Some people *really* believe that God is not only watching them, 24 hours a day, every day, but is also looking after them and even working on their behalf.

This is akin to playing your own game of 'Sliding Doors'. We can't examine what is going to happen in the future because we don't yet know what's going to happen in the future, but we can examine the past because the past is already known to us. Our heads are full of ideas about what could have happened or how things could have turned out differently. As an atheist, even I sometimes wonder if fate has played a hand in my own insignificant life. What was a disappointment at the time later turned out to be a boon – one door closes, another opens. But then, fate is not God.

The psychological wisdom is that people who do look back on what might have been, especially if they are thinking about an event that could have turned out badly and changed their lives, often consider that stroke of good fortune to be 'divine' intervention. This process is called 'Counterfactual Thinking' and it's what we do when we consider the possibility of alternative outcomes. Those believers who imagined the outcome could have been worse found that their belief in God (or a guardian angel) was strengthened. Humans know how to be grateful, but if there's no one to be grateful to, the temptation is to invent someone... Step forward a ready made benefactor! There but for the grace of God...

I have always found religious belief ludicrous – yet fascinating. I understand that amazing strokes of good luck can reinforce belief in the divine. In spite of rational thought and scientific evidence to the contrary, there remains the nagging idea that events just might somehow be preordained by a higher power, even though my logical brain tells me they are not. Good fortune serves to prove one's suspicion that God is not only loving, kind and trustworthy, but He also exercises influence in our everyday lives – all 7.9 billion of us.

Counterfactual thinking can give meaning to otherwise random events. We know that humans tend to fill in the gaps when knowledge of fact is incomplete, and this is what happens when we are unable to fully explain outcomes. But what happens to belief when things turn out badly? For believers, it's all part of God's plan, and like Job, we are expected to keep the faith, pray harder, and eventually everything will turn out alright in the end.

But... I have a real problem with this philosophy. When we pray, we are asking for something – not necessarily for ourselves, sometimes for others – but nonetheless, we are engaged in begging. Sometimes our prayer is answered – in which case God has listened and granted our request. If our prayer isn't answered, not to worry, because we must understand that God has a plan for us anyway, in which case, if God has a plan why bother praying in the first place? In any event, most people pray at the same time, on Sunday, which is supposed to be his day off.

All religions foster and encourage belief in a soul or spirit that lives on for eternity after the body has been reduced to its constituent atoms and molecules. Just as divine intervention is a comforting concept, belief in the reward of an afterlife is equally compelling. It's certainly a powerful incentive to stick with the faith, and it's the perfect emollient if you are at all worried about the approaching apocalypse. Seriously religious types worry less about the '*End of Days*' because they have been persuaded to believe that what comes after is going to be better. Life on earth is full of little disappointments and setbacks, but after the Rapture' we're all going to be saved and live in Paradise for all eternity. So why worry?

Worryingly, 40% of Americans believe that the Rapture – the biblical prophecy of the end of times in which mankind will be judged – will happen before 2050. Throughout history, religious end of the world prophecies have been and gone a thousand times and we're still waiting, along with the second coming of Christ, the four horsemen of the apocalypse and the promised Spice Girls reunion.

Fundamentalist religion



In every large human group, there exist sub-groups, cliques and factions – some more extreme than others. This especially applies to religious groups. There are more open-minded factions who don't have problems with gay marriage or women bishops, and then there are those who would happily see them burn in hell for all eternity.

There are 'weekend Christians' who occasionally go to church and hardly give Jesus a second thought during the week. There are more committed Christians who go to church every Sunday and not too concerned with those who don't. Most of them are intelligent enough to realise that non-Christians are also nice people – and in their eyes even atheists barely merit an unconscious 'tut tut.' But then, as in Islam and er... well, just Christianity and Islam, there are fundamentalists and extremists.

This is the last time I am going to mention Islam – for reasons that must be blindingly obvious. Instead, I am going to concentrate solely on the fundamentalist Christians – the regular church-going, Bible thumping, creationist, bigoted, self righteous, extreme Right God-botherers.

Of the billion or so Christians worldwide, this fundamentalist sub-group represents less than 5% and they are mainly to be found in the Bible belt of heartland America and South Africa, the second most religious Western country. These are the Christians of the 'mega-churches', boasting tens of thousands of members. Their services are broadcast on local cable TV networks, sometimes seven days a week. Absent from this group are Catholics and members of the Establishment Church of England.

The fundamentalist sub-group is an offshoot – a relatively new mutation of the religion virus. They reject out of hand the evidence of science and stick doggedly to the literal interpretation of the Bible, where the world was created in seven days and God is even more vengeful than Hitler with a headache. These ignorant, fanatical zealots lobby the US Government and State Legislatures forcing them to pass laws ensuring only Creationism is taught in American schools.

Religious belief is normal, and it's normal for individuals to explore their own spirituality. Belief in a deity can offer comfort in difficult times. What horrifies me is indoctrination, which robs the individual of the right to make informed choices or make up their own minds. In my opinion, the religious indoctrination of children is a form of child abuse.

I am not claiming for a moment that indoctrination is similar to hypnosis because indoctrination *is* hypnosis – there is no difference between the two and both employ the same methods.

Hardline fundamentalist Christianity also fails to practice the turn-the-other-cheek-love-thy-neighbour doctrine it preaches.

In the last thousand years, there have been more deaths as a result of religious wars, crusades, pogroms, inquisitions, witch-burnings, murders and final solutions than those caused by the Black Death, smallpox or the great flu of 1918. Over 40,000 witches were burned alive in Europe in one year alone in the 17th century!

Let me nail my colours to the mast right now... As you read this, there are thousands of priests, nuns and church workers living and working in the most appalling conditions in the most terrible places on earth, bringing hope to people who would otherwise have no hope. I stand in awe of their goodness, their sacrifice and I consider them all (apart from the minority of rapists and pedophiles) to be living saints. I am also aware of the part religion has played in human evolution because religion has helped codify the altruism that is part of the human survival strategy. Our survival may not have been so straightforward had it been acceptable to murder, steal, or commit adultery with thy neighbour's ox.

But... and this is the big but... I have always had difficulty with those who cannot follow a reasoned argument. This attitude has regrettably won me the reputation of not suffering fools gladly. But life is too short to waste time and energy banging your head against a brick wall. I have been called arrogant because I have demonstrated that I would rather walk away from an argument about religion. Some of the greatest minds in human history were atheists – Stephen Hawking, Albert Einstein, Nelson Mandela, for example.

Historically, Christianity has gone through a series of evolutions – oh the irony! Christianity has often had to adapt to survive its 2,000 year history. It's hard to pinpoint which parts of the Bible are truly the teachings of Jesus, and which are the result of centuries of translation – from Aramaic into Greek, from Greek into Latin, from Latin into English – not to mention good old-fashioned embellishment.

When William Tyndale translated the Bible into English, he rewrote entire passages, making them more poetic, more beautiful – and in the process, accuracy went out of the window. Tyndale even added huge tracts – the Song of Solomon for example, as beautiful and poetic as it is, was written entirely by Tyndale.

Tyndale's translation was also heavily influenced by the writings of Martin Luther and this is evidenced by the way he altered the meaning of certain important passages. The word 'congregation' substituted 'church' – 'senior' substituted 'priest' – and the words 'penance, charity, grace and confession' were removed. Tyndale invented and inserted phrases such as 'under the sun, signs of the times, let there be light, my brother's keeper, lick the dust, fall flat on his face, the land of the living, pour out one's heart, the apple of his eye, fleshpots, go the extra mile, the parting of the ways' and more.

Tyndale deliberately set out to write a Bible which would be accessible to everyone, and to accomplish this, he more dynamic language that eventually became the heart of English prose. The result was a very different Bible.

Isaac Asimov said that the Bible, if read properly, is 'the greatest advertisement for atheism ever written'. The Bible is riddled with absurdity and weirdness. Does anyone seriously believe that the world was created in a mere seven days, that Noah was 500 years old, or

the Great Flood covered the whole planet? The fundamentalist Christians do. You have to be blind to science or mentally ill, or both, to think that every word in the Bible is true. Of course some Christians think of these stories as useful allegories, and even I find that acceptable – there are also some great truths in there, as indeed there are in Dickens, Shakespeare and Tolstoy.

The God of the Old Testament is an irresponsible, angry, jealous, misogynist, mass murdering, child-killing sicko. The first four items on the list of ten things God does not want you to do all concern not having any other Gods. The other six things on the list of ten things God does not want you to do are just common sense. With all his smiting, drowning, battles and child sacrifices – God is big on human sacrifices – He kills around 33 million people in the Old Testament, a record that still stands unequalled. What happened to ‘Thou shalt not kill?’ ...or is it alright to kill in the Lord’s name?

It is only when we open the New Testament that God re-invents himself. It’s here that we are introduced to the loving, caring God via a collection of stories about a man called Jesus.

But the Jesus stories – they are allocated four books – are at best contradictory and non-contemporaneous. By the time we get to the Book of Revelations, the most ridiculous fantasy about the end of the world ever written, we could be forgiven for wondering if it’s the ramblings of a drug-crazed mental patient. It’s what Harry Potter would have been like had J K Rowling allowed him to take crystal meth.

The real truth, and one which is accepted by Christian scholars, is that Christianity as a formal religion really begins with St. Paul, or Saul of Tarsus, as he was originally known. Saul, a Jew, working for the Romans and whose job it was to try to break up the new Christian sect (originally for Jews only – no Goys allowed!) experienced his 'conversion' on the road to Damascus, doubtless as a result of increased activity in the anterior superior temporal gyrus, the neural correlate of insight, which becomes active just before any kind of epiphany, stroke of genius or brainstorm.

Maybe Saul, or Paul, suddenly realised there was be a lot of money to be made out of the cult if it were properly managed and made available to everyone. Smart move on his part, because once everyone and anyone was invited to join, membership skyrocketed and the collection plates filled to overflowing.

And it is at that point in the story that see one of the great flaws in the argument. An all-seeing, all-powerful, all-knowing, almighty God always seems to need more money. Despite being somehow (as yet unexplained) able to create the entire universe, God doesn’t seem competent enough to manage his finances.

Despite what you may think, most Christians haven't actually read the Bible. Instead, they have had it read for them by others, and even then only in very short bursts. And yet, innumerable souls still gather on a weekly basis to listen to experts on what Jesus is supposed to have said, and what he is supposed to have meant when he said it, expounding on the importance of every word in the Good Book. They conveniently ignore the indisputable fact that the Bible was written by men, not God (as opposed to the Koran, which is God’s word as dictated to the Prophet Mohammed.)

The Gospels were not written until at least thirty to forty years after the death of Jesus, and then by authors who could not possibly have been alive when Jesus was doing his magic tricks, such as turning water into wine, curing psychosomatic illnesses, raising Lazarus from the dead, and as a finale, attempting to do the same thing to himself. Christians

conveniently ignore the fact that all those tricks had been done before by a plethora of travelling prophets, including the trick of restoring sight to the blind, resurrecting the dead (a feat made possible by the careful administering of the juice from *digitalis purpurea*) and the miracle of the sawing of the woman in half, performed many times by St. Paul of Daniels.

Every year, at round about Easter in the very Roman Catholic Philippines, devout Christian men allow themselves to be crucified. They are literally nailed to crosses so that they too can share Christ's suffering. What they expect to prove by doing this defies any rational explanation, but real nails are hammered through their real hands and feet and real people spend the entire day enduring the very real agony of a real crucifixion. Some go the whole hog and get whipped and scourged before being crowned with real thorns that lacerate their flesh. All are scarred for life. At dusk, they are taken down from their crucifixes and taken to the nearest hospital. And yet, they all manage to survive and fatalities are unknown.

The official Catholic Church does not approve of this act of devotion but remains quiet about it. Nonetheless, it shows that it can be done. Death by crucifixion is a tortuous, barbaric death by suffocation. Eventually the feet are no longer able to support the whole weight of the body, which then hangs by the wrists, constricting the lungs and starving the victim of oxygen. The actual blood loss is quite small and the appearance of death can be easily produced by ingesting *digitalis purpurea*.

Had Jesus' attempt at dying and coming back to life worked out as he had planned, he might have got away with it and become the real overnight sensation he always wanted to be. But it didn't. It might have just come off too, but a wide-awake Roman soldier decided to take no chances and give him a good prod with a spear to make sure he really had gone to meet his maker before the band of magicians assistants carted him off to intensive care.

If you look at the accounts of Jesus' life in the Bible from a psychologist's point of view, certain personality traits are obvious. Jesus is an extravert, he is optimistic and he is great in the company of others and the life and soul of any party. He is both imaginative and creative and has the ability to be able to think on his feet, finding unique solutions to problems. He displays a quick-wittedness that would have been the envy of others, even today.

Extraverts are known to be more likely to become leaders. Jesus also comes across as an agreeable type – he's the likeable, all-round party guy. But he also likes attention and thrives on adulation – just like all show-business types. [The ancient Greeks invented the water into wine trick – it is accomplished by using the simple scientific principle of creating a vacuum in a double-chambered vessel. Every magician knows how to do it.]

Jesus also knows how to work a crowd. Jesus comes across as a man who doesn't mind taking a few risks. But if Jesus was really who he claimed to be, and wanted to galvanise the world into action, surely he could have shown us something a little more impressive, like maybe curing *all* lepers or *all* blind people – and left us with something a bit more credible! Instead he relied on our blind (pardon the pun) faith.

The gospels are based on hearsay and urban myths that pass from mouth to mouth, like the flu. It's a racing certainty the stories would have been subject to embellishment along the way, over the thirty or so years following Jesus' death, because that's human nature, and then worked up some more when eventually they were committed to papyrus. Therefore, we are left with an unreliable account that was thence subject to a dash of artistic licence.

In the Bible, no phrase is too small or insignificant to be examined, re-examined, picked over and discussed, in order to extract every last drop of meaning from it. And the faithful lap it up week after week – unthinking, unquestioning, uncritical, and as susceptible to the influence of suggestion that has been part of human evolution for a hundred thousand years.

It's not their fault. Really, it's not. It's not even the fault of the preacher man spouting this bull. The human desire to conform overrides reason and critical thought, and critical thought becomes temporarily suspended.

In the United States, church-going has been craftily and surreptitiously woven into the fabric of family life. Churches lay on crèches for the kids during services, provide a fashion show for middle class adults to compare clothing before being robbed of their cash. At the same time, their progeny are being brain-washed so that when they are old enough, they too will be willing to hand over their cash. The churches also run outings, hog roasts and picnics to attract families. Before you know what's happening, you are now part of a close knit and loyal community, where most, if not all of your friends are evangelical nut-cases and where distrust of non-Christians is inexorably replacing racism and the Klan – one bogey-man exchanged for another.

Churches have their own social networks and membership of a church is thought by some to confer a special standing in a community. Non-believers are considered immoral, untrustworthy and unlikely to be allowed to live in the White House.

Gather together a group of people with the same fears and wacko notions and they will become even more prejudiced than they were before and start to formulate even more extremist views. Gather together people who are already predisposed to aggression and they will become even more aggressive when isolated in the company of their own peer group. Just like gangs of football hooligans, those with extreme religious ideologies – such as people who believe they are the only ones who are going to be saved by Jesus – will start to think they are better than the rest of us.

People who share similar attitudes and beliefs will reinforce those attitudes and beliefs when they are brought together. This is one of the reasons I find fundamentalist religion so disturbing. The effect is contagious. People who have previously only harboured a vague idea about certain thoughts or beliefs will inevitably find that those same thoughts or beliefs become stronger when they are egged on by others, and especially if they are egged on by their peers, or the guy who stands at the front who has already established his leadership credentials, and therefore his credibility. People soon find themselves *openly* expressing more extreme opinions, whereas previously they wouldn't have thought to do so.

These groups soon become more dogmatic, and thus more able to justify actions that the rest of society might find unacceptable. They find *moral* justifications for their actions and have a tendency to form stereotypical views of people who then become targets of racial or religious hatred.

As far as the rabid Christians are concerned, Hypnotists come near the top of the list of people to hate. I've said it before and I'll say it again – the real reason they don't like hypnotists is because that's what they do every Sunday, every time they 'convert' someone into the faith, and every time someone falls over backward through the power of suggestion, believing they have been just filled with the Holy Spirit.

I once attempted to explore this point with a couple of fanatical Christian zealots and quickly discovered that you simply cannot have a reasoned discussion with these people. One of them threatened to kill me. The other simply stood and stared at me with a rather silly grin on his face. If I didn't know better, I would have sworn he was on something – but now I come to think of it, smiling at nothing is one of the preferred leisure pursuit of the born-again. They do it all the time. It's almost as if they *want* to be martyred.

Extremism, the ability to smile at nothing, and conformity, is vital to the cohesion of any group – and it is an ancient force. Safety can always be found in numbers. In our ancestor's day, membership of the group was vital to survival, but groups become polarised when the opinions of individuals become extreme. Conformity increases when there are at least three or more present. In those circumstances, any feelings of insecurity quickly evaporate and are replaced by feelings of unanimity. Just one dissenting opinion can be disastrous for the group, so dissent is not only discouraged, it is *dealt with* – swiftly and efficiently.

Nonetheless, when a group is united, an admiration develops by members of the group for the group as a whole. Where an individual previously lacked any other prior commitment, there is now a commitment to the group. More insidiously, the group becomes engaged in a covert surveillance of the individual. This surveillance is undertaken by the other members of the group quite unconsciously, though it is accepted as being for the individual's own good and his/her own safety and security. Scientology has this off to a fine art!

Extreme religious groups particularly often establish themselves in isolated places or remote locations. This keeps them away from cultural common sense or possible exposure to ideological challenge or dissent.

In the 1970's, Irving Janis studied Groupthink. In particular, he studied the experiences of the members of close-knit religious groups, exploring the symptoms and similarities of membership. He found that in any group, there are close-knit ties, which are subsequently difficult to break. Many members of the group experience feelings of invulnerability and excessive optimism, often discounting warnings that challenge assumptions or unquestioning belief in the group's superior morality. Members ignore, or are oblivious to, the consequences of their actions. They have a tendency to form stereotyped views of enemy leaders, most especially those that present a threat to the authority of the group's leaders. Pressure to conform is applied to dissenting or disloyal group members. Extreme religious sects strive to preserve the illusion of unanimity, often employing 'Mind guards' – members who 'shield' the group from dissenting opinions.

Group Responses are predictable and tend to mirror the individual responses and beliefs of the most confident group members, even when they are patently wrong. Members who are perceived to be the most confident are also perceived to be the most competent, even when they're not.

This type of behaviour is immediately apparent in religious sects such as Scientology, the Moonies and Jehovah's Witnesses. But it is also prevalent in the mega-churches.

We don't see it, because we assume that Christianity is 'normal.' But watch carefully – the pastor and any number of volunteers are only too willing to spend time giving spiritual guidance to any wavering member of the flock, lest the church loses a precious strand of income. And if it's not for the money, it's because it gives the pastor a sense of his own superiority. This feeling of superiority excites the pleasure centres in *his* brain – he also gets a 'spiritual' lift from it as well, so *everyone's* a winner!

I am in danger now of committing the ultimate sin in that I want to use a quote, but can't remember who should rightly be credited with it, so whoever it is, my apologies! Anyway, the quote is '*When religion enters the room, reason tiptoes politely out of the door.*' And that is precisely the problem when trying to have a sensible discussion with a serious God-botherer.

Religion is a cruel fraud heaped on our shoulders by those who seek to ignore and override natural human cynicism. They hypnotise the suggestible, the needy, and the gullible. Not all preachers understand why it is they find hypnosis and hypnotists so repugnant – the message that hypnosis is 'bad' has been disseminated through the ranks at the behest of those who do, and that is reason enough. The monopoly on souls, and thus donations, is possible only because the free will of the individual is manipulated and managed by those trained to be expert in this most insidious form of mind-control.

But many people now feel that religious belief is no longer so important, particularly now that there is a more universal understanding of science. The church has consistently lost ground over the last century as religious belief has declined – a process that has gained even more momentum in the last 40 years – a trend that looks set to accelerate even more once older generations stop filling in their census forms. More and more people are coming to the realisation that they can still lead good, productive lives without God. I believe this Humanistic approach is healthier. Humanists are anti-war and are horrified at any sign of religious bigotry.

Recent research shows that non-religious types are more likely to go into science – particularly astrophysics and cosmology, mathematics and engineering. The more religious types are less likely to have a spontaneous sense of humour. I have had ample opportunity to confirm this observation on many, many occasions and I know it to be true. Some very religious types are very deep! It's like they are drowning in their own piety!

Praying to God is very much a hit and miss affair. It's a lot like begging at the traffic lights. Sometimes God grants your request, but more often than not he doesn't. When he doesn't, then it's God's will, because God has this great plan. This rationale, followed to its logical conclusion, means that it's pointless praying to God for anything anyway, because he already has his big plan.

The vast majority of people accept religion simply because that's the way they were brought up. This is the Nurture part of the Nature versus Nurture debate. Indoctrinated at an early age and witness to various rituals and practices, the connections between the neurons, particularly those associated with unconscious thought and actions, are strengthened. In the same way that an individual's personality becomes established by their late teens, so religiosity can become established – at least that has been the conventional wisdom so far, but new research is casting doubt on that wisdom. Even where a strong religious belief has been established, outside events can effect powerful changes. But this is also a double edged sword. It is not unknown for those with no particular belief to convert as a result of a sudden peak experience, the onset of a bout of temporal lobe epilepsy, or because membership of a new church or religious lifestyle brings with it new benefits and convenient advantages.

Membership of a religious group can confer its own rewards, particularly when times are hard. Religious groups, whether mainstream or cult, are sometimes magnets for the needy, the emotionally unstable, or seekers of attention. New recruits are fawned over and made to feel 'special'. For certain individuals, this kind of attention can satisfy a need, or needs, and can even be a powerful stimulant. Again, having specific needs satisfied will excite pleasure centres deep within the brain.

In a moment, we will look at the effect of personality on religiosity, but for the time being, it is important to understand that in many cases, Social Forces lead to religiosity more than divine intervention. In a lot of cases, the need to belong is as powerful as the need for oxygen.

In Scandinavian countries, the sense of social responsibility and sense of community is much stronger than in Britain and certainly stronger than in the United States of America. Which explains why the majority of the populations of Denmark, Sweden and Norway have little time for God. Wisely, Danes say they don't need to go to church to experience a sense of community because they live in Denmark!

A person's religiosity can change in later life. There is a true and verifiable story of a Rabbi, crowded onto the back of a truck taking Jews from the camp to the gas chamber in Auschwitz. He called on God to stop what was happening... *'This is against You!'* he cried... and of course nothing happened. Exhausted, broken, he slumped back down, suddenly forced to accept a truth more awful than his impending earthly fate then he said, matter-of-factly... *'there is no God.'*

The question is not whether or not God exists, but why he exists for some and not others. This question is explored in more detail in the chapter *Hypnosis In Religion*. What I want to know is, if God loves me so much, why did He make me an atheist?

Recent research has discovered that religiosity is much more likely to affect those with certain personality types. Genetic factors account for over half the variability in religiosity, just as they do for one's overall personality, and the research has confirmed the genetic component, verifying the certainty of a biological basis for belief. When we look at personality, we can see that a person's genes serve to predispose that person to particular character traits and behaviours.

Agreeableness and conscientiousness are prevalent in religious types and perhaps unsurprisingly, this is a trend that extends over all the mainstream religions. They are more likely to cooperate with each other and more like to volunteer for things. They are more likely to lead healthy lifestyles – they don't take drugs, don't drink to excess and are less likely to smoke or commit adultery with an ox.

But could that mean that religion is responsible for installing these more desirable traits? Er... no. Personality really does decide an individual's religiousness. This is something that has been substantiated by painstaking testing involving thousands of questionnaires. Those people who were conscientious and agreeable in childhood continued to retain their religious belief as adults.

On the up side, religion fosters social cohesion and has undeniably played an important role in evolution. Rather mainstream religion than the downward spiral of drug-addiction or chronic alcoholism. [I am at least a pragmatist!] What is interesting is that religious people, or at least those with religious belief, are more willing to help others. *However*, that particular personality trait comes with a disturbing caveat. Religious types discriminate between helping people they know and those they do not. Humanists on the other hand are equally willing to help strangers. It's as I always suspected... there is a streak of bigotry that goes part and parcel with religion. This mean-spiritedness becomes particularly obvious when individuals, particularly persons who represent a threat to the group, are the ones in need of help. And perhaps not unsurprisingly, the more deeply, conservatively religious are even less likely to lend a helping hand to 'outsiders.'

Given our evolutionary history, this attitude is easy to understand and has its roots in the survival of the group, the tribe, and the village. What is more interesting however is that this behaviour seems to be entirely unconscious. The deeply religious profess the tenet that all men are created equal in the eyes of God. Yet when put to the test...

But... *I am the bringer of Good News!* Even if during childhood and adolescence there has been exposure to a great deal of religion and religious belief, which would include the religiousness of immediate family, friends, school etc, and this religious upbringing has played an important role, there is still hope. Between the ages of 18 and 25, the genetic influence starts to take over. As the early environment becomes less prevalent, as the child passes from adolescence into adulthood, education, and with it, logic and reason begin to assert themselves. Once that vulnerable child, brought up to love Jesus, gets out into the big wide world, they begin to question. Before you know what has happened, they too will partake of the fruits of the tree of knowledge, their consciousness emerging from the prison of blind belief. Why then do some people still cling to Religion?

Images are much more powerful than purely verbal information when it comes to emotions, and sermons, in fact the whole ritual of hearing about Jesus' love and his advice about keeping slaves, (honestly!) his magic tricks and sideshow hypnotism, are full of imagery.

Once the group is listening to the same message and repeating the same comfortable and familiar choreographed actions (kneeling, joining hands in communal prayer) they are unconsciously acting in lockstep, as one organism. The next step is then to get the emotions in lockstep, and this is remarkably easy. This is where religious ritual emerges triumphant. It's really just a quirk of human nature, an accident of evolution... and one that has exacted a terrible price.

As in the army, all that square-bashing isn't a waste of time. Repetitive tasks carried out by groups of people, even for no apparent reason, forges bonds between the members of that group that grow continually stronger. Psychologist Scott Wiltermuth at the University of Southern California has confirmed what generations of Regimental Sergeant Majors already knew – when the individuals in the group cooperate, the emotions become aligned. What to do with those emotions is then a matter of moral judgement. Aggression is the more likely outcome. The more tightly knit the group, the more it becomes a fiercer and more destructive force, even to the extent that individuals within the group will do things they later admit they wouldn't normally do!

I put on a couple of shows in a small town in South Africa called George, something I had done with considerable success in a number of towns in South Africa. Andrew Newton, world famous Hypnotist, would be appearing at the 1,000 seat Civic Centre on Wednesday and Friday at 7.30pm. Most of the audience for the Wednesday show was made up of older students from local schools, but we also had a good turn out of local shop workers and businesses who had been given free tickets to make up the numbers, and to give me the word of mouth publicity to fill the 'extra' Friday show, which would be announced at the end of Wednesday's performance. This is a tried and tested way of selling out shows in South Africa and it has worked for me many times, most notably in the 3,000 seat 3 Arts in Cape Town, where I have had several successful runs. Sure, I have to do two shows, but I don't spend a penny on advertising and I get more exposure.

But back to George... We had already had objections from one of the local churches as soon as the tickets started going out. Some 'Christians' had made strenuous objections to the council about allowing the hall to be used for a hypnotist show, and they were out in force at the front of the theatre, clutching their Bibles, singing their hymns, and praying for the souls of the people on stage. No one ever takes much notice of them and to be

honest, I tend to view them with mild amusement. I'm very experienced at putting on these shows, and the hall was full.

On the Friday evening however, something happened that I had not foreseen. At around seven-o'clock, cars started pulling up as usual outside the hall. As the people stepped out of their vehicles, we noticed that they were being intercepted by people handing out leaflets – advertising a free entertainment, free food, free music and free rides for the kids – all organised at 36 hour's notice, and right across the road. A group of about a dozen adults stood on the opposite pavement, arms folded, and glared, at us. The last time I saw behaviour like that was when I was seven years old in the school playground. We lost maybe two hundred or so potential customers and secretly I was furious – it cost me about 5,000 SA Rand – about £500 in English money. But it was a perfect illustration of the targeted aggression I have described above and a classic example of what happens when a group indulges its prejudice. There's something wrong with these people. Added to which, it is childish, which made it an even more interesting study.

It would be easy to dismiss the Christian fundamentalists as a flock of fruit loops, inevitably destined for the dustbin of history if they did but know it – but this would be to understate their organisational abilities. You can destroy an army, but it has been proved time and again that it is impossible to suppress an idea. This is another reason for the delayed rebuttal of religious belief in the face of science.

With 80 million committed fundamentalist Christians in America, the movie industry is equally committed to getting its own share of that particular entertainment dollar. 'Faith-based audiences' are a lucrative market and Hollywood has an impressive track record of tapping into it. In the 1950's and 60's big budget Cecil B. De Mille blockbusters like *The Robe*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *The Greatest Lie (Story) Ever Told* starring, amongst others, Charlton Heston, put a schmaltzy, wide screen Technicolor twist on well known Christian fairy tales. Ironic that nearly all those movies were produced by Jews.

But Hollywood continues to court a market with disposable income and an appetite for anything even remotely Godly. There are websites that pastors and ministers can download clips from, complete with a copyright-free invitation to use them in their sermons, along with biblical quotations to prove how truly holy the movie is! The PR men invite religious leaders to advance screenings, sometimes months before the opening in theatres, emphasising the film's faith-based story lines complete with goody bags of biblical style promotional materials. [Check out HollywoodJesus.com]

The Sandra Bullock film, *The Blind Side* about a Christian woman who adopts a poor black teenager, who then goes on to be a rich black teenager by playing [American] football is a prime example of this new kind of market strategy. Clips from the film were made available to more than 22,000 mega churches throughout the US before it was released, complete with selected Bible passages for sermons.

But in the roaring two thousand and twenties, Hollywood is shifting slowly to the new religion of Woke and Black Lives Matter. It may be a refreshing change from the days when Copernicus and Galileo were imprisoned for suggesting that the world was not the centre of the universe after all, but it also proves Hollywood still follows the trend... and the money. The movie industry, aided and abetted by the Oscars, are quickly switching to making films highlighting 'equality' and, er... things that would have seen producers arrested for indecency half a century ago. Woke is the new religion, and the world would be a much better place without it.

Hypnosis in religion



Left: American TV evangelist, Benny Hinn.

'Let us pray' said the minister and the whole congregation, observing the traditional social convention, closed their eyes and bowed their heads as one... and in that brief moment relinquished their individuality and became submerged in the larger organism of the group.

The simple act of bowing heads and closing eyes made the entire flock just that little bit more suggestible – suggestible enough for the ritual to begin. '*Lord, we are not worthy*' intoned the minister... '*Lord we are not worthy*' answered the congregation, repeating the time honoured canon, irresistibly reinforcing an established belief.

It was the same this week as it was last week, and shall be next week and the week after. It never occurred to anyone to question what it was about this custom that was so compelling. Perhaps it was the comfortable familiarity of sitting in the same seats, in the same surroundings, among the same familiar people, going through the same uncomplicated ritual that was the real addiction. None would dissent, none would stand out from the group, none would risk the denunciation of their peers and none would gamble on the possibility of being singled out to be told they were wrong.

Note that this chapter is headed Hypnosis in Religion and not Hypnosis and Religion. This is because hypnosis and religion are different, and yet inextricably linked. The techniques of hypnosis have always been an integral part of religious practice.

While Christian worship is declining in Europe and even in America, Islam is fast becoming the world's fastest growing religion. In Britain, 37% of people think that David Beckham exerts more of an influence than God. John Lennon once said that The Beatles were more famous than Jesus Christ, a remark which earned him the condemnation of many church groups, particularly in the United States where they are very sensitive about that sort of thing. But John Lennon was right.

The power of belief is not to be underestimated. It inspires men to build magnificent temples and cathedrals – it inspires them to murder to murder others and to volunteer for martyrdom.

Religion can sometimes be a practical way of getting to grips with problems and in this respect, therapy and religion have a lot in common – both encourage introspection and enlightenment. Religion and the existence of God are sociological and anthropological issues and the way in which an individual defines God has a direct bearing upon the

usefulness of God to that individual. However, neither religion or God holds the copyright on decency or morality or values or the altruism that has been such an important part of the human survival strategy – it merely reminds us of them.

Ghandi said that 'faith must be reinforced by reason' and there is a great deal of truth in this superbly rational and logical statement. Interestingly, 29% of atheists sometimes pray. Even the most devout non-believer will call on God's help when faced with a situation of extreme fear and some of us have even been known to call out God's name while having sex! However... those who experience extreme religious feelings should know that their cognitive immune system is inactive.

Organised religion proposes particular occasions for prayer, regardless of whether those occasions are daily or limited to special festivals. It is accepted by some religious authorities that quiet contemplation is also prayer.

We must be careful to discriminate between commercialism and spiritualism – remember, prayer is just another way of asking for something. Away from church, therapy is also a way of asking for something – the difference is that instead of relying on God, therapy teaches us how to achieve goals ourselves. Having a mentor, even if it's God, can also do a lot to help personal encouragement.

Religious belief is still very much part of the human survival strategy, but did our evolution instil in us a sense of the divine, or is our innate sense of wonder at the universe part of what it means to be human? Certainly religious belief is very handy for keeping order in a dog eat dog world, particularly where belief in God, or perhaps God himself, acts as moral policeman.

In short, religion may be one of the dynamics, along with communal farming, child care and storytelling, that help to hold societies together. Worshipping God however does not have to be a collective experience, it can be, and often is, done in isolation, disconnected from more formal, organised prayer. However, the overwhelming majority of people congregate to worship, observing similar rituals and creeds. Once the congregation is in place it's only a matter of using the common system of beliefs and practices as the basis for the secular rules and laws that unite and protect the group and keep it functioning.

An example of this is the Ten Commandments – injunctions against murder, theft, adultery something about your neighbour's ox, are effective social organisers. The natural progression consequential from these religious rules are injunctions to pay taxes and submit to authority. Fulfilment in today's world also includes exhortations to get a job and pay tax.

The downside to all this is that sometimes religions organise themselves not into congregations but into camps – sometimes armed camps. History is littered with wars of religious persecution, Spanish Inquisitions, Crusades, Holocausts and Jihads, some of which are still going on today. This is that has been useful for the survival of certain groups, but it can also be a double edged sword. Fire can keep the village warm but it can also burn the village to the ground, depending on the will of the guy with the matches.

There are more modern-day and disturbing examples of this tribal behaviour. In the United Kingdom, the 2000 census showed that there had been an increase in the number of people describing themselves as Christian, but only in areas where there were large Muslim communities, such as Bradford, Oldham and Birmingham. It is conceivable that this points to the old 'safety in numbers' routine where groups who feel they may be at risk of being outnumbered start to reunite against a perceived common enemy. Certainly in

areas of the world where religious groups are more extreme in the protection of their own particular ideals, we are seeing extreme counter-measures coming into place.

An example of this behaviour is alive and well in the Middle East where the antagonism between Jews and Palestinians (and their supporters) has reverted to Old Testament proportions. Religious conviction intensifies the conflict in Northern Ireland between the Nationalists and the Unionists – Catholics on the one hand support the idea of joining with the Republic and Protestants are keen to retain membership of the United Kingdom, and loyalty to Her Majesty the Queen as head of state. Thus religion has become inextricably linked to the politics of the North.

It might be that belief in God has become more and more deeply ingrained in our genes with every generation, as with any other evolutionary process. It might be that societies with no 'God gene' run the risk of exterminating themselves. If that is the case then it follows that as societies become more technologically advanced, as information flows more and more freely, original thought is allowed to flourish and human beings become more responsible, the need to believe in God could become less and less part of our genes. Alas, the new religion of 'Woke' is the joker in the pack – not to mention the spanner in the works.

Western religions are doctrinal. This means that the 'divine' is interpreted and the religious hierarchy enforces the idea, the rules and the religion.

In any society there will be some people who are more spiritual (although not necessarily religious) than others in the same way that some people appreciate music more than others or have more of an affinity for sport than others. Some hear the music of spirituality clearly enough while others remain spiritually tone-deaf.

One of the problems which arise when one looks for a common thread of profound spirituality is that no two mystic types describe their experiences in exactly the same way. This makes sense when one considers that all brains are different and each brain has a unique take on the world. Is there really any difference between the religious oneness with God or the atheist's more scientific wonder at the immensity and complexity of the universe?

In the United States, molecular biologist Dean Hamer claims to have found one of the genes responsible for belief in God and it just happens to be one of the genes that codes the production of neurotransmitters that regulate mood.

Our most profound feelings of spirituality may be nothing more than a shot of intoxicating brain chemicals, the dosage of which is governed by our DNA. But this is reductionist thinking and will not sit well with theists – it ignores the fact that religious belief is a highly personal and varied, experience.

As with any other kind of human behaviour, psychologists are able to measure these peculiarities and carry out experiments to support their observations. Identical twins carry matching DNA and therefore have lots of things in common. For example, some pairs of identical twins suffer from migraines, the same fear of heights, the same eccentricities and so forth. When tested on religious feelings and spiritual values, they showed a similar overlap. They are twice as likely to display these similarities as siblings who are not twins. However, these similarities did not hold up when they were questioned about their religious practices, for example, the number of times they attended church or the type of prayers they said. This has to be the result of nurture, that is, the stuff of environment, upbringing and culture.

Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine has found that the deeper people descend into prayer or meditation, the more active their frontal lobes and limbic system become. The frontal lobes are the seat of concentration and attention – the limbic system is where powerful feelings (such as religious rapture) are processed.

Even more importantly, at the same time these regions flash into life, activity in another important region, the parietal lobe (located at the back of the brain) diminishes. It is this lobe that orients the individual in time and space. Reduce its influence and the boundaries of the self fall away, creating the feeling of being 'at one with the universe.' Further, combine this with what is happening in the other two lobes and what you get is the religious experience. God becomes an artefact of the brain, and is proof that belief in God resides in the brain.

In 2002, neuroscientist Richard J. Davidson of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and colleagues used fMRI scans to look into the brains of meditating Buddhists from all over the world. During meditation, brain activity is more intense in areas containing the ability to concentrate and focus attention. This groundbreaking research was duplicated and confirmed by Newberg and D'Aquili in 2003 when they carried out similar tests on Franciscan Nuns.

Newberg and D'Aquili discovered another pattern of activity in the brains of five women when they were 'speaking in tongues' that is, babbling nonsense in a language that only they could understand (an old stage hypnotist's trick). Because the frontal lobes are used for self-control, the researchers concluded that the decrease in activity there opened the way for the loss of control necessary for such garrulous outbursts. It is impossible not to see the similarities between this behaviour and that brought about by hypnosis – particularly the stage variety, where getting subjects to speak Martian is one of the old stock-in-trade devices of the seasoned showman.

This is precisely the sort of neurological change that happens during the hypnotic experience. Concentration together with expectation, relaxation and suggestion produces feelings of euphoria, leading to an abdication of control whereby the suggestions given by the hypnotist are followed without question.

When tribes living in remote and isolated areas come up with a concept of God as readily as nations living shoulder to shoulder, that could be a fairly strong indication that the idea is pre-programmed in the genome rather than having been picked up by chance. If that's the case, then there's probably a very good reason for it to be there. As a species capable of contemplating its own ultimate death and decay, belief in a deity with a guaranteed afterlife may serve to make the anticipation of our own demise tolerable. Maybe the passing of these genes from generation to generation is the result of evolution – only societies which are ordered survive to pass on genetic information – and these are the same kind of societies that foster religious belief.

Spiritual contemplation too is intuitive. The paradox is that this ability is also distributed unevenly. Some people are spiritual virtuosos while others can't even play a note.

It is one of the central tenets of religion that grace is available to all... and yet some people just don't get it. This is more bad news for the God squad. Their claim that 'all you have to do is believe' simply will not work on brains which do not, and will never, have the ability to operate on blind faith alone. The same can be said of hypnosis – some people are great hypnotic subjects whilst others are relegated to the status of awkward customer – another argument in favour of nature over nurture?

It could be that we were born with a tendency to believe in things supernatural. It might just be that that's the way our brains have evolved. We are unique in that we can predict, with some degree of accuracy, our own demise, that all the atoms and molecules that make up our bodies will eventually go off and become something else.

There is a price to pay for this knowledge and that is the tempting thought that there might be another life after death. All religions support the notion of afterlife. Britain's most famous atheist Richard Dawkins believes that religion is something that has been passed down from generation to generation and in the true spirit of Darwinism, by this process, religion has also evolved from generation to generation. Thus it is that we are burdened with the very attractive possibility that there might be something beyond the grave. Religion merely formalises that assumption, infecting the more gullible, and children, along the way. This is the view that I also hold. It's just a shame God couldn't be a little more demonstrative.

As an aside, I would strongly recommend watching the documentary film '*Jesus Camp*' to get a proper idea what effect unscrupulous religious types can have on children. The film draws comparisons with the madrassa schools of Pakistan and Afghanistan, but what is happening in America, right now, has to be seen to be believed. It is desperately shocking.

What if religion (any kind of religion) is simply capitalising on an inbuilt need to believe in supernatural things? The brain has a habit of 'filling in the gaps' and if those gaps are caused by things that we cannot readily understand or explain scientifically, it's easy to see how erroneous ideas can fill in the gaps and become lodged in the mind permanently.

As well as filling in gaps, the brain is good at spotting coincidences and sometimes even assigning significance to those coincidences. We see shapes and faces in clouds and images of the Virgin Mary on a slice of toast. We form completely illogical attachments to inanimate objects. No way will a bride swap her wedding ring for one that is identical, no way will a child swap his battered teddy bear for a brand new one, and no way would anyone wish to wear an article of clothing that once belonged to Myra Hindley or Peter Sutcliffe.

Remember... the mind is a blank canvas and once an idea has been accepted by the mind, it remains in there, unchanged and unchallenged. With religious ideas, it's virtually impossible to change, challenge, or even modify these ideas once they become entrenched. There are very religious people whose complete and utter certainty of belief bestows upon them complete calm. I have to admit that I find these people irritating because they always seem so smug.

In China, there are now an estimated eighty million Christians – more Christians than there are members of the Chinese Communist Party! For over seventy years, the Chinese government did its level best to stamp out religion of any description and yet there it is – not just alive and well, but positively thriving, and with the permission of the authorities. No such luck in the case of Islam. I suspect that the Chinese realise that if there has to be a religion, it had better be one that agrees to some state control and that has agreed to align itself with government thinking – not one that might cause trouble for China's future leaders. The Chinese Uighur Muslims have not found it so easy to toe the CCP line and as a result, have been imprisoned, with many held in forced labour camps.

There are similarities here with the Roman Emperor Constantine's decision to convert to Christianity – mainly because he needed the cooperation of the rapidly growing Christian sect to hold an unwieldy and faltering empire together. Constantine understood that the early Christians had a better communications infrastructure than Rome itself! Constantine built churches and in the Roman Catholic Faith, priests still wear the purple sashes that

because of the high cost of the dye, were once reserved for Emperors.

In America, many of the larger mainstream churches have begun to preach an even more strict adherence to the scriptures, while at the same time, attendance at more moderate churches declines. America voted for a proudly born-again Christian President in the persona of George W. Bush, although some White House officials publicly stated that while Dubya was grateful for their votes, he was secretly laughing at them behind their backs.

Which brings me neatly to my next area of interest – the ‘born-again’ Christians.

Being ‘born again’ is exactly the same sort of catharsis that represents a peak experience in all its ritual, hand-clapping and stranger-hugging glory. My own parents had me baptised when I was but a babe-in-arms – without my permission, I have to add, but in their defence I would say that they thought they were doing the right thing. I’m told my entry into the Christian faith was accomplished with a few simple prayers, a hymn or two, and a mere dab of water from the baptismal font on my forehead in the sign of the cross. But that was as nothing compared to what they get up to these days in the Charismatic churches.

The new Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, has installed what can only be described as a baptismal font of Olympic proportions. Archbishop Sentamu is a man who takes his baptisms seriously. Opting for the full body immersion method of John the original baptist, he stands waist deep in the water and after the prayers and the hymn singing, throws the person bodily backwards, fully submerging them in the water, a wholly unnatural experience (unless you are a scuba-diver) and one which is guaranteed to get the heart pumping. The supplicant then stands up, soaking wet and gasping for breath, whereupon – and to the ecstatic applause of the congregation – the newest member of the church can now consider himself one of us – or one of them, if you prefer. The latest recruit has just had a peak experience which he will remember for a very long time to come and his loyalty to the church is now guaranteed forever. When I witnessed this ritualistic drowning, I couldn’t help but wonder if the Archbishop understood the psychology behind it.

There is another thing about the born-again in particular that I have noticed. A disturbingly large number of them seem to be able to lose themselves in the moment, able to achieve total concentration, to become totally rapt in prayer, even when ‘speaking in tongues’. I have seen these symptoms many times before – on the stage and in private practice. It is exactly, and I do mean exactly, the same behaviour that makes for a really good hypnotic subject.

Could this be why religion and religious ideas are so powerful and so easily passed down from one generation to another? Could it be that we believe in this kind of thing because we are so remarkably suggestible...? Yes it could.

When we talk about hypnosis, we should always be very circumspect about what it is we are actually talking about, and that is, suggestion. Hypnosis as a standalone phenomenon doesn’t really exist at all. It’s a very bad word to describe what hypnosis is. Advertisers use suggestion, so do politicians, lawyers and, this may come as a big surprise to some, so do religious leaders. Most of the techniques of suggestion, focus of attention, relaxation and therefore hypnosis, are well known – the repetition and reinforcement of a single idea by a figure of authority in a location specifically dedicated to that very purpose also works the magic.

Only the fear of having to share a flat with Salman Rushdie for the rest of my life dissuades me from taking this argument to its next logical step... which is that if the same things are

repeated over and over again, say, five times a day and in an attitude of submission, they are more likely to be accepted by and established in both the conscious and the unconscious mind. French psychologist Emile Coué discovered that getting his patients to repeat a simple mantra, such as *'Every day, I'm feeling better and better'*, quickly improved the way they felt, both physically and emotionally.

In fairness to Islam, and in the interests of historical accuracy, Europe entered the Dark Ages after the departure of the Romans in the fifth century AD. At about the same time, the Muslim world sustained its tradition of discovery and enlightenment. At a time when Medieval Europe was forced into backwardness by the Christian Church (Galileo was imprisoned for fifteen years for daring to suggest the earth revolved around the sun), Islam continued to encourage scientific enquiry and innovation.

The Koran encourages the understanding of science because science is also part of God's Work. Pre-reformation Christianity on the other hand adopted more of an 'ask no questions just give us your money' approach, the end result of which was a thousand years of stagnation and ignorance. His holiness the Pope once told Professor Stephen Hawking that he should not enquire into the state of the universe before the Big Bang because that was the moment of creation – to inquire further would be to inquire into the mind of God and blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah...

The Moonies and similar cults make full use of all the really powerful hypnotic methods – sleep deprivation, repetition, temporal distortion, peer-pressure, isolation – in one intensive session lasting for three, four or even five days. New initiates are indoctrinated by means of a crash course which commences the moment they arrive at Camp Moon. This is just one of the things that make this specific sect so insidious. It's the nearest thing to actual brainwashing and the appalling results have been widely documented.

Beware of young strangers presenting you with flowers at airports (a favourite Moonie hunting-ground in the United States) and offering something for nothing. Once in, it's almost impossible to get out. These people are skilled in the arts of seduction and represent a very great danger to those who are particularly suggestible! The Moonies are skilled at spotting trusting, often lonely, individuals – quite possibly because they were once trusting and lonely themselves!

I have seen them in action and one of the most disturbing things I noticed about them was that they each displayed all the signs of a permanent opiate fix. My own brief encounter was in Los Angeles in the early 1980's. But fear not, I dealt with the situation with my usual subtle comedic efficacy and thus was successfully able to side-step being sucked in by their charm and was able to hold on to my sanity. And my holiday money.

Compared to the Moonies, the Hare-Krishna's are really quite a nice bunch. Actually, compared to the Moonies, the Gestapo were not such a bad bunch either. But membership of the Hare-Krishna's is optional and members are free to do as they like and when the novelty of shaving their heads (apart from a bit at the back) wears off they are free to leave whenever they choose and become secondary-school science teachers. They are pleasant, peaceful and fastidiously polite people, if a little off-beat. The only reason I mention them here is because of their love of chanting, which brings us back to Emile Coué...

As with most formal religious practices and rituals, including hypnosis, it makes no difference whether the suggestions emanate from the priest, the therapist or the entertainer because precisely the same processes are taking place. Once you understand the nature of suggestion, any ideas of the supernatural or the occult simply evaporate. So

why then, do some very religious people get so hot under the collar about hypnosis and reach for their Bibles at the mere mention of the word?

To be fair, even the most zealously religious accept that hypnosis used for medical purposes is probably acceptable and therefore nothing to get too excited about. It's only when confronted with the persona of the stage hypnotist that the praying, hymn singing and accusations of sin really start in earnest.

To be totally fair, stage hypnotists have brought much of this opprobrium on their own heads. The traditional image of the hypnotist – particularly the image presented in the early Hollywood movies of the 1930's and 40's was originally derived from the neatly top-hat-and-tailed world of magic and illusion, which in its turn was steeped in the traditions of the Victorian music hall.

By default, complete with black cloak and goatee, the stage hypnotists inherited the same fashion sense as the diabolical Svengali who, it was said, could exert supernatural and mysterious power and influence and enforce his will upon unsuspecting damsels in distress. Part of the problem is that Svengali never existed in the first place – he was an invention of novelist George du Maurier in his scandalous book *Trilby*, published in 1894, but the image became fixed in the public imagination.

With a combination of laziness and a collective lack of imagination or originality, the modern day mesmerists have remained stuck in this gloomy mould because they have found it easier to reproduce the exact same image from generation to generation – beautifully parodied on the TV show *Little Britain* – without making any attempt to progress in the same way the magicians have. They seem strangely unwilling to part with their smoke machines, decorative facial hair and sequined waist-coats.

Stage hypnosis is a singularly western cultural phenomenon and hypnotic techniques have been used by mainstream religion for nigh on two thousand years and some christian churches don't like the competition.

In the eighteenth century there was a famous priest called Father Gassner – famous for the many successful exorcisms he carried out, casting out devils of sickness and infirmity. His most successful exorcisms seem to be connected to illnesses that were at least in part, psychosomatic. The possessed were brought to the church and during the lengthy and ritualistic preparations, they would start to succumb to many indirect suggestions – the atmosphere of the church itself, the presence of other priests and Father Gassner's own formidable reputation being paramount among them. Most important among these suggestions were those concerning the Gassner's potent powers.

Gassner's great success also had the very welcome side-effect of giving a great deal of good publicity to the church itself and exorcisms were routinely attended by high church officials and occasionally visiting medical doctors. One of these doctors just happened to be Franz Mesmer who was struck by the theatricality of the proceedings and considered them to be an obviously well rehearsed ritual. When Father Gassner entered the church and laid the brass cross upon the head of the afflicted, they would collapse, then on command rise to their feet, praise God and announce they were cured. Alleluia! Praise the Lord! Mesmer realised at once that the spectacle had nothing to do with religion but thought that it might be something to do with the metal in the cross. Mesmer started experimenting with magnets and soon after, became more famous than Father Gassner, and was run out of town by a Royal Commission, thus securing his own place in history.

The laying on of hands is a biblical phrase and crops up in exorcisms, evangelical healings,

tribal witch doctor practices and... stage hypnosis. Again the expectation of effect is all part and parcel of the overriding principle of suggestion.

So is there a difference between suggestion and what is perceived by some as the power of the Holy Spirit? In reality, it's all down to perception and belief because the often euphoric feelings which accompany such religious experiences are the same as those experienced as a result of hypnotic suggestion. The only difference is that the attention is focussed on a different subject matter. Interesting to note that the born-again also dislike anything to do with tarot cards, fortune tellers, tea-leaf reading and more recently, Harry Potter – in fact they dislike anything beyond their own narrow understanding or that threatens their own beliefs.

Generally speaking, good behaviour merits reward and this is especially true when dealing with children. The fact that we are all God's children is a philosophy that forms the basis of every organised religion. The better we behave here on earth the better our chances of being rewarded in Heaven. By any stretch of the imagination, this is a potent bribe.

With hierarchy and authority, comes the need for control – the control of one's fellows and of society in general. Without economic or political control, society would almost certainly descend into chaos. Democracy is fine at the local level or when dealing with relatively small groups, but to keep the masses in order, a firmer hand is required if government is to function effectively. More than that, it is an absolute must when it comes to the maintenance of social stability. Human beings need to be herded properly or societies will become chaotic, and religion has always assisted in the process.

Before the dissolution of the monasteries, when priests and monks were relieved of their stranglehold on almost every facet of everyday life, the Church relied heavily on the old tried and tested smoke-screen of symbolism and imagery – the medium being infinitely more effective than the message. The mystique and ceremony of the Catholic Church bamboozled the general populace who were ignorant of the precise meaning of the ancient Latin liturgy. Catholicism is the most supremely hierarchical religious organisation in existence today. The chain of command of priests, bishops, archbishops, cardinals and popes makes it the largest pyramid selling organisation on the planet. Remember they are only selling you an idea, and ideas carry no manufacturing costs, raw materials or factories. And most of the salespeople work for nothing!

Religion invented the Tupperware party. One guy gets twelve guys, who in turn get twelve other guys, who in turn get twelve other guys... before long, the base of the pyramid starts to get bigger and bigger, all the time growing at an exponential rate up to the point where entire populations become involved. Unlike Tupperware however, there is no need for any initial investment as nothing is actually produced in the way of goods, just the basic philosophy....

And the idea is basically this... two thousand years ago, an ex carpenter, whose own family thought he was an oddball, decided to go into the magic business under the name 'Jesus of Nazareth'. He surrounded himself with a group of magicians' assistants and super-fans and with the aid of a few cheap conjuring tricks went on the Palestinian variety circuit until he got too big for his sandals and was nailed to a tree for claiming he was the son of God. Decades after his death, four scribes called Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, none of whom were alive when Jesus was touring, or had met the guy or even been to one of his gigs, wrote biographies based on second, third and fourth hand accounts about the man who told interesting stories, performed great magic and got nailed to a tree for claiming he was the son of God. Each account was slightly different and often contradictory, but the books became best-sellers anyway and resulted in centuries of

unquestioning worship of a man now world famous for telling moralistic stories in the manner of an early day Aesop and being nailed to a tree for saying he was the son of God. Belief that this man really was the son of God will buy you life after death and eternal happiness and salvation. Jesus and his followers inadvertently and quite accidentally started a world religion.

A good way to annoy Jesus' modern day followers is to remind them that Jesus was in fact a hypnotist. Yes, that's right – a hypnotist, and the proof can be found in the last place you would expect to find it... the Bible.

If the reports of the miracles of Jesus in the New Testament are even remotely accurate, it is possible to see a very clear pattern emerging. In Matthew 8:1-3 Jesus cures a man of leprosy. Not all dermatological problems are actually leprosy – it is a well known fact that all sorts of rashes, hives, blisters, eczema, warts and other lesions respond extremely well to hypnotic intervention and suggestion. In the 1940's there was a celebrated case known as 'the rhino boy' where a young man with severe and disfiguring eczema was cured by hypnosis alone in a matter of a very few weeks – in fact the improvement was noticeable the day after the first session.

In Matthew 8:5-11, Jesus cures the servant of a Centurion '*sick of the palsy and grievously tormented*'. Jesus' choice of words is interesting... '*Go thy way; and as thou hast believed so be it done unto thee*'. Jesus is unashamedly using faith in the treatment and this is a common theme in Matthew's reporting of the miracles. And again, in Matthew 8:14-15, Jesus cures Peter's mother-in-law by direct suggestion... '*and he cast out the spirits with His word.*'

Could it be that Jesus realised and fully appreciated the enormous power of words well chosen and the underlying psychological mechanism lurking behind them? The point seems to be made very clear by Jesus himself and must surely be apparent to any Biblical scholar.

In Matthew 9:28-29, two blind men came to Jesus who asked them '*Believe ye that I am able to do this? They said unto him, Yea Lord. Then touched He their eyes... and their eyes were opened.*' Hysterical blindness is a well known psychological condition and in many cases, easily cured using hypnosis or just plain old suggestion.

Jesus has this habit of checking whether his patient believes in his powers first – a sensible move for any hypnotist. But as with any hypnotist, those that don't believe simply aren't going to phone for an appointment in the first place and I have no reason to believe that it was any different in Jesus' day. Yes, Jesus needed the cooperation of his clients before attempting cures at random. Interestingly enough, when Jesus returned to his own home town of Nazareth, the people rejected him – and his powers. Amateur hypnotists know not to try to hypnotise close friends or relatives – it's not so much because you know them, it's more because they know you!

In Matthew 17:14-20 there are other examples of mental illnesses being cured but strangely no examples of severed limbs growing back. It's safe to assume that Jesus' failures were not so highly publicised.

Even the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead is held in suspicion by many Biblical scholars. Digitalis purpurea, or foxglove, is a poisonous flowering plant. Small doses of it can cause the recipient to fall into a deep sleep that can sometimes resemble death, while too much of it can kill you. It was the poison of choice in ancient Rome and Jesus would have known about it. In Jesus' time, bringing people back from the dead was a popular

trick!

Most disturbing of all is the notion that Christ died on the cross for our sins. This bestows on us all the ultimate guild trip... but thank you anyway for providing a truly brilliant eye-fixation point – a cross.

The promise of life after death is a tempting inducement. It has the power not only to temporarily suspend rational or critical thought, but it ensures lesser mortals toe the line. There may indeed be life after death – no one really knows for sure, but it's not going to be available just because an individual follows a certain set of rituals or certain guru.

There have been plenty of instances and examples where other mortals have tried to pull the same stunt, but nobody has ever achieved the same success on the same scale – probably something to do with being the first to corner the market. In living memory, the 'reverend' Sun Myung Moon immediately springs to mind. The smartest people have realised that in a world where the market in religion has already been cornered, the best way to make the real money is to start your own franchise of the same well established religion... enter the TV evangelists.

Whatever the angle, all these bandwagon jumpers have been shrewd enough to follow tried and tested formulas, even using the same or very similar patten. They claim that they have been chosen by God, to do 'His work.' Questioning this will find yourself in serious trouble – even ostracised for the rest of the group and labelled a troublemaker. Trying to muscle in on the act might even cause you to come to physical harm – such is the competitiveness of the God industry in America.

The more exotic claims of any religion, be it Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Jedi Knight, have no more basis in fact and offer no more empirical proof than astrology or horoscopes, most of which are almost certainly made up the night before they appear in the next day's newspaper. Millions of people tune in to this twaddle which makes it a perfect example of the power of suggestion on a grand scale.

The fact is, more than a billion people believe in this insanity. Anyone who seriously believes that if you live a good life, you will go to heaven, or live a bad life and you will go to hell where you will be tormented for all eternity, is disturbed. And yet these same people never fail to express amusement, or occasional abject disgust, even horror, when they are reminded of the quaint beliefs of other societies with their sacred cows, monkey gods, spirits and ancestor worship.

Each religion claims to be the one true faith, the only approved and credible purveyor of God's word. God is always on the winning side, except for the odd occasion when God behaves illogically and chooses to exercise 'his will' and not be.

This does not mean there is no place for God or even gods. But God may not be quite as altruistic as some would have us believe. If God is all seeing, all knowing and all powerful, then surely God feels the anguish of all the suffering in the world and yet for some reason seems to be too busy with other things to do anything about it.

There are many sensible, obvious and logical reasons for this view, but if God created man in his own image, man has recreated God in *his* own image, and that's the problem we're stuck with. God must be fuming. No wonder he sends the odd earthquake to smite us on occasions when he's frustrated to the point of Supreme Anger.

When we consider organised religion, would it not be far better to have a universal faith with rules and guidelines which apply to all and protect all, than a mish-mash of confused

and mainly nonsensical ideologies?

A white middle-class English couple in London paid for a spiritual healer to clear their house of any bad Ju-Ju before moving in. Doubtless they also employed a Feng Shui (moving furniture around) expert. Perhaps they had already considered an exorcism just in case but had probably decided against it on the grounds that it was far too mainstream. This sort of thing is becoming all too common and is symptomatic of a society which has either lost its sense of direction or has too much disposable income.

The problems really start when religion moves from being quaintly illogical to downright ridiculous, something which leads to bigotry and worse, persecution which then leads to mindless pogroms, crusades and wars in God's name. Out of control, religion promotes racism and sets foundations for movements like the Ku Klux Klan.

Unscientific ideas are perpetuated by society's blind acceptance of untestable beliefs and pre-conceived culturally generated ideas. Magicians know this very well, which is why their illusions work so spectacularly well – and so do hypnotists – especially stage hypnotists, a handful of whom are extremely skilled at pulling the wool over large numbers of people's eyes on a nightly basis. They are even better at it than the spoon benders who only know how to do the one trick but nonetheless still make a living out of it.

Stage hypnotists can accomplish all the same illusions – the only difference is that they are transparently honest and obsessively truthful about what hypnosis actually is and this is precisely why some religious types don't like them. This disapproval goes much further than plain old fashioned superstition or fear of the unknown, and it's more than just a misunderstanding of a concept that is difficult for most people to grasp... for the uninitiated, there is bound to be the uncertainty that accompanies something which appears inexplicable or magical. Neither is it the confusion of pure verbal suggestion and the forces of evil.

The damnation of hypnotism and hypnotists, especially the stage variety, is based on the fear that once made public, the knowledge of what is actually happening will upset the apple cart once and for all and the game will be well and truly up. The gravy train will grind to a halt and along with it, the tenuous hold on power. The God-botherers will not only be out of a job, but exposed as the power crazed con artists most of them really are. Thomas Jefferson said '*The priests of the different religious sects... dread the advance of science as witches do the approach of daylight, and scowl on the fatal harbinger announcing the subdivision of the duperies on which they thrive.*' And how right he was!

The quote particularly applies to charismatic 'healers' like Benny Hinn. Like many other [mainly American] TV evangelists, Benny Hinn's brand of faith healing is something that is found almost exclusively in the American brand of Christian worship. It's big business and it's highly competitive... and it's success depends entirely on the techniques used by stage hypnotists.

Benny Hinn is the market leader and makes around one hundred and twenty million US dollars a year. No wonder he, and the rest of his ilk, don't want you to know how it's really done! They unashamedly exploit the sick, the needy, the vulnerable and the desperate. The psychological build up, the expectancy, starts from the moment the willing spectators book their tickets.

As with the stage hypnosis show, the evening follows a tried and tested pattern with emotional highs and lows, the liberal use of appropriate music and the peak experiences of the people lucky enough to end up on the stage... all in the name of Jesus. These public

exhibitions of mass hysteria are called 'ministries' or 'crusades' – a very powerful use of language.

Shakespeare knew this trick very well. In *Macbeth*, we are introduced at the beginning of the play to three witches who prophesy a King's murder and Macbeth's own inevitable demise. From that point on, the tension builds until Shakespeare breaks the spell by introducing the character of a drunken porter who tells bawdy jokes about the perils of drink and its effect on sexual performance. Then Shakespeare builds the drama to its shocking climax. There can be no doubt that Elizabethan audiences would have found this shocking and riveting. But Shakespeare was a master dramatist. He knew that the employment of highs and lows would not only capture the attention of his audience but would drive home the message of the dangers of evil ambition more than any pulpit sermon. It's a tried and tested technique and stage hypnotists who know and understand their business know it well.

The stage hypnosis show – just like the charismatic healing shows, relentlessly copied but never refined beyond the certainty of 'what works' – follow the same formula of highs and lows. First there is the expectation of the audience and then the jokes, then the 'miracles' and then the climaxes. It's like sex really. Or gambling.

Where the 'miraculous' healing of the sick is concerned, the phenomenon is distinctly the patent of charismatic Christian preachers who use hypnosis as a matter of course even though they won't admit it. To give benefit of the doubt – like many stage hypnotists – some of them may not be fully aware of exactly what it is they are doing even if they may have a sneaking suspicion, but most certainly are and are shamelessly cashing in big time.

In my view, it is impossible for experienced practitioners to do this sort of thing on a regular basis without the realisation that there is something else, something psychological going on. If they stopped to ask themselves the question 'why some and not others?' that might lead them to more scientific enquiry.

The charismatic healers use the same suggestibility tests, convincers and deepeners that stage hypnotists know and love so well. Even the 'laying on of hands' or hypnotic inductions, are the same. Getting people to fall backwards using the power of suggestion is an old hypnotist's trick, and these men of God use it all the time. As someone who has had some considerable personal experience in this field, I would hasten to add that there is virtually no difference between the two except to say that the American style evangelists are generally speaking, better showmen! The only real difference is that with the stage hypnotists, the public have to pay to get in, whereas with the likes of Benny Hinn, they pay to get out!

It would also be fair to say that although stage hypnotists are well known for getting people to run round like a chicken, Benny Hinn just has to get them to run round. Stage Hypnotists freely admit that the phenomena they present in the name of entertainment is purely suggestion, even though any further explanation to their audiences is curtailed in order to preserve at least some of the mystique. Charismatic preachers like Benny Hinn resort to age old hocus-pocus and lay the blame for sickness and infirmity on demons of sickness and infirmity. In his services, Benny Hinn casts out demons with a theatrical relish that would be the envy of any B-movie hypnotist. Hammer House of Horror couldn't do it any better!

Ordinarily speaking, anyone who publicly said that they could see 'a demon, half man, half beast, walking out through the door' could expect an appointment with a psychiatrist – but not Benny Hinn. Tens of thousands of normally rational people, living in the supposedly

advanced United States of America, go for this clap-trap every week yet at the same time harbour a patronising attitude toward other cultures that also have demons and spirits as part of their belief systems. It is only because their critical faculties have been temporarily suspended by the hypnotic techniques Hinn uses to great effect that the demons so feared in the middle-ages are allowed to make a brief come-back.

As with the stage hypnosis show, in the highly charged atmosphere of a charismatic 'healing', human beings behave in a manner that is predictable and preachers like Benny Hinn are nothing more than skilled showmen who have mastered a set of simple psychological and theatrical tricks. Both are ordinary human beings influencing other human beings, modifying behaviour in exchange for cash. Using every trick in the stage hypnotist's handbook, they carefully select only the most suggestible from the crowd to come up onto the stage. These participant's reactions to Hinn's suggestions serve to confirm the expectations of the rest of the crowd, creating a situation where everyone becomes more suggestible.

The music rises and falls and shifts up a semitone, helping to generate heightened emotional states which release opiates that increase suggestibility and therefore hypnotisability. Benny Hinn coordinates these experiences like the conductor of an orchestra and he works his audience hard. In keeping with the best traditions of show business, his arrival on the stage is carefully timed to happen as the final verse of the pentecostal hymn *How Great Thou Art*, in a superb arrangement for choir and orchestra, reaches its inspired and thrilling climax.

As he walks to centre of the stage, Benny exudes supreme confidence, tempered with just the right degree of humility so as not to upstage God. At every performance, scores of technicians, riggers, sound and lighting engineers, musicians and singers aid the illusion. As if all that isn't enough, Benny (God bless him) uses another old trick – the bogey-man, in this case, the Devil, Satan, the Forces of Darkness... and the crowd laps it up faster than he can spoon-feed it to them.

Although Palestinian by birth Benny Hinn is the epitome of the all-American success story – arriving in the United States at the age of six, a refugee from the Arab/Israeli Six Day War, he has seized opportunity in the land where the seizing of opportunity is the one true religion. And he plays the part perfectly. Wearing a collection of expensive white suits (the good cowboys always wear white) he confirms and reconfirms all the beliefs that America holds dear.

Benny Hinn is the ultimate middle-man, and his share of the profits has provided a lifestyle his congregation marvel at – and respect. In one of his recent broadcasts he quite openly and transparently appealed for 6,000 people to send in a mere \$1,000 each as a matter of urgency.

What would they get for their six million? Everlasting life? Eternal bliss? A seat at the right hand of God? Er... no; what they would get for their money was... a brand new private jet for Benny's personal use. Within the first ten minutes of this scam, there had been 52 calls! God bless America! *

* Actually that is not strictly accurate. Only fifty-one calls were from people pledging their thousand dollars, the other one was from yours truly asking the telephonist to pass on a personal message to Pastor Benny from asking if I donated, would I get \$1,000 worth of flying time on the jet, and I have to say, the person on the other end of the line was not as helpful as I imagined she might be.

The Benny Hinn Show goes all over the world – he comes to the UK at least once a year and you can't get a seat! He came to sunny Manchester and filled the 30,000 seat Manchester Evening News Arena three nights on the trot! Even cynical old me realised I'm in the wrong business!



Above: Benny Hinn's preferred mode of transport.

Once one stage, Pastor Benny uses the oldest of old stage hypnosis tricks, asking the entire audience to look at him 'eye to eye please... you must let every guard down... become completely open...' and when Benny Hinn performs hypnosis, he rarely meets the resistance that stage hypnotists encounter because what is on offer is the opportunity to be 'filled with the rapture of the Holy Spirit', an invitation which is so seductive, they can't wait to throw themselves on the ground, aided by the mass hysteria he has so skilfully created. I have come to the conclusion that for a lot of people, it's a substitute for sex. On a good night, large numbers of ordinarily sane individuals will writhe, fit and perform just as expected. And then they hand over their money.

When large numbers of people come together like this, performing actions together, in lock-step, they get caught up in the heat of the moment – and it is at this point that they can be persuaded to behave in ways that they would not contemplate under normal circumstances – some even leap out of their wheelchairs!

At this stage, even Pastor Benny admits he is only the catalyst for such conduct. The mild glow, the wide eyes, the tears of joy are a direct result of chemical and electrical reactions taking place deep within the brain. The crowd is literally intoxicated as this dopamine induced state of euphoria produces naturally occurring painkillers that make it possible, for the duration of the performance at least, for those in pain to leap and run about the stage in paroxysms of ecstasy as the suggestions delivered by the preacher take on a personal meaning and significance. The willingness of the recipient to blindly accept the suggestions transforms even the most banal utterances into perceived wisdom – there are things you can say to a thousand people that would be impossible to say to ten people, and that's another thing the Nazis understood.

But the 'cure' is only temporary. Within a few hours, the brain chemicals will rebalance and the aches and pains will return, by which time Benny Hinn and his huge entourage is already on the way to the next town, pausing only to count the money. For the people left behind, especially those who have been so deeply hypnotised into believing that their cancers have been cured, that they often refuse the treatment and life-saving drugs their doctors and specialists say are necessary. This blind belief is typical of hypnosis. Suggestion cannot restore an amputated limb or cure a brain tumour, despite Pastor Benny's claims to the contrary.

Leading theologians condemn these practices because they prey on the desperate and give false hope to those who have no other way of escape from lives filled with pain and suffering and yet this kind of hypnosis is happening daily all over the United States. By default, this creates a vicious circle where the mind becomes trapped in a cycle of control and dominance where people are constantly being hypnotised and re-hypnotised every time they go to one of these events!

How on earth do they get away with it? Surely there must be someone in the vast heartland of the United States that could, or should, say something. Surely they can't all have been taken in? The answer to this question has nothing to do with religion and everything to do with politics.

In America, the influence of the fundamentalist Christian Right is not only felt in the small towns of the mid-west and the Bible belt, its influence is most strongly felt – and feared – at the ballot box. Any candidate standing for election knows full well the hold preachers have over a significant majority of the population, and to criticise them is akin to criticising God Himself. Any Representative, Senator or Presidential hopeful is simply not willing to take the risk of losing tens of thousands, or even millions, of votes by telling people that everything they believe in is a sham. In fact, the majority of politicians actively court the Christian Right simply because their voice *is* so powerful and their votes so numerous.

Individuals are already conditioned before they turn up on Sunday morning for worship and such is their virulent opposition to anything supernatural (other than their own mainstream beliefs) that even the TV show Buffy the Vampire Slayer is a target for their dread.

As a stage hypnotist, I rate Benny Hinn as one of the finest in the business. I congratulate him on his showmanship, on his presentation, his stage presence, his hypnotic ability and on his ruthless business acumen. Benny Hinn's services follow exactly the same pattern on every occasion and the results are what any stage hypnotist would instantly recognise. But Pastor Benny's 'cures' and 'miracles' are brought about not by the power of the Holy Spirit, but by the power of suggestion – and the power of belief we all have within ourselves.

An obvious question would be that if God really is all seeing, all knowing and all powerful, then He must know about the suffering of those with terminal pain that love and worship him... so why then does He need Benny Hinn to do his work for him? And why does He reward Mr. Hinn so lavishly?

There is one major difference between the healers and the hypnotists. Whereas Benny Hinn's 'miracles' are short lived, the hypnotherapist can teach clients the relaxation and visualisation techniques that will help ease pain on a more permanent basis.

It is no accident that Benny Hinn and the rest of the hypnotists are the same people who are the most virulent opponents of stage hypnotism. This opposition is disseminated through the ranks whenever the opportunity arises. Hypnosis – or 'the devil's work' as it is sometimes known – has garnered a fearful reputation amongst the religiously brainwashed. There are people who have been so utterly convinced that hypnosis really is a form of demonic mind control that their own minds are not able to function enough to see the truth that is staring them in the face. Surely it is this economy of truth and the determination to keep people in the dark and handing over money that is the real devil's work?

There is nothing in the Bible that specifically mentions hypnosis, although there is a rather vague hint in Deuteronomy 18:10-12, where there is a mention of '*binding one with a spell*', which is what Pastor Benny and his like are doing anyway.

After a brief on-line discussion with the person who pointed this out to me, I received the reply '*As Jehovah's Witnesses, we are willing to come to your home to have Bible discussions with interested persons at no cost*'. No thanks, I'll be too busy worshipping the false god Bacchus and watching the Last Night of the Proms.

There is another admonition from the Seventh Day Adventists who believe that no one should exercise their will to control the senses of others, but this assertion is based solely on Jesus' words from Matthew 11:28 – '*Come unto me all ye that labour*'. It's difficult to see the connection but that is exactly what was quoted to me.

In hypnosis, participants are free to reject suggestions that don't suit them or that they don't agree with.

I think it's worth pointing out that Jehovah's Witnesses are also unalterably and implacably opposed to any type of blood transfusion on the grounds that there is a passage in the Bible which forbids it. There isn't.

The cult of the Christian Scientists is a much more interesting study. This offshoot of mainstream Christianity is virulently opposed to hypnosis in any form – even hypnosis for medical purposes only.

And the reason for this rabid hostility? Stand by to be amazed. The Church's founder, Mary Baker Eddy suffered from hallucinations, a condition now thought to be associated with temporal lobe epilepsy. In the less enlightened 1860's people believed her when she told them that it was the voice of God she had heard in a series of 'visitations.' In the more enlightened twenty-first century, she would probably be laughed off the stage and sent to the nearest psychiatrist.

Travelling through the United States at the time was a stage hypnotist called Phineas Quimby. Quimby was willing to give lessons in hypnosis to anyone who was interested for a staggering \$100 a time, a fortune in those days, and one of his students was... Mary Baker Eddy! Quimby had previously made an attempt to start his own religion but his efforts were about to be eclipsed by those of his new protégé.

From that point on however, the more spectacular techniques of stage hypnosis were used extensively by the Christian Science Church. By utilising tried and tested methods of concentration, followers were '*miraculously able to bring about changes in mental and physical health*.' To start her own religion, Mary had first to renounce hypnosis – the very thing that had inspired her in the first place and she decided to present it as a divine religious experience rather than a simple psychological technique.

To be completely fair, people in whose lives the church plays a significant part are generally happier than their non church-going counterparts. Those who pray on a regular basis and trust in God are in the main, more able to withstand the stresses and strains of everyday life. People who are able to enter into fervent and sincere prayer seem to have found a firm mental rudder with which to steer through the trials and tribulations of life. These people also have the support of a strong and caring community.

Nonetheless, the simple act of closing one's eyes, relaxing, focussing one's attention and praying and talking to God, is a form of self-hypnosis. No religion in the world teaches its followers to pray with clenched fists or trying to balance on tip-toes. The preferred attitude of prayer is one of relaxation, or hands-up supplication in the case of the happy-clappies. Those that pray all agree that when they open their eyes they break the connection with

God. This is what happens when people decide to open their eyes during hypnosis – the spell is broken. The sense of sight is the most powerful of our senses – most of the information we get about the world is through our eyes, which is why cutting off that sense makes it easier to think and concentrate.

It is during these intense moments of concentration that the emotional learning experience is at its most effective. If the experience is given positive motivation and direction, a beneficial transformation is the happy result. Even in prayer, or self- hypnosis, it is possible for very powerful and positive suggestions to take root, even if these suggestions are based on what the person doing the praying wishes for themselves.

Emotion concentrates the mind. Even if a person has cognitive understanding of their own particular problem, it is at the emotional level that the introduction of positive suggestions can most effectively influence and modify negative ideas.

People who find it easy to experience and express deep emotions more frequently succumb to bouts of emotional or mental illness. They also happen to be more suggestible. Those with a more cynical and realistic [and in my view more healthy] outlook on life find it difficult to stir their emotions or even express them.

The stoic personality, because of its inflexibility, does not make a good subject, even though stoics and cynics can be very imaginative. These latter types tend not to suffer from emotional problems and so you very rarely see them in the therapy room.

When accessing the Holy Spirit we often see emotional experiences or emotional awakenings. Go along to any modern day charismatic Christian Church and you will routinely see the cringe-worthy spectacle of people speaking in tongues – a direct result of the hysteria which affects groups of people when they are subject to such an emotional experience. Of course they're not really speaking in tongues, they just think they're speaking in tongues – any linguistic analysis will reveal that their bizarre rantings are nothing more than gibberish. I remember in my student days suddenly and unexpectedly being able to speak fluent Swahili having had too much to drink, hunched over the toilet, vomiting, and saying 'Oh God' quite a lot.

In all formalised religions, the young are taught how to pray from the earliest possible age. Knowing how to pray properly is the key to the acceptance of religion. As with successful hypnosis, prayer contains a seriousness of intent and purpose which is the direct cause of the acceptance of barmy ideas. Many religious people assert that prayer changes things, and indeed it does, for exactly these reasons. All you have to do, is believe... However, as we have seen, God seems to reserve the right to answer prayer with a resounding 'No'.

There are no countries that actually ban hypnotism outright, either on stage or in therapeutic practice, although there are some countries that regulate its practice. Chief among them is the United Kingdom where public performances of hypnotism for the purposes of entertainment are regulated by the 1952 Hypnotism Act. Stage hypnosis is also regulated in Australia by the Psychological Practices Act, although most Aussie performers simply ignore this inconvenient rule and carry on doing shows regardless – one or two have taken to calling themselves 'psychological illusionists' or 'mind magicians' in a brilliantly successful attempt to avoid any unnecessary unpleasantness with local bureaucrats.

In Sweden, stage hypnosis can be carried out with the permission of the Social Authority and in Norway, stage hypnosis is absolutely forbidden. Other than that, hypnotists have pretty much a free reign worldwide.

I have never come across any objections from any mainstream religious groups. I have done enough free shows for Jewish, Muslim and Christian charities over the years in Britain and South Africa to know that there are no objections on religious grounds from these groups. Likewise, as someone who had a reasonably strict Catholic education, I know that there is no objection from the Vatican. Not even the Scientologists are bothered about hypnosis. Mention hypnotism to a Scientologist and their first response is more likely to be a request for help to stop smoking.

This fear and loathing of hypnotists and the attendant mind numbing paranoia that goes with it, is only found in certain sections of the Jesus-worshipping community, and then, only in certain parts of the world. It is only in the cultish subdivisions of mainstream Christianity that one encounters any hostility and apart from the born-again task force, this appears to be limited to a few Jehovah's Witnesses, the odd Seventh Day Adventist, Christian Scientists and another sect calling themselves the Christadelphians. There may be more, but I haven't come across them yet but might in the future.

All these anti-hypnosis groups have the same things in common. They are all run by lay people rather than full time priests or religious scholars and are principally found in small towns or rural areas which are safely situated away from the influence of the more sophisticated and up-to-date philosophies that thrive in big cities.

Their followers are conservative, often right wing and usually a good deal more concerned with the fight between good and evil than followers of the more mainstream religions than is healthy. They are more likely to view things in terms of black and white and less willing to compromise than their urban fellows. Preachers generally have day jobs, are staunchly middle class, and more often than not are elected to their positions in the same way town councillors are. It is this background that provides us with the first clues.

Once in office, they very quickly become pissed with power, to coin a phrase, and rapidly develop a ridiculously high opinion of their own morality and importance, something which they soon become desperate to impress upon their fellow parishioners. They become addicted to this exalted saintliness and never hesitate to resort to the tried and tested technique of rule by fear, eventually becoming skilled manipulators of, and spokesmen for, everyone else's conscience.

President George W. Bush and his poodle Tony Blair are both fundamentalist Christians and know this trick well. They both claimed that they consulted God before committing troops to Iraq. Coincidentally, Adolf Hitler claimed that he too was the instrument of God's Will in his hysterically funny book *Mein Kampf*. Whether or not Bush and Blair really did receive God's sanction is, I think a matter for God, but I wouldn't like to be in their shoes if they made it up if and when they eventually meet Him.

All tinpot religionistas exercise control over a very small empire of maybe a few hundred or so simple folk within a relatively small locality and never hesitate to rise to the challenge of impressing their worthiness and authority on more than just issues of local and trivial importance. What better bogeyman than the evil stage hypnotist to provide an excuse to vent a little spleen and keep the rest of flock in check?

The arrival of a stage hypnotist in town gives them a perfect opportunity for some serious spleen venting, virtue signalling and absurdly fatuous pronouncements. God forbid any member of their congregation should attend a show and suddenly become curious about the incredible similarity between what is done on stage in the name of comedy and what occurs every Sunday morning in the name of the Lord, or when they tune in to the Christian TV channel to watch this week's episode of the Benny Hinn's 'Power Hour'. Even

Cletus the slack-jawed yokel might have his suspicions aroused. Best make sure they stay away or the cat will be well and truly out of the bag!

The second clue is in the geographical demographic. The anti-hypnosis brigade has their main support in the isolated heartlands of culturally underdeveloped countries – countries like the United States of America. Forget the real underdeveloped parts of the third world for a moment, the countless villages of India and Vietnam have never even heard of hypnotism let alone developed a view on it, although doubtless they will have experienced it! We are talking about nations that have at least the pretence of sophistication and modernity. In reality, the greater population of Middle America displays many of the symptoms of being culturally backward – a place where individual thought is an unfamiliar skill.

With sophistication comes the ability to see the bigger picture – and make rational decisions based on as much information as possible. And this is what the God-bothersers fear so much. Greater knowledge brings with it the rationality and logic of cynicism. Cynicism is part of intelligent and coherent debate based on the ability to not only answer the questions, but question the answers. Do away with blind unquestioning, ignorance, and cynicism becomes second nature. It is entirely healthy for human beings to question, even to challenge traditional mind-set, to suspect authority and inevitably to distrust the hierarchy behind it.

This does not mean advocating anarchy. Ignorance breeds superstition – enlightenment brings a natural and *truly* God-given ability to decide for oneself. This is one of the fundamental principles of secular government. The French fought for it in their Revolution – an event that did not just free the people from oppressive government based on wealth, rank and privilege, but it also broke the stranglehold of the church on all public affairs. The Americans have the principle enshrined in their Bill of Rights, when they choose to remember it, and the European nations cling to the idea with a zeal earned at enormous cost by people informed by the experience of two world wars.

So, can the principles of hypnosis or suggestion ever live side by side with the principles of religious belief when there is obviously such an overlap in their practice? It is my opinion that they can, and for lots of reasons.

The most obvious is that they already do anyway, at least most of the time. Understanding the power of suggestion means understanding hypnosis and this should not affect religious belief – a matter of personal choice. Hypnosis is a simple psychological technique that has its own value. Only an imbecile or a control freak would try to persuade someone that their mind will be taken over by the Devil, Satan or the dark side of the force. In any event, advertising is far more influential than hypnotism could ever be. I don't hear anyone cursing Saatchi & Saatchi, although maybe they should. Perhaps the power of suggestion should be taught in schools alongside religious education.

Both the practice of hypnosis and the practice of religion involve a certain degree of ritual. The ritual of the hypnotic induction, particularly in the stage setting, is as important a part of the process as is the ritual of worship. This may go some way to explaining the success of Neuro-Linguistic Programming in America. NLP uses hypnosis without actually using the word 'hypnosis'. NLP practitioners thrive in places where hypnotists would once have been burned at the stake. NLP is devoid of all the old connotations of mind control and the associated baggage of witchcraft, voodoo, Darth Vader and all the rituals that are an unfortunate hangover from the days of Mesmer and animal magnetism, although Richard Bandler has been raised to the rank of Messiah by his disciples.

In the final analysis, it is only those who are either naively or wilfully ignorant, or those with a vested interest in the power trip of control that feel the need to confuse or control what is after all, simply the clever use of language. I fully understand the nature of suggestion – it has been my specialist subject for forty years – and yet I also can't help thinking from time to time that there is more to the universe that we currently understand. I'm sure that one day, all the secrets of the universe will be discovered and understood – presuming of course that we don't exterminate ourselves first.

It is truly astonishing the things people still believe in this supposedly enlightened age. The distrust of hypnosis (and hypnotists) represents the same hysteria as the dread horror of witches in days long gone. Remember, it was righteous men that condemned tens of thousands of innocent women to a terrible death at a burning stake. It's always those desperate to hold on to their smidgeon of power who are first to light the bonfire.

There is a new religion emerging in the west which presents a greater threat to civilisation as we know it than Christianity ever did and it fills me with horror. It demands blind unquestioning belief and demands the physical destruction of a thousand years of historical, cultural and intellectual heritage. This new religious group asks its adherents to show their devotion on only one knee – not to any god, but to a false and destructive ideology.

The foot soldiers of the new religion of woke are young, enthusiastic and desperately ill-informed. The high priests and puppet-masters are extreme left wing teachers, university professors, political activists and those with their own agenda, hell bent on overthrowing a stable society and replacing it with a nonsensical demonic Narnia.

Like the witch-hunters of old, they seek out and destroy all those who do not believe. Cancel culture is the new bonfire of the vanities and social media their stormtroopers' weapon of choice. They are already burning books, silencing dissenting speech and destroying the lives of any who oppose them.

Mass hysteria in religion: two case studies



For those readers who are unfamiliar with the Toronto Blessing, it is a religious craze that swept the world about 20 years ago. During the 'blessing' people would inexplicably be reduced to hysterical rambling, 'speaking in tongues,' behaving like wild animals, and often collapse in a heap on the floor as if suddenly having some sort of seizure – just like a Friday night in Newcastle town centre.

Scientists and laymen thought the phenomena closely resembled a text book case mass hysteria – which it indeed was. Those who took part in it and succumbed were all very suggestible and very emotional people and there is no doubt that expectancy and wish fulfilment played a major part.

I would like to examine two testimonies from people who received the Toronto Blessing. The first is a man called Mick Brown. He went to Toronto and attended a meeting led by John Arnott, pastor of the Toronto Airport Vineyard. This is part of Mick Brown's testimony:

'A body came falling towards me. I rested it on the ground and moved on. I found myself beside John Arnott, who was moving through the crowd, blessing people, who fell like ninepins. I didn't even see his hand coming as it arched through the air and touched me gently – hardly at all – on the forehead. 'And bless this one, Lord....' I could feel a palpable shock running through me, then I was falling backwards, as if my legs had been kicked away from underneath me. I hit the floor – I swear this is the truth – laughing like a drain.'

The interesting thing about that testimony is that Mick Brown is not a Christian. He is an unconverted Daily Telegraph journalist who went to Toronto to write a report on the Toronto Blessing for the Daily Telegraph Magazine, from which the above quote is taken. Yet when Pastor Arnott touched him, Mick Brown experienced exactly the same phenomena as all the professing believers. He becomes '*slain in the Spirit*' and laughs hysterically. Later he told a Christian newspaper that his experience had made no difference to his unbelief in Christianity. He was and still is a non-believer. So we are left with the same physical and emotional experience, the same Toronto Blessing, the same hysterical reaction but without the religiosity.

This forces us to ask two very important and searching questions:

First, how can this be the Holy Spirit at work? and second, does the Holy Spirit bestow the same emotional and physical experience on believer and non-believer alike – ‘*slaying in the Spirit,*’ uncontrollable laughter, a state of euphoria?

If these things had no spiritual or religious meaning or significance in the life of atheist Mick Brown, how can precisely the same things have any authentic spiritual meaning or significance in the lives of professing Christians? Clearly we are dealing with an experience that is not truly spiritual in nature, but can be happily shared by believers and non-believers alike. Obviously it must be up to the individual to interpret the associated emotions and find meaning or not find meaning.

The second obvious question is, what is the power that John Arnott possesses that enables him to induce this experience in a non-Christian who has absolutely no belief that the Toronto Blessing is a work of God, since he does not even believe in God? Is it possible that this is nothing more than hypnotism working on a suggestible mind? Mick Brown had not participated in any of the warm-up techniques of the worship, and had no expectation that anything would happen to him. Yet when John Arnott touched him, quite by accident, down he goes, gibbering away and laughing hysterically. This seems to point us in the direction of John Arnott and others like him actually possessing or at least channeling some kind of supernatural power.

Stage hypnosis employs the same mental sleight of hand, as do the industrial scale antics of American TV evangelists, such as market leader, Benny Hinn. Once a participant has seen other volunteers collapsing and falling into what appears to be a trance-like state, that participant also becomes suggestible. This happens quite unconsciously and is as reliable as clockwork. One does not have to take part in the warm up tests and exercises to be affected – merely watching it work on others is enough to heighten suggestibility.

The second testimony is that of Glenda Waddell, a member of staff at Holy Trinity Brompton, the Anglican church in London which acts as the British headquarters of the Toronto Blessing. This is Ms Waddell’s testimony of how she first received the Toronto Blessing:

'To my absolute horror I just knew beyond any shadow of doubt my hands were doing strange things and I was going to roar. I said, 'Oh Lord, I'd do anything but please, please, don't make me roar. Only the men roar and the women don't roar.' But it came and I did roar quite loudly and I made a lot of awful noise and I was crawling around the floor doing terrible things and half of me was thinking, 'This cannot be me.' But another part of me knew that it was.'

The disturbing thing about Ms Waddell’s testimony is that it again presents us with a picture of the Holy Spirit supposedly at work, even though to me at least, it is obviously hypnosis! By her own account, Ms Waddell was invaded and possessed by a power which reduced her to bestial behaviour, all against her conscious will. She was simply taken over, physically and spiritually, by a controlling force. That is *not* how the Holy Spirit operates in a believer’s life because the Holy Spirit does not sanctify individuals by forcing them to do sub-human things. He is supposed to work through the Word of God, bringing truth to bear upon our minds and enlightening our understanding. Anyone with any spiritual knowledge must realise that this force was definitely *not* the Holy Spirit!

An important thing to understand about mass hysteria is that it can creep up even on those who are on their guard against it. From the accounts of the two people above, it seems to me this is what happened. The same thing happened to otherwise sane people at Nuremberg and happens in hypnosis shows – sometimes even to those who resist.

I once found myself caught up in a group of people Las Vegas who were running away from a man who was brandishing a gun. The compulsion to get away was suddenly all consuming and I ran with the rest of them as fast as I could. My heart was pounding, I was in fear, and yet I had no idea *why* I was running until we got round a corner and someone told me a man had a gun. The feelings and emotions were absolutely overpowering and I felt slightly ashamed afterwards – not from cowardice [America is full of crazed gunmen and so running is a sensible course of action] but because I had been sucked into this behaviour. I thought about my own reactions a lot in the days following. I had been surprised by my total and sudden inability to retain my individuality. I had been suddenly and against my will submerged in the larger organism of the group.

As with the Toronto Blessing, throwing people down on the floor, even by just touching them, is an old stage hypnotist's trick. In this case, social compliance comes into play. Social compliance is extremely powerful and sometimes all-consuming. Its power should not be underestimated. I know this to be true – not just because of the experience I described above, but because I have witnessed it thousands of times in my stage shows.

Social compliance has its roots in the evolutionary survival strategy. Humans have to work together to survive and anyone who 'rocks the boat' will be deemed 'anti-social' and quickly ostracised by the rest of the group. To not behave as one is expected to behave is a serious social impropriety. This is why people are often extremely surprised that they comply in hypnosis and I can see a clear connection here with the Toronto Blessing.

I have also seen on stage, one volunteer suddenly become convulsed with uncontrollable giggling, so much so that she was for some time unable to talk. What happened next was that all the volunteers became likewise, and this happened within seconds!

Allowing oneself to be touched – having one's personal space invaded by another, even someone you may not know or trust – is one very powerful way in which the hypnotist gains superiority. Again, even if warned beforehand, or on your guard, when the moment comes, it is to most, irresistible. In the case of the preacher and the two cases described above, the loss of self-control and self determination happens at an unconscious level, even though the person is still conscious.

Therefore, even though conscious, they are unaware of the signals happening in their own brain and this would explain the puzzlement of the two people in the report.

As for roaring like a lion (another old stage hypnosis trick) it is akin to trying to stop oneself yawning. The more you think about trying not to yawn, the more difficult it becomes not to yawn. Or sneeze. Or fall to the ground. As you're reading this, try not to think of a rhinoceros...

It is not unknown for charismatic preachers to use trickery in these circumstances. A mild electric shock is enough to convince even the most hardened skeptic that something unusual has actually happened. Sometimes the apparatus delivering the amps is hidden in a decorated wooden cross or such like. The shock is delivered not to the head, but to the lower body by misdirection – something well understood by magicians. The spectators' eyes of the follow the hand as it touches the head, unaware that the preacher is delivering the electric shock to another part of the body. To the recipient, the sensation is so quick that it is indistinguishable. I never cease to be amazed at how easily some people are fooled – especially by those who use religion for their own nefarious purposes.

But most preachers do not think beyond religiosity and their curiosity ends at the power of the Holy Spirit.

Religion addiction



Religious and spiritual experiences both excite the brain's pleasure and reward circuits in exactly the same way as more down to earth pleasures, such as food, tobacco, alcohol or listening and dancing to music, but this is especially true when the individual *expects* the experience to be fulfilling or even joyful. Dancing, singing and achieving trance-like states were prominent in many ancestral societies and are still exhibited by some today.

The cognitive theory of religion states that belief is a by-product of our cognitive abilities. In other words our brains are primed to see meaning everywhere, which helps us make sense of random events. Certainly, as we have already seen, our brains are primed to 'fill in the gaps', so it's logical that our brains should also fill in the gaps of *meaning*.

Children [and those high on the Autism Spectrum] like the idea of order and design in the world – something that is useful as it allows us to predict possible threats that we cannot physically see, such as dangerous predatory creatures... or dangerous predatory humans! After all, those ability gives us an evolutionary advantage. The problem is, it also facilitates the build-up of delusional belief and a 'feeling of rightness'. Either way, take away religion and it will likely be replaced with something else – something possibly worse. Where there is uncertainty, humans will always find *something* to fill the gap!

The most likely explanation is that religion is a by-product of a number of cognitive and social adaptations which have been an important part of human development. We are social creatures who interact and communicate with each other in a co-operative and supportive way, so we inevitably have stronger attachments to some individuals more than others. British psychologist John Bowlby demonstrated this influence of attachments on children's emotional and social development, and showed how these attachments can suffer when they are threatened by separation or abuse.

We continue to rely on these attachments through life, when making friends or falling in love, and can even form strong attachments to non-human animals and inanimate objects and it's easy to see how these attachments could transfer to religious deities.

Our relationships depend on being able to predict how others will behave. But the things we form attachments to don't necessarily need to be visible for us to be able to predict their actions. Quite often we can imagine what they would do or say. The ability to do this is known as cognitive decoupling, and it originates in childhood through play.

Another adaptation that may reinforce religious belief derives from our ability to anthropomorphise objects, for instance, confusing a shadow on the wall with a real person. This ability to attribute human form and behaviour to non-human things shows that we are also capable of bestowing other natural phenomena with the same qualities that we possess and, as a consequence, make it easier to imagine them as real.

As well as acts of social unity, even more formal rituals also alter brain chemistry, increasing levels of serotonin, dopamine, and oxytocin in the brain – chemicals that make us feel good and make us want to do things again and also provide a closeness to others.

These cognitive adaptations are facilitated by educational and household norms which don't tend to challenge or dispute religious ideas.

While we are encouraged to challenge other ideas presented to us early in childhood that may not have a strong evidence base – such as Father Christmas or the Tooth Fairy – this is not the case with religion. These challenges are often discouraged in religious teachings and oft regarded as sinful.

The mass hysteria whipped up by many [particularly American] evangelists is a prime example. Believe it or not, all that falling over backwards business has its roots in stage hypnosis – a pleasant and euphoric enough sensation in itself – but the uplifting experience of being filled with an imaginary Holy Spirit can be emotionally very powerful. The brain floods with 'feel-good' dopamine, a natural and addictive opiate, and so religion has a lot in common with sex, drugs and rock and roll.

As part of *The Religious Brain Project*, scientists and researchers at the University of Utah School of Medicine studied 19 young and devout adult Mormons who underwent fMRI scans while they performed four tasks specifically designed to evoke spiritual feelings.

Each hour-long session included watching religious videos of Biblical scenes, listening to quotations by Mr Mormon and other religious leaders, readings of familiar passages from The Book of Mormon and eight minutes of quotations. During the tests, the participants were asked if they were 'feeling the spirit' and their responses were then measured from feeling nothing to strongly feeling something.

All the volunteers reported feeling peaceful and warm inside and some were reduced to tears when they felt a peak spiritual uplift while watching the 'stimulating' church video at the end of the scan.

When study participants were asked to think about their saviour, or about being with their families for eternity, or about their heavenly rewards, there was a noticeable response in their brains. This response was seen to be in the same area activated by taking drugs such as amphetamines – which are of course designed to produce feelings of euphoria – and by participating in other rewarding experiences including music, sex and exercise.

The volunteer's peak religious feelings coincided neatly with their brain regions 'lighting up', an increase in their heart rates, and deeper breathing. In addition to the brain's reward circuits, the researchers found that spiritual feelings were associated with increased activity in the medial prefrontal cortex. This complex area of the brain has previously been shown to be activated when performing tasks involving valuation, judgement and moral reasoning.

They also confirmed that spiritual feelings stimulated a region of the brain (the nucleus accumbens) associated with processing reward and which is known to play a role in

addiction. Spiritual feelings also activated brain areas associated with focused attention, as with hypnosis.

Senior researcher Jeff Anderson, a neuro-radiologist, claims that religious experience is one of the most influential factors in how and why people make decisions that affect all of us, for good and for ill – which is just one extremely good reason why understanding what happens in the brain to contribute to those decisions is important.

The study was published in the journal *Social Neuroscience*. I can hardly wait to find out if believers of other religions would respond, let alone cooperate in the same way as the Mormons did.

There is however, an upside to this particular addiction and its roots are buried deep in the evolutionary psyche of humans.

It cannot be denied that religion can have a profound effect on the brain, which is one of the reasons why religion, in one form or another, has endured for thousands of years. Religion is a part of every culture – it provides a deep-rooted sense of satisfaction that can now be measured on a neurological level.

Religious faith can provide a lifeline in times of worry and desperation. The feel-good chemicals that tickle the brain's pleasure centres are the physical constituent of the peace, solace and strength that spirituality can provide, and this can be especially important for the terminally ill.

We know that cancer and Aids patients who adhere to a religion have fewer symptoms of depression than those who do not. They are also less likely to be hospitalised and are more likely to maintain a reasonable level of health. Religious belief is also known to assist in the recovery of those who suffer from depression.

Spirituality and the religious experience bestow upon us certain benefits – an inner peace can give us the strength to tackle even the greatest challenges. In short, religion can provide hope when everything else seems hopeless.

Religion, instinct and intelligence

Many of the most intelligent people in the world are atheists, so in hope of understanding the link between intelligence and religion, researchers have created a model based on survey and historical evidence. The results suggest that religion should be considered an instinct, and intelligence the ability to rise above instinct. So far, so good...

Researchers from the Ulster Institute for Social Research and Rotterdam University were interested in understanding whether religious belief is instinctive or something that evolved. Religion might be instinctive because it evolved to be that – after all, there has never been any empirical scientific proof to confirm the existence of God. After centuries of religious belief, the idea may well have lodged in the human brain to be an inherited trait.

The team created the Intelligence-Mismatch Association Model (IMAM) which attempts to explain why intelligence is negatively associated with religious belief. The model is based on the ideas of evolutionary psychologist Satoshi Kanazawa's Savanna-IQ Principle.

The IMAM proposes that human behaviour will always be anchored in the environment in which their ancestors developed, and religion should be seen as a separate evolved instinct. Rising above instincts is advantageous, because intelligence helps to solve problems. If religion is evolved then it is an instinct, and intelligence which rationally solves problems can overcome instinct. Being intellectually curious means being open to non-instinctive possibilities. In other words, the idea of an imaginary friend, passed down from generation to generation, becomes redundant the one applies common sense, logic and reason.

The researchers also investigated the link between instinct and stress. They suggest that being intelligent helps people to rise above their instincts in times of stress. If religion *is* an evolved instinct, then it will become heightened at times of stress, when people are inclined to act instinctively, and there is lots of clear evidence for this. It also means that intelligence allows us to pause and think about the possible consequences of our actions.

The study was published in *Evolutionary Psychological Science* – and Mr Spock couldn't have put it better himself – after all, people who are able to think logically and ignore instinct are potentially better problem solvers.

Intelligent Atheists include:

Stephen Hawking is known for his work into the basic laws that govern the universe. He has made his disbelief in God very clear, and famously said '*Science can explain the universe, we don't need God to explain why there is something rather than nothing*'.

Alan Turing has been called the founder of computer science and artificial intelligence and was famous for his work breaking the German Enigma code at Bletchley Park. He believed in God as a teenager but he let go of his religion when a friend died of tuberculosis and he decided materialism made more sense than religion.

Rosalind Franklin's work was critical in Watson and Crick's discovery of the DNA double helix structure. In one of her letters, she said '*I maintain that faith in this world is perfectly possible without faith in another world*'.

Neil de Grasse Tyson is an American astrophysicist and science communicator. He describes himself as agnostic, rather than atheist. In a recent interview, he said *'I remain unconvinced by any claims anyone has ever made about the existence or the power of a divine force operating in the universe'*.

Thomas Edison has been described as one of the US's greatest inventors, and is best known for his invention of the light bulb in 1879. He famously said *'I have never seen the slightest scientific proof of the religious ideas of heaven and hell, of future life for individuals, or of a personal God'*.

Andrew Newton – *'blessed with a thinking brain, I understand how easy it is for religion to be passed from one human being to another, in the same way a virus is passed from person to person, usually from adult authority figures such as parents, teachers or priests to infect children. Once an idea has been accepted by the mind, it will lodge there, unopposed and unchanged'*.

Further research from the University of Kentucky, led by psychologist Professor Will Gervais and published in *Nature* magazine in August 2017 found that both religious people *and* atheists naturally assume that immoral people, for example, thieves, fraudsters and serial killers, are probably atheists, and they are probably right.

Even though 'religiosity' has reduced in many countries, Islam is rising faster than Christianity is declining. Thousands of years of exposure to religious ideology means that many people still hold onto the belief that morality requires faith – it doesn't. Morality is a function of altruism, something that binds families and societies together.

The researchers tested more than 3,000 people from 13 different countries on five continents to find out if there was a link between immorality and atheism. These countries ranged from very religious societies, such as the United Arab Emirates and India, to very secular countries such as China and the Netherlands. The participants tended to assume that violent, sadistic and truly evil villains probably didn't believe in a god.

To measure prejudice against atheists, they provided participants with a description of a thoroughly immoral person who initially tortures animals and eventually kills people for thrills. Half of the participants were then asked whether it was more probable that the perpetrator was either a teacher, or a teacher who is a religious believer. For the other half of participants, the second option was changed to a teacher who does not believe in god. The researchers then measured how frequently people chose each option in each group.

The results revealed that the natural moral suspicion of atheists is culturally widespread, appearing in both secular and religious societies and among both believers and atheists.

Although previous research has shown that moral instincts form independent of religion, most people's perceptions of a 'necessary' link between morality and religion appeared to be very strong. However, the variability across countries suggests that this perception could change in the future because the effects were much smaller in most of the secular countries.

As religiosity declines, entrenched pro-religious and anti-atheistic cultural norms may also decline and intuitive distrust of and bias against atheists would eventually disappear altogether. This would be a good thing because the world would be a better place without religion and the divisions it causes. But there again, the influence of Islam has increased in the last two decades to such a degree that the results of the Kentucky research, and others like it, may already be skewed, if not obsolete.

How spirituality can lead to narcissism

There is nothing more amusing than watching a room full of people sitting squat on the floor with their eyes closed, their hands upturned, while some fraudster bangs a gong. Is this really the path to spiritual enlightenment, or the road to delusion?

Chögyam Trungpa, a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master who lived to the grand old age of 48 and died in 1987, warned that *'there are numerous sidetracks which lead to a distorted, ego-centred version of spirituality. We can deceive ourselves into thinking we are developing spiritually when instead we are strengthening our egocentricity through spiritual techniques.'*

It seems he was right.

Spiritual training – including mindfulness, meditation, self healing and aura-reading – is supposed to distance people from their egos and grandiose feelings of self-worth. But contrary to all expectation, it has the opposite effect.

Instead, it feeds people's need to feel more successful, more respected or more loved. How ironic is it that something that is supposed to reduce self-aggrandisement actually boosts feelings of superiority!

The simple – and obvious – reason is that the self-enrichment motive is deeply ingrained in all our psyches – it can hijack methods intended to transcend the ego and adapt them to serve its own demands.

Mindfulness for example, a form of meditation which involves emptying your mind and switching off all thoughts, focusing on the present and avoiding judgement, is no more spiritual than directed daydreaming.

Aura reading – the most ludicrous of the 'spiritual' practices – involves 'reading' an imaginary 'electromagnetic field' that surrounds a person's body. Those that say they can see a person's aura fall into two groups – those that believe they can see the aura, and those that can't see the aura but claim they can anyway.

The same goes for Aura healing, which allegedly heals the energy field around a person's head or body. Likewise, 'chakra reading' – the reading of invisible energy points around the body – basically the same dance to a slightly different tune.

'Past life regression' – another trick of the creative mind – works best on people with colourful imaginations. 'Enhancing psychic recall of past lives for karmic energy healing' is in reality nothing more than good old-fashioned flim-flam artistry and something often practiced by unscrupulous, or worse, delusional hypnotherapists. People who believe they really have lived a previous life are not only fooling themselves, but could be considered borderline mentally ill if the belief starts to effect their behaviour in this life.

Reiki – the passing of 'universal energy' from the hands of the therapist to the patient, supposedly encouraging emotional or physical healing is simply our old friend, suggestion weaving its magic, while Shiatsu (finger pressure massage) does have some merit because it is physical and most of the time, very relaxing.

Haptotherapy – a relatively new piece of woo woo artistry – is a treatment that allegedly assists the individual to be more ‘present’ in body and mind. It is based on the philosophy of haptonomy, a pseudo-science that studies the phenomena of human interaction. In plain language, it’s a poor man’s fake psychology.

The object of haptotherapy is to help clients become aware of their natural ability to focus on, and open up to affirmative interaction, the main goal of which is to encourage and restore feelings of individuality and authenticity – which is gobbledegook for the ability to engage with others while still remaining socially on top.

Proof of supernatural powers is hardly ever required because they are outside the borders of established science – a cop-out if ever there was one. But the main problem with spiritual superiority is that it encourages er... spiritual superiority. Spiritual training is supposed to encourage people to rise above their private interests and feel connected with others, but in reality it usually just encourages people to feel superior.

I have met many of this sort of person over the years and they all have a degree of spiritual snobbery about them, in many cases a front to camouflage their own feelings of inferiority.

People who educate themselves in healing and the reading of auras and chakras, invariably go on to discover they have remarkable psychic abilities allowing them to ‘see’ things that others cannot. This makes them feel both special *and* superior at the same time.

The elephant in the room is that spiritual training often hides true psychological motives and responses that are anything but enlightened, instead, weaponising their spiritual superiority against those who lack the ‘spiritual wisdom’ they ascribe to themselves.

Fortunately, researchers from Radboud University in Nijmegen, Holland, have discovered the link between spiritual training and ‘spiritual superiority’.

They found that spiritual enlightenment can ‘boost feelings of superiority’ by stroking the ego, and that people who were engaged in more bizarre therapies such as ‘aura reading’ were the most smug. This smugness could be because they are secure in the knowledge they will not be challenged because no one can conclusively prove they are making it all up in the same way that we cannot conclusively prove there isn’t a silver teapot orbiting the moon.

Aura-readers often equip themselves with special cameras which produce colourful photographs of their clients’ auras, neglecting to mention the cameras are fixed with a special lens that distorts and exaggerate light. Some of the more expensive cameras are merely repackaged thermal imaging cameras.

The Nijmegen researchers also looked at several other forms of spiritual training, including meditation, aura reading/healing, haptotherapy and reiki and created questionnaires asking 3,700 people to respond on a scale of 1 to 7 to a series of statements, to test their ‘spiritual superiority’. For example:

- I am more in touch with my senses than most others,
- I am more aware of what is between heaven and earth than most people,
- the world would be a better place if others too had the insights that I have now.

The researchers also created scales that would correlate spiritual superiority – for example, the ‘spiritual guidance’ scale noted aspects of spiritual superiority, such as talking about

one's insights, trying to help others acquire the same wisdom, and aspiring to be another's spiritual coach or guru. It included statements such as:

- I help others whenever possible on their path to greater wisdom and insight
- I am patient with others because I understand it takes time to gain the insights that I gained in my life and my education.

Another scale for 'supernatural overconfidence' assessed belief in 'one's own paranormal powers' and included some far-fetched statements. Delusional beliefs included:

- I can send positive energy to others from a distance... I can get in touch with people who are deceased... I can influence the world around me with my thoughts... I can see people's auras... when I randomly open a book on a page number that is meaningful to me, this is no coincidence.

Participants completed the questionnaires and also answered questions about their age, sex, education, religion and spiritual training.

Some of the respondents had never undergone any form of spiritual training. The researchers found that those who had taken part in forms of meditation scored higher in the questionnaires than those who had no spiritual training. Specifically, they discovered a gradual increase in 'spiritual superiority' from people with no spiritual training to those with mindfulness training and those engaged with energetic therapies such as reiki and aura reading etc.

People who believed that they had been taught to see auras and regress to past lives were the most spiritually smug, scoring about 67% more than people with no training.

Those who had undergone mindfulness sessions scored about 50% higher than those with no spiritual training.

So it seems the road to spiritual enlightenment is fraught with danger. People may indeed aim to become more successful, more respected or loved by means of their spiritual development, but the process inevitably brainwashes them into believing they are superior human beings.

Even if this is not their initial motive, they may discover these benefits along the way. They may get a sense of excitement, or wisdom and serenity, and embrace the ideology that brought them this spiritual cornucopia of delight along with its 'higher values' and dubious morality – but it is an illusion...

Their spiritual renaissance leads to them becoming less open-minded toward other schools of thought. It also leads them to becoming a right pain in the neck.

The Nijmegen study was published in full in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*.

Close encounters of the temporal kind

Whether you are a believer or a non-believer, having a sudden and unexpected religious experience can be life changing. But encountering God for the first time may be due to causes more earthly than supernatural. Scans taken during religious experience reveal how neurons in the temporal lobes light up in the brains of those who claim to have had a talk with the Almighty.

Exactly what goes on in the brains of people who claim to have had an unscheduled encounter with God has largely remained a mystery. Neurological studies are of necessity based on scans taken too long after the event to tell us very much. However, an Israeli team of scientists may have caught God in the act, with one man's experience of an encounter captured at the very moment he was undergoing a brain scan. Researchers at Hadassah Hebrew University reported on a rare case when they were treating a patient for a form of epilepsy. The patient suddenly announced that he not only saw, but was able to speak with God. This intriguing case study offers an insight into what might be going on in the brains of those who have made similar claims.

Dr Shahar Arzy and Dr Roey Schurr were treating a 46-year-old man for temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE), carrying out a battery of tests including an electro-encephalogram (EEG) that measured his brain activity. In the run up to the tests the patient, a Jewish man who had reportedly never been especially religious, had stopped taking anticonvulsant medication for seizures.

Intense religious experiences are well documented throughout history, with recorded instances of smells, such as roses, incense and other sensory experiences accompanying visions. Similar visions, including smells, have also been reported by patients afflicted with certain types of epilepsy as 'auras' that precede seizures. But during these latest tests, the man froze and stared at the ceiling for several minutes, saying he felt like 'God was approaching him', before exclaiming 'Adonai', the name of the Hebrew God. The patient then removed the wires from his head and convinced his creator had singled him out to bring redemption to fellow patients and medical staff, began touring the hospital to recruit followers, proclaiming 'God has sent me to you'.

Just before the incident, the doctors measured a spike in activity in the patient's left prefrontal cortex, a region of the brain associated with a number of higher functions, including planning and perception, that has been previously linked to religious and mystical experiences. According to The Epilepsy Foundation, case studies of patents experiencing TLE seizures report the world seeming more real, and a dreamlike, disconnected state, with audio and visual 'warning' hallucinations. The Israeli team believe their patient suffered the visions as a result of a psychotic episode following a seizure.

Neuroskeptic explains that the patient's experience of seeing and being chosen by God bears a resemblance to key religious figures, from Abraham, Moses Jesus to Mohammed. To that first division list could be added St. Paul, or Saul of Tarsus as he was known before he had his own epiphany on the road to Damascus, Joan of Arc and St. Bernadette of Lourdes. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that any of those people had epilepsy, but it is interesting that these phenomena can occur in this disease.

The findings were published in the journal *Epilepsy and Behaviour*.

The mystic connection



Meditation is widely recognised as a valuable therapeutic exercise – the relaxation and focus of meditation is undoubtedly of benefit to those who practice it and for many, it's a way of achieving peace with the world and one's inner self. But is meditation also a way of connecting with a higher power, or is the mystical experience merely the brain's ability to freewheel into the realms of fantasy for short periods of time? And why are some people able to 'connect' with the mystical while others are not? Is mysticism a special gift, or is it just the way our brains are wired?

For some people, mystical experiences are usually spiritual and can sometimes be life changing. For most people however, inhibitory mechanisms in the brain *prevent* the mind freewheeling. But according to scientists at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago (RIC) and Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, our ability to enter into mystical experience is governed by one of two theories:

- The first assumes that a single area of the brain, sometimes called the God-spot, is responsible, when activated, for fantasy and religious belief [is there a difference?]
- The second argues that it is the suppression of inhibitory functions that opens up the brain to mystical experiences.

Using CT scans and questionnaires, the researchers were able to predict how likely a person was to have a mystical experience. To test the theories, they examined activity in the brains of more than 100 patients who were veterans of the Vietnam War, and who had undergone a series of cognitive tests both before the war and after they had returned. All these patients had sustained damage to regulatory regions of the brain, located in the frontal and temporal lobes.

These veterans were found to be more likely to report mystical experiences compared to those who had sustained no damage. In other words, those who had sustained damage to their regulatory regions seemed to be more prone to the mystical. The reasons for these mystical experiences are extremely complex because they also involve lots of other areas of the brain rather than just the activation of a specific area – it is also the suppression of the brain's regulatory functions that boost the chances of individuals being able to experience the mystical.

Participants in the tests were asked to answer how true or false a number of statements

were. These included their experiences of feelings such as unity, profound joy, and even being able to transcend time and space. The scores were then tallied up to give a quantifiable measure of how mystic the respondents perceived themselves to be. As with all serious research projects, a scale was devised (the Hood Mysticism Scale, or M-Scale) was used to quantify the abstract individual perceptions of mysticism.

People who have taken psycho-active drugs such as LSD or magic mushrooms nearly always report some kind of altered perception of life, the Universe and everything. This is no surprise as these drugs suppress the brains' regulatory functions. Users also report the experience as mystical (or at least bordering on it) often describing the experience like 'having a veil lifted from their eyes' and profound changes in perception of colour, time and distance.

Looking at the CT scans that showed damage to the regulatory regions of the brains of the veterans, the researchers were able to predict how likely they were to have a mystical experience.

The frontal lobes, involved in planning and organisation, are the most evolved areas of the brain – they help control and make sense of the perceptual input we get from the world. The research suggests that if the frontal lobes' inhibitory functions are suppressed, a 'door of perception' can open, increasing the chances of a mystical experience. If these areas were linked to inhibitory cognitive functions, or able to suppress these functions which help us regulate and resolve our perceptual experiences by opening up a 'door of perception', it would explain a lot about peoples' perceived mystical experiences.

But this is by no means the full story. Other brain states associated with stress or distress, extreme circumstances, prior strongly held beliefs, heightened emotion, or exposure to mind altering substances could all lead to a higher probability of having a mystical experience, since all of these states may affect the key frontal lobe regions involved in moderating peak experiences.

The search for a neurological centre of mysticism or 'God spot' is nothing new. Some previous searches have been specifically commissioned to confirm the existence of God. In 2009, a study of multi-faith groups all showed the same areas lit up when they were asked to ponder religious and moral problems. In that study, volunteers were asked to ponder statements about whether God intervenes in the world, such as 'God's will guides my acts'. These statements activated the lateral frontal lobe regions of the brain normally involved with empathy for others.

The participants were then asked to dwell on God's emotional state [I could have had a lot of fun with this!] When it came to statements such as 'God is wrathful' the areas that lit up were the medial temporal and frontal gyri, which help us to judge the emotions of others. The MRI scans revealed the regions that were activated were also those used every day to interpret the feelings and intentions of other people.

But is mysticism the same as spirituality? Other research has shown that spirituality is more complex, and that multiple areas of the brain are responsible for many aspects of spiritual and mystical experiences. Researchers at Missouri University replicated the initial findings, but also determined that other aspects of spirituality were related to increased activity in the frontal lobe and found that the participants with more significant injury to their right parietal lobe showed an increased feeling of closeness to a higher power.

The search for answers to the question of Life, the Universe and Everything continues...

Belief in the supernatural is here to stay

Unbelief in God doesn't necessarily entail unbelief in other supernatural phenomena. Even atheists who do not believe in God or any organised religion accept there might be things that can only be explained as supernatural, although atheists and agnostics have lower levels of supernatural belief than do the wider population.

Most commonly accepted beliefs among atheists – those who absolutely do not believe in the existence of God, and agnostics, who say it can't be proved one way or the other – are ideas that there are 'underlying forces' of good and evil, that 'there exists a universal spirit or life force' and 'most significant life events are meant to be and happen for a reason'.

The Understanding Unbelief project at the University of Kent has produced a study based on thousands of questionnaires completed by atheists and agnostics.

The study, which questioned atheists from the UK, the US, Japan, Brazil, Denmark, and China, found that respondents from Japan tended to be the least 'supernaturally-inclined' while those from China and Brazil believed the most. According to the study, not only do some of the 'unbelievers' accept the idea of some supernatural phenomenon and philosophies, none of the nationalities were considered pure 'naturalists' – that is, people who reject ALL supernatural ideas.

In the US, a little under 20% of Americans reported believing in 'supernatural beings,' while about 50% of self-described atheists in China reported believing in 'underlying forces of good and evil'. In none of the six countries surveyed did the percentage of unbelievers who qualify as naturalists approach 50%. Even among American atheists, the most naturalistic group of the surveyed countries, only around a third seem to have a wholly naturalistic world view.

While the study focused primarily on atheists and agnostics, the researchers were also able to compare 'unbelievers' moral codes and found a remarkably high level of agreement between unbelievers and general populations concerning the values most important for 'finding meaning in the world and in life' with family and freedom ranking most highly.

However, that commonality began to dissolve however when they were questioned on the importance of truth, nature, and science.

Other studies across the world show that 'unbelief' is vastly more common among younger generations. In a recent study by Pew Research, young adults between 18 to 39 were less likely to report that religion is 'very important' to them. People tend to become more religious as they age and those who are religious are more likely to have children, meaning those populations may grow much faster than their secular peers.

Christianity seems to be declining in the West at the same time as Islam is on the rise. Afghanistan and Pakistan were once Hindu countries and Lebanon was once a Christian country, now Muslim. Muslim birth rates dwarf those of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and all other religions. It is expected that Muslims will exceed 50% of the world's population by the end of the 21st century.

In the meantime, even the most ardent atheist will call for God's help in a moment of extreme fear...

A Godless future?

Why do people believe in God? The greatest thinkers and philosophers have been pondering this question for centuries. Karl Marx called religion the 'opium of the masses,' while Sigmund Freud said that God was an illusion and worshippers were reverting to the childhood needs of security and forgiveness.

Surprisingly, it's only a small step from being able to understand the mind of someone we know to imagining an omnipotent, omniscient, yet human-like mind – especially if we have religious texts which tell of their past actions and future intentions.

We know that religious activities make our brains feel good and thus encourage us to repeat them and social traditions also encourage people to be religious. As our lives become safer, more stable and more comfortable society could become less religious – even Godless – as our need for religion diminishes.

When children encounter religion, they find the explanations it offers intuitively appealing and believable, but this instinct is usually foiled by education and logic. Or maybe the reason people continue to believe it because they're too lazy to think too hard about it. But human nature being what it is, people tend to cling to moral guidance and existential comfort and they don't let go of that habit easily.

Although the future may indeed become increasingly secular, human beings will never totally lose the instinct to believe in God. As long as existential uncertainty exists, religion will not disappear completely, even though some of the things in the Bible defy logic or reasonable belief.

The number of Americans who identify as having no religion has risen since 1991 and accounts for 23.1% of the U.S. population in 2020.

One reason for this decline is that many people used to lie about their belief in God because it would have been an admission that would have seen them ostracised in their communities.

Shifting political ideologies about social issues may have also played a role, because fewer Americans are now comfortable with the rhetoric of their religious leaders, not to mention their religious leaders' bad behaviour outside church hours and far right religious leaders' attitudes to gay rights and abortion.

Despite widespread accusations of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, membership has remained static – possibly because Catholicism has a longer tradition and is more cultural than other religions. Overall though, America is on course to becoming increasingly less religious – following a pattern already emergent in Europe's most developed countries, including Scandinavia.

In the UK, average Sunday church service attendance has fallen by 18% from the 919,000 average in 2007 to an average of only 756,000 turning up each week in 2017, according to the Church of England. Average weekly attendance also fell by 9% to 895,000 in 2017 from 994,000 in 2013. The Church of England did stress however that the number of regular attenders rose by 2,000 between 2016 to 2017 from 1.136 million to 1.138 million.

Part of the change might be down to the kind of social changes affecting all aspects of life – from working patterns to how people spend their weekends. The Church is also reaching more people than ever through social media, providing a Christian presence to those who might not otherwise go to church.

There was also a rise of 3.4% from 2.6million to 2.68million in the number of people attending Christmas services in 2017 – the highest attendance since 2006.

Still... people who actively practice a religion may indeed be happier – according to a study by the Pew Research Centre study and survey data from more than two dozen countries which compared the self-reported lifestyles of religious and non-religious people.

Overall, the researchers found that actively religious people tend to be happier, though they aren't necessarily healthier in terms of exercise or obesity rates. Even so, the findings on self-reported happiness are striking.

There is a growing body of research that suggests religious participation has a positive effect on those who actively pursue it. Religion can help to reduce feelings of loneliness for the socially disconnected, because God may serve as a substitutive relationship that compensates for some of the purpose that human relationships would normally provide – according to researchers at the University of Michigan, after three separate studies involving 19,775 people. According to the researchers, the feeling of a connection to God may help some people gain 'a better sense of purpose in life'.

Having said all that, belief in religion or science does not decrease stress levels. Contrary to the popular, yet erroneous, belief that calling on a higher power can help us deal with difficulties, a study from Coventry University and the University at Albany, New York, found that stress increases regardless of how religious you are or feel.

Researchers compared people with strong beliefs in either God or science and found that stress levels increased significantly when they talked about difficult issues. Participants from both groups were challenged to reflect on their beliefs, whether sacred or secular, before discussing Brexit – Britain's [at that time] impending exit from the European Union and the researchers found that aggravation levels increased for both groups after talking about the situation.

The study was the first of its kind and explored whether faith in a higher power or a rational universe could help alleviate acute stress.

One hundred university students – all either believers in science or religion – were recruited to participate in the study. Half were asked to write about an important event in their lives where God or science had been particularly helpful, thus prompting them to reflect on their beliefs. The other half – the control group – wrote instead about their favourite season.

Stress levels were then increased as participants were asked to argue for or against Britain leaving the EU in front of a panel who would judge the credibility of their arguments.

The researchers measured heart rates, blood pressure, and levels of cortisol (a hormone that regulates stress responses) throughout the experiment. Each participant was monitored for subjective measures of stress alongside the strength of their ideology to measure the impact of reflection or belief. Both groups experienced feelings of anxiety and stress after the test, but there were no differences between strong believers who had been prompted to reflect on those beliefs, and those who had simply written about the seasons.

These results suggest that when people are not able to anticipate an upcoming acute stressor, their ability to cope is *not* improved by having recently reflected on beliefs. The authors noted that perhaps it is not belief itself, but the complex of practices and associated social support which helps believers cope with stress.

It is possible that had participants had a chance to reflect on their beliefs after rather than before the Brexit stress test, they might have been able to selectively consider aspects of their beliefs that could have more directly helped them cope with what they were experiencing.

Religion or scientific belief may be of limited use to help people anticipate the specific nature of a stressful situation, though belief may help them cope with longer-term stress.

The study was published in the journal *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice*.

God on drugs

Spirituality and feelings of being one with some higher power have long been linked to greater overall life satisfaction – and an 'encounter with God' can make people happier – even if the experience is a drug-fuelled one.

Some people might try to argue that you can't manufacture such an experience, but a new survey conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins University suggests otherwise.

The researchers found that the vast majority of those who had a 'God encounter' thought it the most meaningful experience of their lives. Not only that, but the drug-induced ones were more likely to reduce people's fear of death, suggesting that encounters with some 'higher power' may have lasting effects, whether through long-held beliefs or induced by the mind-altering effects of psychedelic drugs.

Researchers found that of people whose belief systems bring them a greater sense of 'oneness' with the world, or universe, or whatever entity they believe is greater than humanity, Muslim people were most likely to hold such beliefs and be more satisfied with their lives, much more so than Christians, Jews, Buddhists and atheists.

Although modern Western medicine doesn't typically consider spiritual or religious experiences as a tool to combat sickness, the study suggests that these encounters often lead to improvements in mental health.

The Johns Hopkins researchers surveyed 4,285 people around the world, recruited via online ads or emails. Everyone surveyed had had an encounter with something that could be called God, a 'higher power', an 'ultimate reality', an 'emissary of God' or an angel'. 3,500 had had such an experience while using a hallucinogen, and were sent a survey appropriate to that experience. The other 785 had had a 'naturally occurring' God experience and had explicitly never had one that involved a mind-altering substance.

Across both groups, 75% said that their encounter with something like God was the most meaningful or spiritually significant thing that had ever happened to them. Overall, everyone that experienced what they considered a God encounter reported positive changes in their mindsets, outlooks and practices. However, ideas of what exactly they'd seen varied considerably, and those who had reached their spiritual meeting or vision via magic mushrooms, LSD or ayahuasca were actually more likely to come out of it less afraid of death.

The experiences were so powerful that some two-thirds of people who considered themselves atheists before they had communed with God or some other higher power claimed they believed in the existence of these entities afterwards – even if they only met with God while stoned. Non-drug users were more likely to feel that their spirituality became a bigger part of their daily lives.

It wasn't all roses and rays of light, though, as 15% of each group called the experience the most psychologically challenging of their lives. Compelling though their findings were, the scientists were careful to caution against illegal psychedelic drugs to find God, or to even take the results as evidence that God exists. Whether God exists or not, it is doubtful that science can definitively settle the debate.

Is religion a conspiracy theory?

People who think that an almighty deity created the world are just as likely to believe conspiracy theories such as the moon landing was a hoax or President John F. Kennedy was killed by the CIA. The religion or god a person believes in is irrelevant – the minds of believers in conspiracy theories or religion are equally open to believe anything – no matter how nonsensical.

Scientists at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, believe they have found a common thread between creationist thinking and conspiracy theories is because of a brain bias that connects unrelated events.

Although at first glance both belief systems might seem different, both are associated with a single and powerful cognitive bias called teleological thinking, which involves the perception of cause and purpose in naturally occurring events. Teleological thinkers are willing to accept statements such as *the sun rises in order to give us light* [instead of, we have eight because the sun rises] and *the purpose of bees is to ensure pollination* [instead of, pollination occurs because bees collect pollen to make honey] as factual.

Recognition of the link between errors in rational thinking, conspiracy theories and religious belief could help explain and even rid the world of conspiracy theories – and religion.

By drawing attention to the analogy between religion, creationism and conspiracy theory, it may be possible to highlight the major flaws in both and thus help people detect or recognise illogical statements instead of relying on teleological reasoning by assigning incorrect cause and purpose to important world events.

Researchers are now in the process of assessing the effectiveness of ongoing attempts to educate children and adolescents about the nature of conspiracy theories. They say what's ultimately needed is a thorough understanding of the factors that contribute to a conspiracist mindset. Certain types of misinformation easily spread unchallenged through social media, and this research may help understand why, the researchers claim.

It is possible that content framed in teleological terms is easier for the brain to process and disseminate faster than other types of information. Social media can even reinforce teleological misinformation because most information passed by social media is accompanied by images that reinforce that thinking.

Conspiracy theorists are more likely to have negative psychological traits such as selfishness and attention-seeking and previous research has linked the endorsement of conspiracy theories to low self-esteem.

202 participants completed questionnaires on conspiracy beliefs which inquired into how strongly they agreed with specific statements, such as whether governments carried out acts of terrorism on their own soil. They were then asked to complete a narcissist scale and self-esteem assessment. The results showed that people who rated highly on the narcissism scale and who had low self-esteem were more likely to be believers in conspiracy theories.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Kent was published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* and in the journal *Current Biology*.

The relevance of God in a secular world

Belief in a god capable of handing out sweeping and occasionally brutal punishment may once have been the glue that held large societies together because of the social benefits of religious belief.

The evolution of a moralising god or gods would seem more likely to encourage and inspire cooperation between people from different groups, while those who believe in a more punitive god might tend to be more fair and just to others, reflecting processes that have taken place in societies throughout history.

The threat of punishing children by putting them on Santa's naughty list is the same – and it really does improve their behaviour! The European version of Santa gives naughty children a lump of coal while well-behaved children are rewarded with nice presents such as toys and sweets.

Scientists at Exeter University surveyed more than 4,200 parents from all over the world and more than a third said they had used the threat of putting children on the naughty list to improve behaviour. Around 40% of respondents said they had used the idea of Santa or elves or little helpers to get their children to behave throughout the year – and it worked.

Reward and punishment is a recurring theme in all religions. Be good in this life and you will be rewarded in the next. But follow the path of evil and you will burn in everlasting damnation in hell for all eternity! That also seems to work quite well.

But cultures that are not governed by any religious belief but are tolerant of minority groups tend to have higher levels of wealth, education and democracy. In fact positive changes in culture relating to acceptance and tolerance generally come before improvements in these three measures of affluence [wealth, education and democracy] not the other way round.

A UK / US survey of half a million people across 109 countries post 1990 showed that secularism and openness towards minorities – known as secular-rationality and cosmopolitanism – can predict Gross Domestic Product (GDP), enrolment in secondary education and even the introduction of democracy.

According to researchers at the University of Bristol's School of Mathematics, for a nation to become affluent, it needs first to separate itself from religion and become tolerant of minorities and of individual rights. The researchers used statistical methods to learn cultural values from survey data which were then compared to historical statistics. With access to such massive digitised data, history is becoming a much more accurate science.

Data-driven analysis supports the theory that a 'good' society – one that values diversity, tolerance and openness – may also be a *productive* society. Certainly the last 100 years have brought about huge increases in affluence relating to health, economic development, democracy and education.

Researchers, from the University of Bristol and the University of Tennessee, wanted to investigate the origins of this surge in affluence in respect to religious tolerance and whether distinctive cultural values had emerged in response to the rising prosperity in Western societies, or, conversely, whether cultural change preceded those developments.

Using data gathered by the World and European Values Survey, the teams found that both secular-rationality and cosmopolitanism have to be in place for socioeconomic development to emerge.

Promotion of a country's development must take pre-existing cultural values into account, and promoting democracy will only succeed if combined with the promotion of tolerance of minority groups.

Western countries tended to be the first to see dramatic increases in wealth, health, education and democracy – the regions with the highest secular-rationality and cosmopolitanism are located in Western Europe, Australasia and the Americas.

The team noted that American college students' values of fairness, economic decision-making, individualism, independence and moral reasoning are substantially different psychologically from other more traditional societies.

Cultural values are the software of society and can be innovated in one region before spreading to another region that speaks the same language.

Places with the greatest increases in wealth, education and democracy tended to have pre-existing secular and tolerant cultures.

Promoting a culture of secularism, tolerance and openness, along with improved public health, may be the first step on the road to development.

A classic case of secularism trumping religion if ever there was one. And amen to that!

The study was reported in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*

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