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Confessions of a Lonely Atheist

By Natalie Angier

In the beginning -- or rather, at the end of a very lo-o-ng beginning -- George W. Bush made an earnest acceptance speech and urged our nation to "rise above a house divided." He knows, he said, that "America wants reconciliation and unity," and that we all "share hopes and goals and values." After his speech he reached out, up and down and across aisles, to embrace Republicans, Democrats, Naderites, Palm Beach Buchananites, the disaffected, the disinclined.

The only problem was what President-elect Bush wanted from me and "every American." "I ask you to pray for this great nation," he said. "I ask your prayers for leaders from both parties," and for their families too, while we're at it. Whatever else I might have been inclined to think of Bush's call for comity, with his simple little request, his assumption that prayer is some sort of miracle Vicks VapoRub for the national charley horse, it was clear that his hands were reaching for any hands but mine.

In an age when flamboyantly gay characters are sitcom staples, a Jew was but a few flutters of a butterfly wing away from being in line for the presidency and women account for a record-smiting 13 percent of the Senate, nothing seems as despised, illicit and un-American as atheism. Again and again the polls proclaim the United States to be a profoundly and persistently religious nation, one in which faith remains a powerful force despite the temptations of secularism and the decline of religion's influence in most other countries of the developed world. Every year, surveyors like Gallup and the National Opinion Research Center ask Americans whether they believe in God, and every year the same overwhelming majority, anywhere from 92 to 97 percent, say yes.

Devils and angels alike, it seems, are in the details. In one survey, 80 percent profess belief in life after death. True to the spirit of American optimism, an even greater percentage -- 86 percent -- say they believe in heaven, while a slightly lower number, 76 percent, subscribe to a belief in hell. When asked how often they attend church, at least 60 percent of respondents say once a month or more, and have said as much for the past 40 years. Three-quarters of all Americans proclaim a belief in religious miracles, and the same number concur with the statement that God "concerns himself with every human being personally."

These statistics contrast starkly with those from many other nations. According to the International Social Survey Program, a comparative study of beliefs and practices in 31 nations, while a mere 3.2 percent of Americans will agree flatly that they "don't believe in God," 17.2 percent of the Dutch concur with that statement, as do 19.1 of those in France, 16.8 percent of Swedes, 20.3 percent of people in the Czech Republic, 19.7 percent of Russians, 10.6 percent of Japanese and 9.2 percent of Canadians.

Other countries are also noticeably more skeptical about miracles, or their personal prospects post-mortem. Anywhere from 40 to 70 percent of people in France, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Japan and the Czech Republic say, sorry, there probably is no life after death, there is no heaven, there is no hell, there are no Lazaruses.

Only in those countries where the Catholic Church still reigns supreme, like the Philippines or Chile, does the extent of devoutness match or even surpass America's. So, too, does the devoutness of non-Christian nations like India, Indonesia and Iran.

So who in her right mind would want to be an atheist in America today, a place where presidential candidates compete for the honor of divining "what Jesus would do," and where Senator Joseph Lieberman can declare that we shouldn't deceive ourselves into thinking that our constitutional "freedom of religion" means "freedom from religion," or "indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion," and for his atheism-baiting receive the lightest possible slap on the wrist from his more secularized Jewish counterparts?

Who would want to be the low man on the voter poll? When asked in 1999 whether they would consider voting for a woman for president, 92 percent of Americans said yes, up from 76 percent in 1978; 95 percent of respondents would vote for a black, a gain of 22 points since 1978; Jews were up to 92 percent from 82 in the votability index; even homosexuals have soared in popularity, acceptable presidential fodder to 59 percent of Americans today, compared with 26 percent in 1978. But atheists, well, there's no saving them. Of all the categories in this particular Gallup poll, they scraped bottom, considered worthy candidates by only 49 percent of Americans, a gain of a mere 9 percent since 1978. "Throughout American history, there's been this belief that our country has a covenant with God and that a deity watches over America," says Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington. Atheism, in other words, is practically unpatriotic.

It's enough to make one tell a nosy pollster, oh, yes, I believe in God. It's enough to make one not want to discuss belief in the first place, or to reach for palatable terms like "secular humanist," or "freethinker," or "agnostic," which sound so much less dogmatic than "atheist," so much less cocksure.

So, I'll out myself. I'm an Atheist. I don't believe in God, Gods, Godlets or any sort of higher power beyond the universe itself, which seems quite high and powerful enough to me. I don't believe in life after death, channeled chat rooms with the dead, reincarnation, telekinesis or any miracles but the miracle of life and consciousness, which again strike me as miracles in nearly obscene

abundance. I believe that the universe abides by the laws of physics, some of which are known, others of which will surely be discovered, but even if they aren't, that will simply be a result, as my colleague George Johnson put it, of our brains having evolved for life on this one little planet and thus being inevitably limited. I'm convinced that the world as we see it was shaped by the again genuinely miraculous, let's even say transcendent, hand of evolution through natural selection.

I don't need pollsters like Daniel Yankelovich to tell me that I'm in the minority. I'm in the minority even among friends and family. Not long ago I was startled to learn that my older brother believes in God. ("You got a problem with that?" he practically snarled.) My older sister is rearing her two kids as semiobservant Jews, and my niece recently won raves for her bat mitzvah performance. When I sent out a casual and nonscientific poll of my own to a wide cast of acquaintances, friends and colleagues, I was surprised, but not really, to learn that maybe 60 percent claimed a belief in a God of some sort, including people I would have bet were unregenerate skeptics. Others just shrugged. They don't think about this stuff. It doesn't matter to them. They can't know, they won't beat themselves up trying to know and for that matter they don't care if their kids believe or not.

"My children's religious beliefs are their own," says Florence Haseltine, a scientist and advocate for women's health. "And as long as those beliefs do not require you to kill your parents, they're O.K. with me."

Rare were the respondents who considered atheism to be a significant part of their self-identities. Most called themselves "passive" atheists and said they had stopped doing battle with the big questions of life and death, meaning and eternity, pretty much when they stopped using Clearasil.

"I don't spend much time thinking about whether God exists," said Wendy Kaminer, author of "Sleeping With Extraterrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety" and an affiliated scholar with the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies. "I don't consider that a relevant question. It's unanswerable and irrelevant to my life, so I put it in the category of things I can't worry about."

To be an active atheist seems almost silly and beside the point. After all, the most famous group devoted to atheism, the American Atheists, was founded by Madalyn Murray O'Hair, an eccentric megalomaniac whose greatest claim to fame, at this point, is that she and her son were kidnapped several years ago and are presumed dead. Other atheistic groups, like the Freedom From Religion Foundation or the Council for Secular Humanism, are more concerned with maintaining an unshakable separation between church and state than they are with spreading any gospel of godlessness. Katha Pollitt, an unabashedly liberal columnist for *The Nation* who says she is listed in the "Who's Who in Hell," admits she used to feel more strongly about arguing against religion than she does today.

"I'm anticlerical, not antireligion," she says. "If somebody believes there is God, I'm not interested in trying to persuade that person there is no intelligent design to the universe. Where I become interested and wake up is about the

temporal power of religion, things like prayer in schools, or Catholic-secular hospital mergers."

Or, as Tom Eisner, a neurobiologist at Cornell, put it, "I don't ring doorbells saying I'm a Seventh-Day Atheist."

And yet. There is something to be said for a revival of pagan peevishness and outspokenness. It's not that I would presume to do something as foolish and insulting as try to convert a believer. Arguments over the question of whether God exists are ancient, recurring, sometimes stimulating but more often tedious. Arrogance and righteousness are nondenominational vices that entice the churched and unchurched alike.

Still, the current climate of religiosity can be stifling to nonbelievers, and it helps now and then to cry foul. For one thing, some of the numbers surrounding the deep religiousness of America, and the rarity of nonbelief, should be held to the fire of skepticism, as should sweeping statistics of any sort. Yes, Americans are comparatively more religious than Europeans, but while the vast majority of them may say generically that they believe in God, when asked what their religion is, a sizable fraction, 11 percent, report "no religion," a figure that has more than doubled since the early 1970's and that amounts to about 26 million people.

As Pollitt points out, when one starts looking beneath the surface of things and adding together the out-front atheists with the indifferent nonbelievers, you end up with a much larger group of people than Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Unitarians put together.

"Survey data point to an overwhelming belief in God, but when you go down a couple of layers, it can be pretty vacuous," says Cromartie. "It's striking how many people say they're Christian but don't know who gave the Sermon on the Mount."

Moreover, it seems that even good Christians sometimes lie when a pollster comes calling. Stanley Presser, a survey methodologist and sociologist at the University of Maryland in College Park, and his colleague Linda Stinson of the Bureau of Labor Statistics were impressed by the apparent stability of the number of Americans, 40 percent, who, year in and year out, told pollsters like the Gallup organization that they attended church every week. To check on the accuracy of such self-reported conscientiousness, the researchers turned to time diaries they had compiled for the Environmental Protection Agency -- accounts of the daily activities of 10,000 respondents nationwide to help the agency gauge public exposure to pollutants.

"We asked people, tell us everything you did in the last 24 hours so we can know what chemicals you might have been exposed to," Presser says. "If somebody went to church, they ought to tell us, but if they didn't go, they shouldn't manufacture it. We didn't do what most polls of religious belief do, and ask, Did you go to church in the last seven days? Which some might interpret as being asked whether they were good people and good Christians." According to their time-diary analysis, only 26 percent of Americans in 1994 went to church weekly, although the Gallup poll for the same period reported the figure at 42 percent.

What's more, in some quarters, atheism, far from being rare, is the norm -- among scientists, for example, particularly high-level scientists who populate academia. Recently, Edward J. Larson, a science historian at the University of Georgia, and Larry Witham, a writer, polled scientists listed in *American Men and Women of Science* on their religious beliefs. Among this general group, a reasonably high proportion, 40 percent, claimed to believe in a "personal God" who would listen to their prayers. But when the researchers next targeted members of the National Academy of Sciences, an elite coterie if ever there was one, belief in a personal God was 7 percent, the flip of the American public at large. This is not to say that intelligence and atheism are in any way linked, but to suggest that immersion in the scientific method, and success in the profession, tend to influence its practitioners.

"It's a consequence of the experience of science," says Steven Weinberg, a Nobel laureate and professor of physics at the University of Texas. "As you learn more and more about the universe, you find you can understand more and more without any reference to supernatural intervention, so you lose interest in that possibility. Most scientists I know don't care enough about religion even to call themselves atheists. And that, I think, is one of the great things about science -- that it has made it possible for people not to be religious."

So long, that is, as the nonbelievers remain humble. Among the more irritating consequences of our flagrantly religious society is the special dispensation that mainstream religions receive. We all may talk about religion as a powerful social force, but unlike other similarly powerful institutions, religion is not to be questioned, criticized or mocked. When the singer-songwriter Sinead O'Connor ripped apart a photograph of John Paul II to protest what she saw as his overweening power, even the most secular humanists were outraged by her idolatry, and her career has never really recovered.

"Society bends over backward to be accommodating to religious sensibilities but not to other kinds of sensibilities," says Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist and outspoken atheist. "If I say something offensive to religious people, I'll be universally censured, including by many atheists. But if I say something insulting about Democrats or Republicans or the Green Party, one is allowed to get away with that. Hiding behind the smoke screen of untouchability is something religions have been allowed to get away with for too long."

Early in December, I visited the kind of person who should be as rare as an atheist in a foxhole: a freethinker in a fire station. Bruce Monson, an affable, boyish-faced 33-year-old firefighter and paramedic who works in the conservative city of Colorado Springs, where evangelical religious organizations are among the biggest boom businesses, had challenged some of the religious literature, quoting New Testament Scripture, that members of the Fellowship of Christian Firefighters posted on the taxpayer-financed station's bulletin board. Fighting fire with fire, Monson posted literature of his own, this time quoting some of the less savory sections of the Old Testament, like when Lot sleeps with his daughters and impregnates them.

The Christian firefighters were outraged and demanded that Monson's posts be removed. "I was told by my superiors to take my stuff down and leave the Christian material alone," Monson said. Monson pursued his fight up the chain of command and finally won the right to his postings on the department's Web page, but not without being described by any number of colorful terms and being told where he should, and would, go.

"I'm not antireligion," he said. "I'm anti-shoving-it-down-your-throat. Is it too much to ask for tolerance?"

Oh, yes, tolerance. How sweet a policy of respectfulness and hands-off might be, were it mutually adhered to. But when *The Atlantic Monthly* asks, in the headline of a feature article by Glenn Tinder, "Can We Be Good Without God?" the answer is, of course, "Hell, no!" And when conspicuous true believers like Lieberman make the claim that religion and ethical behavior are inextricably linked, the corollary premise is that atheists are, if not immoral, then amoral, or nihilistic misanthropes, or, worst of all, moral relativists.

"There remains a sense among a lot of Americans that someone who actively doesn't believe in God might not be morally reliable, or might not be fully trustworthy," says James Turner, a professor of history and philosophy of science at Notre Dame. Yet the canard that godliness and goodness are linked in any way but typographically must be taken on faith, for no evidence supports it. In one classic study, sociologists at the University of Washington compared students who were part of the "Jesus people" movement with a comparable group of professed atheists and found that atheists were no more likely to cheat on tests than were Christians and no less likely to volunteer at a hospital for the mentally disabled. Recent data compiled on the religious views among federal prisoners show that nonbelievers account for less than 1 percent of the total, significantly lower than for America as a whole. Admittedly, some of those true-believing inmates may have converted post-incarceration, but the data that exist in no way support the notion that atheism promotes criminal behavior.

In fact, the foundations of ethical behavior not only predate the world's major religions; they also predate the rise of *Homo sapiens*. Frans de Waal, a primatologist at Emory University, has written extensively about the existence of seemingly moral behavior in nonhuman species. "I've argued that many of what philosophers call moral sentiments can be seen in other species," he said. "In chimpanzees and other animals, you see examples of sympathy, empathy, reciprocity, a willingness to follow social rules. Dogs are a good example of a species that have and obey social rules; that's why we like them so much, even though they're large carnivores."

As humans have sought to move beyond simple reciprocity to consider abstract issues of fairness, or to grope toward something like a universal declaration of human rights, established religions have played a surprisingly small part.

"Over the centuries, we've moved on from Scripture to accumulate precepts of ethical, legal and moral philosophy," Dawkins says. "We've evolved a liberal consensus of what we regard as underpinnings of decent society, such as the idea that we don't approve of slavery or discrimination on the grounds of race

or sex, that we respect free speech and the rights of the individual. All of these things that have become second nature to our morals today owe very little to religion, and mostly have been won in opposition to the teeth of religion."

That's not to say religion has no potential to do good, or to inspire brilliant thought, art, music, indeed many of the jewels of civilization: the Song of Solomon, Handel's "Messiah," the Hagia Sophia. Perhaps Mary McCarthy was right in her lovely claim that "religion is good for good people." What remains open to question is whether religion makes anybody good or great who would otherwise be malicious or mediocre.

The capacity for religious sentiment subserves so many human interests as to suggest it may be innate. "Religions have a strong binding function and a cohesive element," de Waal says. "They emphasize the primacy of the community as opposed to the individual, and they also help set one community apart from another that doesn't share their beliefs." Certainly those in authority have long recognized the power of religion as a quick-and-dirty way of getting everybody on the same meta-bandwidth, at once focused and aroused and prepared to do battle for a putative "greater good." President-elect Bush has sought to tap into this unifying, exultant spirit in his call for a replacement of all those sterile and secular government welfare programs with a host of new "faith-based" charities. In their coming book, "Why God Won't Go Away," the neuroscientists Andrew Newberg and Eugene d'Aquili (who died after the book was completed) argue that the "promises of religion" protected early humans from the "self-defeating fatalism" and "soul-sapping" despair of the Ingmar Bergman variety. "By providing us with helpful gods, and showing how to appeal to those gods, religions armed our ancestors -- and continue to arm us -- with a feeling of control," they write. "As long as we have the methods to propitiate the gods, or solicit their interest, or appeal to their sense of fairness and justice, or to connect with the presence of an eternal unity, we feel that an underlying order and purpose exist in a seemingly chaotic universe."

In his book "Consilience," Edward O. Wilson of Harvard states that "the human mind evolved to believe in the gods. It did not evolve to believe in biology."

I'm not so sure. Religion may be innate, but so, too, is skepticism. Consider that we are the most socially sophisticated of all creatures, reliant on reciprocal altruism for so much of our success. We are profoundly dependent on the good will and good behavior of others, and we are perpetually seeking evidence that those around us are trustworthy, are true to their word, are not about to desert us, rob us blind, murder us as we sleep. It is not enough for a newcomer to tell us: "Open your door. Trust me. I'm a swell citizen -- really." We want proof. The human race resides in one great Show Me state. If we are built to have faith, we are threaded through, as well, with a desire for proof that our faith is well placed -- as Bruce Monson doggedly puts it when he asks his Christian colleagues why Jesus can't step down from on high just once to bring back to life one of many children he has seen die in the line of duty.

Believers and doubters alike will always be with us -- and it's just possible that we need each other more than we know. As Kevin McCullough, a member of the Fellowship of Christian Firefighters, told me of his debate with the doubting Monson: "If he's seeking the truth, I don't think he's there yet. But he makes me think, and he brings up good points, and that's good for me. It helps strengthen my own beliefs."

From my godless perspective, the devout remind me that it is human nature to thirst after meaning and to desire an expansion of purpose beyond the cramped Manhattan studio of self and its immediate relations. In her brief and beautiful book, "The Sacred Depths of Nature," Ursula Goodenough, a cell biologist, articulates a sensibility that she calls "religious naturalism," a profound appreciation of the genuine workings of nature, conjoined with a commitment to preserving that natural world in all its staggering, interdependent splendor. Or call it transcendent atheism: I may not believe in life after death, but what a gift it is to be alive now.

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