

Is Your Faith Different From Your Parents'?



It's a regrettable fact that our great learning seldom leads us to truth, but instead merely provides us tools to win arguments. Truth is very important, and the best way to guard it is to hold our beliefs near and examine them often. Beliefs should be held in a loose grip turning them around in the mind to see all sides. In our inspection, if what was thought to be true is found to be false, that belief should be modified or discarded. Truth is stronger than we realize, it does not need to be shielded from scrutiny.

As a biology student in college, I was taught that science is a process in which we observe phenomena, build hypotheses, test those hypotheses with experiments, examine the results, and then form conclusions based upon those data. Years of working in science-based companies side by side with other scientists showed me how infrequently that process is followed. The

approach that seems more common is to use a SWAG (scientific wild-ass guess) to formulate your hypothesis, design an experiment that will prove you're right, look at the data, and if the data doesn't support your hypothesis, reject them.

I may be exaggerating, but not as much as you might think. It's easy to fall into the trap of accepting our assumptions as truth. Our brains are very good at grasping information and correlating it to make conclusions, but they don't like to go back to reevaluate decisions they have already made.

We're also quick to believe what we're told. Years ago, some marketing genius changed the instructions on his company's shampoo to include "Lather, Rinse, Repeat." I understand sales nearly doubled because many people thought they had to lather twice. Sometime later, another sharp marketer at Colgate-Palmolive named their shampoo Lather Once Lustre-Creme, and added the slogan: "A shampoo so rich you only need to lather once." When I was six or seven my oldest sister was about eighteen. She was no dummy, but she told me she didn't use anything but Lustre-Creme, because with it you only had to lather once. Even as a young boy, I found myself questioning what I was told and as she walked away I thought, who said you have to lather more than once with any shampoo?

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I was raised in a Christian family and taught that the Bible was true. At church as well as at home, I learned the basic tenets of Christianity and accepted them as taught, but I also realized that being a Christian meant following the way of life I was taught and not just giving intellectual consent to the teachings. And that decision was up to me.

About the time I started school, I was walking one day up the road toward my house. I stopped and looked at the barn and the beautiful pasture beyond. It was over sixty years ago, but it is so clear in my memory that I could show you today where I was standing. I thought, I'm a bad boy — if I died right now I'd go to hell — I don't want to go to hell — but I like being a bad boy. After thinking about it for a while, I decided, I'm just a little kid, I've got time. At that point, I had not made a decision, but it wasn't long before I did.

One Sunday evening, we attended a church service and sang the old hymn: Love Lifted Me. The words of the song were,
“I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore.
Very deeply stained with sin, sinking to rise no more.
But the Master of the sea heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me, Now safe am I”

As a child, I couldn't swim, and I was terrified of the water. The imagery of those lyrics was not lost on me.

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Then we sang the chorus,
“Love lifted me, love lifted me,
When nothing else could help, love lifted me.”

I sensed an unexpected lightness. I felt like I was floating around the room looking down at the people sitting in the old green Naugahyde-covered theater seats. It wasn't scary or weird. I knew I was sitting in my seat, but I felt buoyed up and held by God. It was unique, and I have never had an experience like that again. The year is clear in my memory because the next day found me in Mrs. Carroll's first grade class during show and tell “Who wants to tell about their weekend,” she asked.

I went to the front of the classroom and tried to explain what I have never been able to put into words. I still remember the perplexed look on the faces of my friends and classmates.

Deciding to place your life on a certain trajectory, and following that path consistently, are not the same thing. Through my school years, I learned more about the Bible and grew in understanding of my faith, but I was a normal kid whose actions didn't always reflect his beliefs. Despite my inconsistencies, I continued to work through what I believed. My views were substantially the same as my parent's, but I continued to challenge those ideas to make sure of what I believed and why. I looked at what the Bible said on various topics and tried to

understand what it really meant.

I was taught inerrancy — that the bible was infallible. I still accept this, but with a qualifying explanation. I believe the Bible was inspired by God. The events described in the bible are very consistent overall, some details vary, but usually in ways that two eyewitnesses might tell the same story. Different writers give different details. There are also different genera. I don't necessarily expect history and poetry to treat details the same way, they have different goals. Biblical writers were of different cultures and from different periods of history. Ancient writers were not always chronological; they crafted the stories in different ways which may seem wrong to us. The point is that we can't hold ancient writings to a standard that was not intended by the authors.

In the science classroom of our high school was a poster on evolution, and as I walked into the class another student was asking the teacher if he believed in evolution or the Bible. Before the teacher answered, I asked the student how they were incompatible. Even though I believed in creation, I also realized that the language of the Genesis account of creation was somewhat poetic. Through college and some years beyond I still had this conciliatory view of our origins. I believed God created all life, but I was comfortable with the idea that He might have done it through a process of evolution. Sometime in my thirties,

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I mentioned my view of the creation vs. evolution debate to a Christian friend who also carefully thought through his beliefs. He challenged me to look at evolution more carefully. After examining my beliefs and testing what I had accepted, I had to change my view. I still believed God created everything, and I still believed the Genesis account was somewhat poetic, but I realized that evolution was a statistical impossibility. I'm not sure how all of it happened, but evolution simply cannot explain the facts. It leaves too many unanswered questions. Most people simply sweep those questions under the carpet, but the sheer number of issues is making the carpet lumpy.

At various times in my life, I've wondered if God exists at all. Thinking about the question, I came up with a simple version of Pascal's Wager. I reasoned that if God didn't exist there was no afterlife, and it made no difference whether I lived a good life or not. But, if God did exist, the way I lived determined my eternal destiny. The logic was compelling, but there was no satisfaction in this argument. I didn't want to play it safe; I wanted the truth.

Some people think that the big bang somehow makes God unnecessary, but it doesn't take him out of the equation at all. Most scientists accept that at the big bang matter, energy, space, and time came into being. Before that there was nothing, and then in an instant there was everything. One of the most fundamental principles of science is the law of cause and effect,

nothing in the universe happens without a cause. Suspending this law once nullifies all science. If one thing happened without a cause, we can no longer be certain of anything. If there is matter and energy — and there is — something had to cause it. This cause must be something other than matter and energy since those are part of the effect. The cause must also be outside of space and time since those didn't exist before the moment everything came into existence. This does not prove the existence of God, but it does make it plausible. Science is the study of matter and energy, and many scientists assume there is nothing outside the realm of science. But for matter and energy to exist, there must be something that is non-matter and non-energy.

Let's go on to the origin of life. In 1952 The Miller–Urey experiment attempted to replicate conditions in prebiotic earth and resulted in a few amino acids, the building blocks of proteins. However, to create life there must be a way to make complex proteins from those amino acids, and that does not happen by accident. Protein synthesis is a complex process within living cells, the amino acids cannot assemble themselves. To make things just a little more difficult amino acids exist in two different forms, D and L, which are mirror images of one another. Only the L isomer is found in living systems. The Miller–Urey experiment and all subsequent experiments

produced both forms. Even if there was a mechanism for making proteins, there would also have to be a mechanism for choosing only the L amino acids.

If all of these conditions were met and all of the other building blocks for a living system were available, and if all those building blocks were somehow assembled in the right order, how would it become alive? We can't even define life. We certainly cannot make a pile of chemicals, even the right chemicals, come to life.

I won't go any further down this particular rabbit hole, but it is a very deep hole. Let's just say that I have been able to convince myself that there is a God. Again, my beliefs are fundamentally the same as my parents. The path to that conclusion may have been different from theirs, but the destination was the same.

Thus far my mental ramblings have convinced me that there must be something beyond the material time-bound universe in which we live, something that brought all that into being, but what is it? Logic alone cannot answer that question, but we can employ the scientific method, hypothesize, determine what we would see if the hypothesis were true, and look for those things.

My hypothesis is first that there is something with the power to create, something that is not matter or energy, and not bound by space or time. I further hypothesize that this being did create all we see. I will call this being God, but at this point, I don't know

this being's attributes.

We can observe that people tend to be obsessed with a search for meaning which seems to suggest we are not the result of a completely random and meaningless process. If God created people with this hunger for meaning, it seems reasonable that he would give us a way to find what we crave. Perhaps He would communicate with us in some way. If that is so, we might expect this communication to be unique.

I have spent years studying the Bible, and in it have found what I believe is a unique communicate. I don't want to get mired down in the details, but the Bible is inimitable in many ways. It was written over a period of time exceeding a thousand years by some forty different authors from different geographical regions and different social environments. Its authors include kings, priests, fishermen, herdsmen, prophets, and a doctor. Yet this anthology presents a stunningly consistent message. This message itself is unique in religious literature, telling us of redemption and grace rather than earning God's favor by obeying all the rules. There are many commandments, but rather than condemning us, they show us how to live. When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment He replied with two: Love God with your whole heart, and love people in the same way you love yourself. Then he added, "All the law and prophets hang on these two commandments."

While in college, I attended a community lecture given by my philosophy professor. He had been asked to speak on the world's religions, but he said he couldn't do justice to that topic in one lecture. Instead, he shared his spiritual journey. He said, "I was raised as a Presbyterian. When I went to college, I became an atheist because that's what you do in college. When I became a philosopher, I thought a philosopher should have a religion, but it should be the most logical religion." He then described how he had studied the religions of the world, including spending five years learning Sanskrit so he could read the Hindu texts without translation.

He started ruling out various religions that offered no hope or were philosophically inconsistent. Finally, he had narrowed his list down to three, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but it was very difficult for him to choose the most logical of these. Eventually, he realized that Christianity was the most logical religion because it was the most illogical. Christianity was the only religion he had ever encountered in which a righteous and omnipotent God saved his rebellious people by becoming one of those people, entering his own creation, and dying to pay for their sins. He said, "That concept would never have occurred to a man, it would be unthinkable. That could only have come from God."

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Throughout my life, I have tried to test my beliefs and make sure they are something I can stand on. I'm thankful for the beliefs I was taught as a child, and I am also glad I challenged them. For the most part, my beliefs have stayed the same, but I have been able to clarify them for myself.