



A reading from the 2009 book *How God Changes Your Brain*, by Newberg and Waldman (pp. 14-15, 19-20, 52-53):

Contemplating God will change your brain. Meditating on other grand themes will also change your brain... but religious and spiritual contemplation changes your brain in a profoundly different way because it strengthens a unique neural circuit that specifically enhances social awareness and empathy while subduing destructive feelings and emotions. This is precisely the kind of neural change we need to make if we want to solve the conflicts that currently afflict our world...

Recent evidence shows that neuronal changes can take place in literally a matter of hours, [but controlling anger takes more substantial neuron change].

Anger interrupts the functioning of your frontal lobes. Not only do you lose the ability to be rational, you lose the awareness that you're acting in an irrational way. When your frontal lobes shut down, it's impossible to *listen* to the other person, let alone feel empathy or compassion. Anger releases a cascade of neurochemicals that actually destroy those parts of the brain that control reactivity.

It takes a lot of perseverance and training to respond to anger with kindness, but this is exactly what spiritual teachers have been trying to teach for centuries. When you intensely and consistently focus on your spiritual values and goals, you increase the blood flow to your frontal lobes and anterior cingulate, which causes the activity in primitive emotional centers of the brain to decrease... Thus meditation—be it religious or secular—enables you to more easily accomplish your goals....

The anterior cingulate... acts as a mediator between our feelings and our thoughts. It is involved in social awareness and intuition... Contemplative practices stimulate activity in the anterior cingulate, thus helping a person to become more sensitive to the feelings of others. Indeed, meditating on *any* form of love, [not just] God's love, appears to strengthen the same neurological circuits that allow us to feel compassion toward others.

In contrast, religious activities that focus on fear may damage the anterior cingulate, and when this happens, a person will often lose interest in other people's concerns or act aggressively against them... If you want to maintain a healthy anterior cingulate, frontal cortex, and limbic system, by all means meditate, but only on those concepts that bring you a sense of love, joy, optimism, and hope.

A reading from Albert Einstein, *The Merging of Spirit and Science*:

The most beautiful and most profound experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their primitive forms - this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness.

Message

In asking the question "Is God necessary for religion?", we get at the heart of everything. I hope to show you that this is really true.



Every new human being starts again at birth. Picture a new mother and her infant son in one part of the world, and another new mother and son in another part of the world. As it should happen, each of these mother-infant relationships is full of love and joy, and the satisfying itch to just do things. One of these women, as her child grows, imparts to him an idea that this love they experience, writ large, has a name, "Allah," and that Allah has spoken to us, through a man by the name of Muhammad. The other woman faithfully brings up her son to have the idea that this love they experience, writ large, has a name, "God," and that God has spoken to us through a man whose name was Jesus, and who, mysteriously, was God's own son.

These two boys grow up. They meet. Out of loyalty and devotion to the highest good they know, the love they experienced early in life, they kill each other. From love to hate.

Hence, for me, the question: Is God necessary for religion?

But why even wonder about the possibility of a religion without God? If you don't want God because you have come to see the harm that various beliefs in God have done, why continue to want a religion? Why not just say, Good riddance to them both! In fact, many people in Western cultures do arrive at the position of saying "I'm spiritual, not religious."

And yet, religion is important. It is not just a psychological quirk of the human species. It is not just a device used by rulers to control the masses, an opiate for the masses, as Marx described it. It is not just a community for the sake of community.

Religion is important because there is a yearning in the human heart for inner peace, an inner peace that cannot be ruffled, because you have attained an assurance that when you add everything up, it's all good. This is more than a desire for knowledge; it's a desire for assurance, for a lived sense that all is good.

This yearning is what the various religions from the beginning have addressed. This is the core of religion. It's the good part of religion, the part that people hope they'll find in religion.

Because religion sometimes satisfies this yearning, it can get away with being a lot of bad things as well. It is vulnerable to being used by self-interested megalomaniacs as a means to increase their power, wealth, or self-importance.

This yearning is given to us by nature, rooted in the emotional part of the brain, connected neurologically with the heart. It is a desire to be able to trust and relate to the entire universe as a friend.

Religion is the name we give to that institution in society that endeavors to satisfy this yearning by providing a believable story about the universe. People turn to religion for guidelines. They seek paths to achieving the holistic sense of good. They also turn to religion out of a desire for companionship in journeying toward and enjoying the holistic sense of good. Therefore there will always be religions attempting to meet this need. On the dark side there will always be charlatans attempting to manipulate it. The only choice then is not whether to have religion or not, but whether to have a good one or a bad one.

A good religion is one that can truly satisfy the yearning for a sense of holistic good, without causing harm to other yearnings of the human spirit, for truth, for beauty, for excellence, and for connection with all.



"Is God Necessary for Religion?"
Bob Greenwell, Leader, Ethical Society Mid Rivers
April 25, 2010

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

The fundamental yearning can be fulfilled without religion, let me be clear. Scientists are people, and they share this same yearning, but they attain an authentic fulfillment of it in a different way. It is satisfied every time a new theory shows how previously disconnected things actually fit together and operate on each other. Scientists whose life-work is based on satisfying this yearning have science as their religion. Einstein, in the reading we heard earlier, brought these two together, calling wonder, awe, and mystical experience both "the sower of all true science" and "the center of true religiousness."

In our other reading, from the book on neuroscience called *How God Changes Your Brain*, we heard how regular thinking about the biggest things we can imagine completely rewires the neurons in your brain and has huge effects in your life, such as whether you are always angry, or usually calm, even in a storm of human making.

But most people don't make science, or art, their life purpose. Religions will always arise because most people want to move on the path toward fulfillment of their fundamental yearning with guidance from those who have gone before and with companions on the journey.

If it seems like a stretch to assert that every person yearns for a sense of holistic good, just reflect that all that we are is built, layer after layer, upon a simple sense of good and bad: this tastes good, that tastes bad, mother embracing me feels good, mother scolding me feels bad. Our powerful brains build good-bad experiences into an enormous complex of ideas and feelings, and through them all runs the desire for good, aversion to bad.

Let me give you another way to think about how we might all have this fundamental yearning.

Consider that when our brain thinks about anything, it uses some basic tools, no matter what it's thinking about. Among the most basic are the category-tools "Something" and "Everything." As soon as our brain starts working, at birth or before, we start coloring in these categories. We're given a bite of cherry pie and we might apply the "something tool" and think to ourselves, "There's something tart in this pie and something sweet in this pie." Later we might sneak and eat the whole pie and then use the "everything tool." "Everything in this pie is good." We learn about hundreds and thousands of new somethings; we carve out each one in our brains as a distinct something—a pie is something in itself; it's not a cake, that's something else. At the same time that we are adding to the somethings we know, we are evaluating each one as good or bad or partly good and partly bad.

Similarly, we continuously apply the everything-tool to all kinds of things: everything in the bedroom, everything in our family, everything in the sky. There are many everything's. Eventually our mind stretches to wonder about the Everything of Everything.

Our mind stretches to draw the biggest circle that it can, one that includes everything that we know, and everything that we don't know—the idea of absolutely everything, or the All of Everything.

Could this idea be the quintessential idea that distinguishes humans from other animals? When the growing child first accomplishes this idea, the idea of the All of Everything, the child necessarily becomes self-aware, for Everything includes oneself.



We attain this idea, and then we ask the crucial question. We ask what we really want to know. Is the totality of everything good?

We know that we are part of the All of Everything. We feel that we ourselves are good, in general, and so we are inclined to hope the All of Everything is good as well. But then bad things happen, or we begin to doubt our own worth. Then the horrible thought arises: what if the All of Everything is not good; what if it is murderous, what if it is evil? This is worse than facing one's own badness. As long as you feel assured the All of Everything is good, then there is hope for you. But as soon as you doubt the goodness of the All of Everything, you doubt yourself with no prospect of recovery.

To sum up so far, we start out with a bare concept of the All of Everything, and gradually we fill it in as we discover more and more somethings that go to make up the All of Everything. We gradually fill in its quality of being good or bad. How we color in the concept of "The All" makes a great difference on our entire outlook on life, for our All-concept is one that we are always thinking along with any particular concept of any Something. More than any other single concept in our minds, the All of Everything determines our psychological sanity. If the All of Everything is good, we are secure, we can make plans, we can proceed with working out our own particular lives, as good somethings in the good All-of-Everything. If the All-of-Everything is split between good and evil, our inner life is always threatened, and life can become a matter of fear and defensiveness, attack and counterattack. The worst nightmare is coming to feel that the All-of-Everything is evil, for there remains only one out for us: get out of this universe, self-annihilation.

In the hope of securing an awareness of the totality as good, we turn to religion. Religion is the promise of a path to possessing this sense of ultimate goodness, and the provider of a group of companions, a community, along the way.

Many people have thought that religion arises as humanity's response to death. Humans are able to look ahead, to imagine their lives as a whole, and to ponder death—the great event that severs relationships still growing in love, that cuts short projects just beginning to bear fruit in new inventions, new goods for humanity. For some of us, a loved one's death might be the trigger to ask "How can the All of Everything be good if death is in it?" Others however can arrive at the question quite simply and naturally, for there are many kinds of pain and suffering. Death is one of them. Religion does aim to provide some solace about death, yet the larger question is the one that sets religion's mission and scope. Religion's challenge is to fulfill the yearning for a sense of holistic good, *without causing harm* to other yearnings of the human spirit, for truth, for beauty, for excellence, and for connection with all.

One of the major ways that religion tries to deliver on its promise is through the idea of God.

How does a God-religion use the idea of God to give people a sense of the goodness of the All of Everything?

Such a religion says, "Here is what you need to know. Here is what you need to believe and trust. Here is the conviction that you need. There is a Being greater than everything you know, outside of your biggest category of everything. We call this Being God. God created the universe and everything in it. Since God is good, then the All-of-Everything is



good, and if you line up with God, you can feel the inner peace of knowing that, in the end, it all adds up to being good for you."

God is one answer to the question "Is the All of Everything good?" The God-answer is Yes, because God is in charge of it, and God is good. This is the first principle in the Western religions. In Judaism, their first book of scripture, Genesis, begins with God creating heaven and earth, looking upon it, and proclaiming, "This is good." In Christianity, Jesus gave the #1 commandment as that of loving God, which implies that God is good. In Islam, the basic saying is "God is great," where "great" is the superlative form of "good."

This answer works. But the way in which it works shows that it is a pseudo-answer. It works because it befuddles the mind. Before hearing this answer, the mind is concerned with the reality it encounters every day, with finding out what is good and what is bad. And the mind asks the big question, but is everything together good?

Along comes the answer—there's a being in charge of the All of Everything, and this being, God, is good.

How there can be something that is outside of everything confounds the mind. Since the mind knows nothing about this mysterious being, it must fall back on trust. I trust my parents or some seemingly knowledgeable person, and so I give credence to the idea.

The trouble with this answer, however, is that the mind will automatically continue to apply its categories of something and everything. It will expand its circle of the All of Everything to include the being called God. Then it will wonder, Is this new expanded All of Everything good?

Many people will not allow themselves to be consciously aware of this question. They have become attached to the feeling of being secure in their God's world. So the God-answer does work, to an extent. God-religions thrive. But not completely. There is a great cost—the cost of repressing one's own natural thoughts, questions, and feelings. The storehouse of one's repressed contents grows, until there is an explosion or a crack in one's psyche, or leaks that strangely perturb one's relationships and life.

God then does not truly help religion to deliver on its promise.

Not only is God not necessary for religion, it is antithetical to religion's true purpose of bringing inner peace. This is desperately needed by people, as demonstrated by their mass willingness to fall for the sleight-of-hand.

How do we tell someone else that we not quite believe in their God?

If we have come to a personal conclusion about how the usual understanding of God has a fatal flaw, how do we answer the question, "Do you believe in God?"

It turns out to be not so simple.



It's a loaded question. If we respond directly, we will be taken in some way we do not intend. Answering it is like answering the question, "Are you still beating your wife?" Answering Yes or No will get you into trouble. You've got to say more than Yes or No.

The word "God" in the Western religions is a word for a being who is outside of Everything, which is impossible, because only Nothing is outside of Everything. But there is another use for the word God, more from the Eastern religions. It is to use the word to simply mean what I have been calling the All of Everything. God is not outside the All of Everything. God is the All of Everything. The All of Everything deserves a name of its own, because the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts.

If someone asks, then, Do you believe in God?, one way to respond is simply "Of course!" For we can take them to be asking, "Do you believe in the All of Everything?" instead of asking, "Do you believe in a Being that is outside of everything that is?"

But they probably don't have this Eastern meaning of God in mind. What they are really asking you is whether you believe in the same God that they do—a being outside the All of Everything and described in their religious literature. That is, they are asking, are you friend or foe? Are you going to be coming from the same framework of understanding as they are, or from some alien framework which might make you dangerous. "Do you believe in God?" means "Are you one of us?" So the question is often more of a test than a search for understanding.

In our culture, of course, we deal mostly with the Christian idea of God. A Christian will believe many things about God. One of the things that most Christians believe about God is that God is all-loving, indeed that God is Love. So if you say to a Christian, "I do not believe in God," what he or she actually hears you saying is that for you Love is not a real factor in the constitution of the All of Everything. This message can be totally shocking and frightening—to meet someone whose idea of the All is devoid of Love, someone, therefore, who is probably a sociopath. My wife Kathleen once told a boss of hers that the Ethical Society *as an organization* does not require belief in God. The climate in her office immediately turned cold toward Kathleen, and it may have been inevitable that about a year after that, with less and less support, she lost the job.

Thus, answering "No" to the question "Do you believe in God?" is the wrong answer, because it conveys a false impression—that love is not a major factor in your life. Since the idea of God is all-inclusive, generally, saying you do not believe in someone's God is tantamount to saying you dismiss everything in that person's world that he or she connects with God. So it's a trick question.

To answer truthfully, you have to say more than Yes or No. You have to say, at least briefly, what the universe is for you. So you could say, "Yes, for me God is the Good, and my highest duty is the ethical life." Or, "Yes, for me God is Love, and my highest calling is to love."

When I ask "Is God necessary for religion," I am asking if God is necessary for a religion to make good on its claim. Can a religion help people satisfy their deepest yearning without recourse to a belief in God and worship of God?



And if not God, What is necessary for a true religion?

Could it be mystical experience?

I have read that many people, perhaps most people, who have had some kind of mystical experience or a psychedelic experience, report years later that the experience was life-changing for them, with lasting repercussions for the good. If this is a fact, then it may be that such experiences do help people to come into a positive connection with the totality of reality. This doesn't mean that this is the only path to this positive outcome, and so we shouldn't say that mystical experience is necessary for a true religion. Nevertheless, a true religion will be open to all possibilities of aids to reaching the goal.

So perhaps full-blown ecstatic mystical experiences are not necessary, but my feeling is that the everyday analogues of mystical experience probably are: wonder, awe, and reverence.

Is community necessary? I would say yes. Yes, because community is the analogue of the connectedness of everything. A community can be good even when elements of it are painful or bad.

Is meditation necessary? I would say, in its general form, yes. For remember the neurological finding that contemplation on the largest themes actually changes the brain, strengthening the part of the brain that recognizes the connectedness of everything. We begin to relate to the All of Everything as to a community, which can be good even with some parts bad. I like to practice a very simple form of meditation which can take only a few seconds. Be quiet enough that you can hear what you couldn't hear before. Then get more quiet, so quiet that you are able to sense the quality of being itself, just being, and you will always discover that being has a quality of good. Being is not neutral. It's a powerful experience.

Is ethical living necessary? Again, I would say yes, and all religions encourage some form of moral self-discipline. The Ethical Societies take this as their starting-point. It is a path of love, with love being understood not sentimentally but as active deed. It is a way of attaining inner peace, discovering that reality is good, through the practice of engaging actively in the good.

I hope I've given you some thoughts worthy of further reflection, and I look forward to our discussion later this morning.

CLOSING WORDS

Be kind to people whose God-belief bifurcates their brain, for they seek only the good.

Be kind to people whose God bifurcates the world, dividing it into good people and bad people, believers and unbelievers, for they too seek only the good.

Let us seek to grow in the world forms of religion that do no harm and that truly fulfill that fundamental yearning for a sense of the goodness of all.