

# “Why God Won’t Go Away”

By The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, April 22, 2007

For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

## Introduction

Two weeks ago I started this series on god(goddess), no god(no goddess) by stating that I am a religious naturalist. Watch out for my bias, I said. Everyone has one. I am no exception. This does not mean that I am convinced that there is no god. It means that I find the naturalistic understanding of the universe the most likely one, or as physicists would say, the most “elegant” one to explain human being in this marvelous universe that makes us possible.

There are a multitude of theistic explanations for the universe. None convince me. They cannot all be correct because they are mutually contradictory in their elements and names. I cannot find one that is most likely. I think the most universal and reliable evidence calls for a natural understanding rather than a supernatural one. If there is an intentional power behind the universe, one of the intentions of that power must be to not make itself clear and obvious to all, at least in comparison with other theologies.

The most elegant design seems to me to be the one that fits all the evidence that is available to all of us, and does not add elements that are available to only some of us, due to geography, religious heritage, scripture, teaching, mystical voices, etc. So while I am a religious naturalist and I admire the arguments of the evolutionary biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins in his current best seller, The God Delusion, I am not convinced that an atheist understanding of the universe is the only one possible. My theological position, while being the one that I have held since I was a small child, is not one that I believe to be the necessary answer to the question of Being.

I think the best all-encompassing explanation for our spiritual experiences is the neurotheological one, that the possibility of spiritual experience, in all its diversity and universality, is hard-wired into the human brain. Why? I don’t know. This sermon shares some ideas about it.

## Sermon: Why God Won’t Go Away (with thanks to Andrew Newberg)

Perhaps I should have subtitled this sermon “Finding the God that Atheists Can Trust.” I know some of you are suspicious of anything that smacks of god-language, and I want to allay your suspicions. As a religious naturalist I’m not about to try to convert anyone here today to a belief they didn’t already have when they walked in, atheistic or theistic.

The “God” I’ll talk about is shorthand for the spiritual experience of transcendence that many people have whether or not they think of its source in theological terms. There are many descriptions of God(Goddess). This is only one.

Have you ever felt yourself united with all that is around you, perhaps in the woods or at the beach? Ever practiced meditation and lost yourself entirely in the experience? Ever had a natural “high” in romantic interplay with someone you love deeply, or felt so close to him or her that you were unsure about where you stopped and your lover started? Ever listened to music that seemed to lift you up out of yourself so that you lost track of time and space entirely? For that matter, ever gotten so absorbed in an intellectual project that you worked on through mealtime and only hours later discovered how late it had gotten while your self-consciousness also seemed to disappear with your absorption in the work? Ever danced with such exuberance that the world around you dimmed and faded away?

These are all experiences of transcendence that are very much like the experiences some believers in God(Goddess) describe in their personal spiritual encounters with what they call the Divine. The language may be different but the spiritual feelings are much the same. Some people never have any of these experiences. They're normal folks just as the people who have these experiences are normal, but they seem to be "wired" without the equipment for spirituality; that is, some people don't appear to have the capacity for transcendence whether they want it or not. They may really want it.

In the deep spiritual events that have been observed scientifically, feelings like these have been reported by persons being studied while their heads were hooked up to machines that could measure the blood flow and electrical energy in different parts of their brains. The measurements were different for those reporting transcendent feelings from those without them.

Some of the people being studied were Catholic nuns, others were Zen Buddhist masters and still others were non-religious meditators. The nuns were deep in prayer to a God or to a saint that some of them could visualize; the Buddhists and the non-religious meditators didn't experience visions of God(Goddess) because they weren't looking for her or him, or God(Goddess) wasn't part of their heritage. But their experiences were different only in degree, say scientists, not in the feelings they reported

The reason God won't go away, said research psychiatrist Andrew Newberg in his 2001 book with the same title as this sermon, is that there is a "neurological process that has evolved [in the human brain] to allow us humans to transcend material existence and acknowledge and connect with a deeper, more spiritual part of ourselves perceived of as an absolute, universal reality that connects us to all that is." In other words, our brains may be hardwired to permit the experience of transcendent spirituality.

Some skeptics think this means that the experience of God is just a few blips in the electrical impulses in our brains, and there's really no God out there to be connected to. Believers say that's not what this means at all. They say the way that our brains function is necessary neurologically to permit people to have an indirect experience of what Newberg calls the Absolute Unitary Being. It feels direct to them if and when they have it.

Maybe both are right. This is as real as it gets in human being, and you've got to provide the meaning of it yourself. While I have a pretty strong opinion about the existence of God and whether God is supernatural, I really don't know any more than anyone else whether God exists outside the human thinking processes. Newburg says all of his research can't answer that question either, but God just won't go away.

If there is God, there would have to be neurological processes for humans to experience her/him/it, or no human beings would be able to have any experience of God at all. (I've always been uncomfortable with the use of personal pronouns to refer to God, as if the Divine were a sexual being or worse, a neutered being. Like all words we use to refer to God, they are inadequate to the tenth times tenth power.)

You don't really see or hear or smell anything directly at all. The action all happens in your brain that assembles experiences in meaningful form for you. You just think it's direct because you have to.

That's why Descartes said "I think, therefore I am." While I don't agree with the causal aspect of that claim, he certainly was correct in implying that it is only in thinking that we can experience anything. Your five senses flood your brain with all kinds of impulses that the limbic system sorts out and that the Cerebral Cortex explains to you. You don't get any of that stuff direct. It's all in the form of electrical impulses shooting around to different places in the brain that permit you to have the experiences. You have to think to make sense of it yourself. We think that means there is a self in each of us experiencing it and receiving the stimuli, and different places in the brain sorting it out and communicating. The brain is an absolutely amazing organ with separate places to sort out everything for us.

That's about as technical as I'm going to get. If you want to know more, you'll have to read a book or two on neurology yourself. The important thing to understand is that for you to have transcendental spiritual experiences, you have to use the same parts of the brain that you have to use to experience anything. There may be a real world out there, but you really can't get there yourself. You have to take your brain's word on it.

The reason that God won't go away, whatever the experience is that we call God, is that the brain architecture is organized in such a way that a certain percentage of people have to have transcendent spiritual experiences. They can't help it. Sometimes those experiences just come upon them spontaneously. Some people have learned techniques to bring them on. That's what prayer does for some people, meditation does for others and electrical stimuli to the right places in the brain can do too. It's all real. But since we don't know what is underlying everything that is that makes what is real "real," we can't know for sure what any reality is. Two people can see or hear the same thing, and report very different things that they experience. We assume it's the same thing. They describe it differently.

Some things are tricks on the mind. All of us are a little bit gullible. Some of us are very gullible. We love to be tricked by our brains. That's why people go to see magicians do impossible things. That's why we watch fantastic movies and horror flicks. We like being tricked when we choose the entertainment. When it comes on us unbidden, we may not like it.

People who have temporal lobe epileptic seizures often have powerful spiritual experiences at the same time. Some of the founders of world's great religions had experiences that look to us today like epileptic seizures. Paul's blinding light on the road to Damascus was one such. Muhammad also had many seizure-like experiences with flashing lights and other affects that sound like temporal lobe epilepsy. Dostoyevsky was an epileptic who was deeply spiritual.

He once said "You strong people have no idea of the bliss which epileptics experience in the moments preceding their attacks. For several moments, I have a feeling of happiness which I never experienced in my normal state and which one cannot imagine. It is a complete harmony in myself and in the wide world..." The fact that it was brought on as a part of a seizure does not mean that it was not real, or that the experiences that skillful meditators may bring on themselves are just tricks of the mind. Certainly they do not appear to be intentional acts from outside of us, from a powerful being beyond our reality called God—but they are so remarkably different from ordinary reality that people who experience them say they are spiritually transcendent, and often refer to them as God.

Michael Persinger, a professor of psychology at Laurentian University in Canada, has found a place in the brain that he calls "The God Spot." He was using transcranial magnetic stimulation on himself to study the functions of various brain regions, when he got to a particular place on his own temporal and parietal lobes, and experienced God for the first time in his life. From that he developed a special helmet equipped with four sets of solenoids. When volunteers wore it, they were asked to press a button if they felt a "presence" that they understood as God, or as a spirit or other mystical being. Many of them pressed the button. They found God within. Maybe we should buy one to use at worship services!

Persinger tried his helmet on the atheist author of [The God Delusion](#), evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. Nothing. Absolutely nothing after 40 minutes except Dawkins' breathing was affected. He did not find God. Persinger said he believes that the sensitivity of our temporal lobes to magnetism varies from person to person. Maybe atheism works in a counter-productive way. Persinger's conclusion was that there might be a talent for spirituality that only some people have.

Why should this part of the brain have evolved to create the “God Spot”? How does it affect survival? Why did it not pass away as a useless trigger that was only valuable for shamans among what we call primitive people? There are, of course lots of theories.

A shaman with the power might have been more effective in bringing his people together with his apparent connections that made his people all feel closer to God. He might have spread his genes around. Their sense of community might have made them stronger warriors as they fought other tribes. We know from many contemporary studies that people who are active members of churches have better health, recover a bit more quickly from some serious illnesses and live longer. A North Carolina study showed that church members lived an average of 7 years longer than the control group who didn’t attend church frequently. It’s a perk of UU membership too. Join Now! Unfortunately longevity doesn’t get rewarded in evolution. Unlike sexually-active young people, elderly church-goers have few babies to pass on genes.

A genetic scientist at the National Cancer Institute isolated one gene in the human genome that appears to make some people score higher on tests for sensitivity and spiritual transcendence. Dean Hamer’s book, The God Gene, published in 2004, is not likely to convince many skeptics like most of his colleagues. But it’s a start, if his research can be replicated by other scientists. He admits there would have to be a lot of other genes involved to give a real evolutionary advantage to those who have spiritual experiences. Believing the “right” things does not appear to give adherents of any particular religion (like Christianity) a leg up on longevity.

So the experience of transcendent spirituality may be blissful for those who have it, but it’s still uncertain how the power of this experience in the brain got into our heads, and whether or not it refers to a real God out there, or only points inward to the feeling of oneness created by some circuits in the brain being closed and others being opened.

Some of those who believe in God suggest that the God Spot was placed there by God, and kept through the evolutionary times to allow people to know him. Whatever you believe, it seems that everyone who gets to the ultimate spiritual union says there is nothing else like it. It is, says Dr. Newberg, the “state of pure mind, of awareness beyond object and subject... Absolute Unitary Being, the ultimate unitary state.”

He says “the mystical traditions of the East have all described some version of this ineffable unity—Void Consciousness, Nirvana, Brahman-atman, the Tao—and hold it up as the essence of what is inexpressibly real.” Those who have been there say there is nothing in their lives that has been as real as this spiritual experience. They absolutely refuse to accept any description of it as a neat neurological trick, just as the deepest believers in the realness of God cannot be persuaded by skeptics that their God is anything but real.

If you haven’t been there, don’t scoff. And don’t envy either. Try meditation if simple belief in God doesn’t work for you. Meditation is good for you, whether God is there or it’s only a powerful experience of your mind. Many studies have attested its emotional benefits.

While you’re at it, don’t expect God to go away anytime soon. Too many people have experienced a transcendent spiritual event spontaneously and naturally to ever be persuaded that it is anything but God that they have felt in their lives.

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