

Psychological Science and Spiritual Pursuits

David G. Myers

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As I explain in *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils*¹, today's cognitive science reveals some astounding powers (and notable perils) of human intuition. This growing scientific appreciation of nonrational, intuitive forms of knowing lends credence to spirituality. Great activity lies beneath the ocean's surface, and perhaps untapped wisdom resides beneath our conscious, rational mind. Hamlet was surely right: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Science also informs the spiritual quest as it helps us winnow genuine from pseudo spirituality. When people make certain claims of spiritual intuition, science can test them. Putting spiritual claims to the test may sound like letting the scientific fox into the spiritual chicken coop; but actually a religious mandate for science exists—even science applied to religion.

The Religious Mandate for Science and Skepticism

Religion and spirituality come in two forms: 1) Dogmatic faith—absolute certainty in one's convictions—feeds fanaticism. I am right; if others disagree, they are wrong. 2) Humble faith feeds openness, dialog, and searching. As a finite and fallible human, I am sometimes wrong; if others disagree, we may each have something to learn. "Judge not."

Humility lies at the heart of theology. Biblical monotheism, someone has said, offers two simple axioms: 1) There is a God. 2) It's not you. These axioms mandate humility, and humility lies at the heart of science. "Lord, I have given up my pride and turned away from my arrogance," wrote the author of Psalm 131.² Biblical spirituality understands the Psalmist's humility, views human reason as limited, and implies that our most confident belief can, therefore, be the conviction that some of our beliefs are in error. In the Reformation tradition, theology itself must be ever-reforming its always imperfect understandings. In principle if not always in practice, people of faith can readily accept Cromwell's plea to "think it possible you may be mistaken."³ They can test their ideas against the axioms of their faith, against the historic convictions of their community, and against the insights of science.

Humility also lies at the heart of science. What matters in science is not my opinion or yours, but whatever truths nature reveals in response to our questions. If people don't behave as our ideas predict, then so much the worse for our ideas. Historians of science remind us that many of the pioneers of modern science were people whose faith made them humble before nature and skeptical of human authority. One of psychology's early mottos expressed this humble attitude: "The rat is always right." It is also the testing attitude commended by both Moses—"If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord and what he says does not come true, then it is not the Lord's message" (Deut. 18:22)⁴; and St. Paul—"All must test their own work" (Gal. 6:3-4a).⁵

Humility, that synthesis of faith in God and skepticism of human presumption, helps us critique certain spiritual claims, challenging some and affirming others.

Near-Death Experiences

"A man . . . hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body . . . and sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. . . . Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before—a being of light—appears before him. . . . He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body and lives."

This passage from Raymond Moody's bestselling book *Life After Life* is a composite near-death experience.⁶ Near-death experiences are more common than one might suspect. Several investigators each interviewed a hundred or more people who had come close to death through physical traumas such as cardiac arrest.⁷ In each study, 30% to 40% of such patients recalled a near-death experience. When George Gallup, Jr. (who contributed an essay to this volume) interviewed a national sample of Americans, 15% reported having experienced a close brush with death. One-third of these people—representing eight million people by Gallup's estimate—reported an accompanying mystical experience.⁸ Some claimed to recall things said while they lay unconscious and near death. (But then, anesthetized surgical patients in a "controlled coma" are sometimes not as out for the count as surgical teams might suppose. Occasionally, they can later recall operating room conversation or obscure facts or words presented over headphones.⁹

Moody's description of the "complete" near-death experience sounds peculiarly like psychiatric researcher Ronald Siegel's descriptions of the typical hallucinogenic experience.¹⁰ Both offer a replay of old memories, out-of-body sensations, and visions of tunnels or funnels and bright lights or beings of light. Patients who have experienced temporal lobe seizures also reported profound mystical experiences, as have solitary sailors and polar explorers while enduring monotony, isolation, and cold.¹¹ Oxygen deprivation can produce such hallucinations. As lack of oxygen turns off the brain's inhibitory cells, neural activity increases in the visual cortex, notes Susan Blackmore.¹² The result is a growing patch of light, which looks much like what one would see moving through a tunnel.

Perhaps, then, the bored or stressed brain manufactures the near-death experience, which, argued Siegel, is best understood as "hallucinatory activity of the brain."¹³ It's like gazing out a window at dusk: We begin to see the reflected interior of the room as if it were outside, either because the light from outside is dimming (as in the near-death experience) or because the light inside is being amplified (as with an LSD trip).

Some near-death investigators object. They report that those who have experienced both hallucinations and the near-death phenomenon typically deny their similarity. Moreover, a near-death experience may change people in different ways than a drug trip. Those who have been "embraced by the light" may become kinder, more spiritual, and more devout in their life-after-death belief. And even if the near-death experience is hallucinatory, might it not also be a genuinely mystical, authentic, and rare opportunity for spiritual insight? Skeptics reply that these effects stem from the death-related context of the experience. When near death, people worldwide sometimes report intuitions of another world, although their content varies with the culture.¹⁴ Under stress, the brain draws on what it knows.

Spirituality and the Good Life

Scientists have similarly challenged spiritual claims of conversations with the dead, reincarnation, and miracles called up by people with a supposed hotline to God. After discarding spiritual "bath water," does a spiritual "baby" remain? Can one challenge the sort of spirituality that gives spirituality a bad reputation without expressing a condescending cynicism toward all spirituality?

Medicine, twisted, can kill people. But far more often, medicine enhances life. Can the same be said of religion? In both *The Pursuit of Happiness* and *The American Paradox*¹⁵, I explore evidence pertinent to religion's adaptiveness. Here is a quick synopsis of four links between an active faith and health, well-being, and goodness.

Health: Recent epidemiological studies comparing health and longevity in secular and religious Israeli kibbutzim, and among religiously active and inactive Americans, find consistent correlations between religion and health. One recent national health study following 21,000 lives through time revealed that life expectancy among those never attending church is 75 years, but 83 years among those attending church more than weekly. For several reasons, an active faith is nearly as strongly associated with longevity as is nonsmoking.¹⁶

Happiness: Many studies have also found correlations between faith and "subjective well-being" (happiness and satisfaction with life). For example, in National Opinion Research Center surveys of 40,167 Americans since 1972, 26% of those never attending religious services reported being "very happy," as did 47% of those participating in services more than weekly. Faith, it seems, connects us with others, engenders meaning and purpose beyond self, provides a grace-filled basis for self-acceptance, and sustains our hope that, in the end, the very end, all shall indeed be well.

Coping: One national survey found that people who had recently suffered divorce, unemployment, bereavement, or serious illness or disability retained greater joy if they also had a strong faith.¹⁷ Compared with religiously inactive widows, recently widowed women who worship at their church or synagogue report greater well-being.¹⁸ Compared with irreligious mothers of children with developmental disabilities, those with a deep religious faith are less vulnerable to depression.¹⁹ "Religious faith buffers the negative effects of trauma on well-being," concluded University of Texas sociologist Christopher Ellison.²⁰

Goodness: Does faith feed morality and compassion, as Senator Lieberman argued during the 2000 presidential campaign? No way, said *New York Times* columnist Natalie Angier: "No evidence supports . . . the canard that godliness and goodliness are linked in any way but typographically."²¹ But Angier is demonstrably wrong: The 24% of Americans who attend church weekly give 48% of all charitable contributions to all causes in the United States and are twice as likely as the irreligious to volunteer among the poor, infirm, and elderly. Moreover, in areas where churchgoing is high, crime rates are low. Even the unbelieving skeptic Voltaire recognized the faith-morality connection: "I want my attorney, my tailor, my servants, even my wife to believe in God," he said. "Then I shall be robbed and cuckolded less often."²² And consider: Who is most likely to sponsor food pantries and soup kitchens? Who took medicine into the Third World and opened hospitals? Who sheltered orphans? Who spread literacy and established schools and universities? Who led movements to abolish the slave trade, end apartheid, and establish civil rights? Who most often adopts children? The answer to all these questions is the

same.

Let no one get smug. As Steven Pinker noted, faith sometimes provides justification for greed, war, bigotry, and terrorism. The Christian writer Madeleine L'Engle acknowledged as much: "Christians have given Christianity a bad name" (and some Muslims and Jews have done the same for their faiths).²³ No wonder that Stephen Jay Gould could write that much of his "fascination" with religion "lies in the stunning historical paradox that organized religion has fostered, throughout western history, both the most unspeakable horrors and the most heartrending examples of human goodness."²⁴ The "insane courage" that enabled the horror of 9/11 "came from religion," noted Richard Dawkins.²⁵ If "a martyr's death is equivalent to pressing the hyperspace button and zooming through a wormhole to another universe, it can make the world a very dangerous place," he concluded. Although the worst genocides have mostly come from irreligious tyrants (Mao, Stalin, and Pol Pot) who did not value fellow humans as "God's children," religion's record is indeed mixed. Still, on balance, the evidence now suggests that faith more often breeds health, happiness, coping, character, and compassion.

All this cannot tell us whether spirituality pursues an illusion or a deep truth. Is "God" merely a word we use to cover our ignorance? Is spirituality an opiate of the people? Or is it human ignorance to presume God's absence from the fabric of the universe? If we are honest with ourselves, we cannot know which is right. In the dark of the night, the theist and atheist will each have moments when they wonder whether the other might be right. Perhaps all spiritual intuitions are illusions. Or, perhaps those missing a spiritual dimension are flatlanders who miss another realm of existence. If we could prove the nature of ultimate reality, we would not need faith to bet on God's existence.

Lacking proof or certainty, should we straddle the fence with perfect indecision? Sometimes, said Albert Camus, life beckons us to make a 100% commitment to something about which we are 51% sure. Credit Dawkins for the courage to get off the fence and stir the debate. It is understandable that the successes of scientific explanation combined with the superstition and inhumanity sometimes practiced in religion's name might push some people off the fence toward skepticism. And credit people of faith, including those who practice faith-based skepticism, for venturing a leap. Many do so mindful that they might be wrong, yet bet their lives on a humble spirituality, on a fourth alternative to purposeless scientism, gullible spiritualism, and dogmatic fundamentalism. They can root themselves in a spirituality that helps make sense of the universe, gives meaning to life, opens them to the transcendent, connects them in supportive communities, provides a foundation for morality and selfless compassion, and offers hope in the face of adversity and death.

Although we're all surely wrong to some extent—we glimpse ultimate reality only dimly, both skeptics and faithful agree—perhaps we can draw wisdom from both skepticism and spirituality. Perhaps we can anchor our lives in a rationality and humility that restrains spiritual intuition with critical analysis and in a spirituality that nurtures purpose, love, and joy.

Endnotes

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- [5] St. Paul: Galatians 6:3-4a, New Revised Standard Version.
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