

Persistence of Belief in a Purposeful Universe

BY RALPH LEWIS

OVER THE LAST FEW CENTURIES RELIGION HAS BEEN slowly eroding in Western societies—a process that has accelerated in the last few decades, especially in recent years. Despite this decline, many people still cling to vague notions of some sort of purposeful universe by way of a higher power and higher plan.

I see this in many of my patients, like Liam (the patient's identifying details have been altered to preserve his anonymity). He was referred to me for psychological support after his wife Angie had been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer two months earlier. He had taken on the massive responsibility for devising a cure for Angie and this had left him overwrought with anxiety and exhaustion from staying up night after night researching alternative cancer therapies and spiritual healing. This had also left him with no energy to devote to the couple's two preschool children during the day. Initially fired up with motivation and optimism by taking this on, his feeling of responsibility had rapidly turned into a crushingly heavy burden. He felt that her life depended on his getting it right.

Liam was a devotee of Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle, taking to heart Chopra's claim that 95 percent of our genes can be influenced by our consciousness and Tolle's exhortation to undergo a transformation of consciousness and spiritual awakening to achieve a life of health and bliss. Liam and Angie had stopped attending their Catholic church years before, partly out of disillusionment and disgust about sex abuse scandals and partly because they felt they had outgrown what they considered an outdated system of beliefs inherited from naïve ancient cultures. They had come to consider themselves spiritual but not religious: They believed in a higher purpose and

higher power in the universe, but not the personal God of the Bible. To them, the universe was at some profound level suffused with consciousness—some sort of eternal universal consciousness that was the primary driving force underlying everything—the force that had brought everything into existence. Liam was persuaded by Chopra that we live in a “human universe”—one that depends upon humans for its very existence, making us not just an accidental byproduct in some remote corner of a vast indifferent cosmos. Liam was also impressed by Chopra's theory that our minds are the creators of external reality at all levels, from the creation of the universe as a whole to the genetic mutations causing cancer.

So Liam pored over spiritual health websites trying to discover what kind of spiritual dissonance had caused Angie's cancer. He reasoned that something must have caused her mind-body energy fields—her chakras—to lose their state of harmonic resonance. Perhaps it was something emotionally unresolved from her past. He strongly suspected a particular incident in their relationship might have caused it. When I gently suggested to him that the causes of Angie's cancer were in all probability essentially random, he could not at first get his head around this seemingly radical idea. Randomness implied meaninglessness, he protested; even worse, it implied powerlessness. “I can't just go along passively with the odds her oncologists pronounce. She's not a statistic. She's the most special human being in the world to me. Are you telling me all this is just an accident? Not just her cancer but her very existence, all of our existence. Everything?! Man, how nihilistic is that! And that implies that if she dies, then it's simply

Excerpt from *Finding Purpose in a Godless World: Why We Care Even if the Universe Doesn't* by Ralph Lewis. From Chapter 4. “Persistence of Belief in a Purposeful Universe.” With permission of the author.

over—her beautiful spirit and life just evaporates? I just can't accept that this is all there is."

My initial attempt to persuade Liam of the randomness of Angie's cancer was mistimed. The idea felt too pessimistic to him at that early stage of the crisis, when he needed to feel a sense of control. But I was afraid for him: what would happen when Angie succumbed to her cancer, which she inevitably would, even though conventional treatments might control the cancer for some time. I knew Liam had a history of harsh self-blame and feelings of failure predating all of this. I feared he would be psychologically destroyed by his inability to save Angie. And he was wasting precious time and energy on the futile quest for spiritual healing while there was urgent work to be done in their marital relationship—a relationship that had difficulties long before Angie's cancer. What she really needed was for him to be there for her, practically and emotionally. Most important, their young children desperately needed Liam to be present and active as a parent while Angie was incapacitated by fatigue and other side effects of her chemotherapy.

Slowly, Liam was able to see all this for himself and he gradually came to understand that his belief that Angie's cancer was a manifestation of spiritual dissonance within a purposeful universe was already leading to self-blame and feelings of failure. He was slowly but surely liberated and empowered by an understanding and acceptance of the randomness of her disease. He began to devote more of his time and efforts to the crucial practical priorities of building his relationship and parenting his children.

Liam's story demonstrates the fairly common persistence of "spiritual-but-not-religious" beliefs accompanying the decline of religion in the West. And it reveals some of the reasons why this is happening, among the most common being the assumption that complete abandonment of all spiritual belief and acceptance that the universe is random and purposeless would render life meaningless and would leave us feeling powerless. More implicitly, it also hints at anxiety about the finality of our own mortality, a topic which I explore further in *Finding Purpose in a Godless World*.

The decline of religion in the West began with the Enlightenment. The 18th century European Enlightenment marked the first serious questioning of religious faith within Western societies, although the Church's absolute power and



Illustration by Ástor Alexander

authority had already been partially undermined during the 16th century Protestant Reformation. Immanuel Kant, perhaps the most influential of all Enlightenment philosophers, argued that the European Enlightenment marked a separation between childhood and adulthood for humankind, a readiness to question authority and think for oneself. Kant felt that “religious immaturity” was “pernicious” and “dishonourable.” In his 1784 essay, *What is Enlightenment*, Kant wrote (<https://ntrda.me/2Gzwifi>):

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity...it is all too easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians. It is so convenient to be immature! If I have a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual advisor to have conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any efforts at all. I need not think, so long as I can pay; others will soon enough take the tiresome job over for me. The guardians who have kindly taken upon themselves the work of supervision will soon see to it that by far the largest part of mankind (including the entire fair sex) should consider the step forward to maturity not only as difficult but also as highly dangerous. Having first infatuated their domesticated animals, and carefully prevented the docile creatures from daring to take a single step without the leading-strings to which they are tied, they next show them the danger which threatens them if they try to walk unaided.

He went on to argue that freedom and courage are needed to overcome this immaturity and that reason should be used publicly in all matters. His motto for a meaningful life was “Dare to know!”

Since the Enlightenment and the era of modernity that it ushered in, Western scholars have been questioning ancient authority and ancient wisdom. They have questioned why so much authority has been given to the writings of unsophisticated people of the Ancient Near East, given their highly limited, narrow knowledge of the world. Scholarly biblical criticism in the 19th century began to provide evidence confirming what many had begun to suspect: that the revered scriptures were entirely the product of people, not God, and were situated within specific historical contexts (in more recent years, archaeology has provided more definitive substantiation of this).

The Enlightenment had been inspired by the scientific revolution, which had begun in the 17th

century. As science advanced, it systematically contradicted or disproved various tenets of faith, undermining trust in religious authority. This process began with Galileo’s proof of Copernicus’s hypothesis that the Earth revolves around the Sun, contradicting Church doctrine that the Earth is the center of the universe. Galileo was persecuted by the Church in Rome for heresy, and was forced to recant. It took an embarrassingly long time before the Roman Catholic Church finally officially admitted in 1992 that Galileo was right.

Modern science became spectacularly successful, leading not only to new insights about the nature of reality, but producing useful technologies that revolutionized every aspect of day-to-day life. Quality of life and health were greatly improved, and people began to trust science more than religious authority, at least on nonspiritual matters. Initially, scientists did not necessarily consider themselves antagonistic to traditional religion. Newton, for example, felt that he was delineating the laws of nature and the regularities of the universe that God had ordained. Only later did modern scientific naturalism seek to explain the world in terms of fully natural, rather than supernatural, processes. Darwinian evolution was the most dramatic example of this, fatally undermining the foundation for traditional religious beliefs about Creationism within the field of biology.

Several other factors that focus more squarely on the negative impact of religion have also contributed to the steady erosion of faith in Western societies over the last few centuries. These include the increasing recognition of the mixed legacy of religions, especially with respect to (1) fostering compassion versus fueling intolerance, brutality, and war and (2) providing insight into the human condition versus impeding rational free-thinking enquiry. In addition there has been growing disillusionment with institutional religions due to realization of their role as instruments of societal control and patriarchal power, which are prone to corruption and abuse.

It’s important to note that the modern movement away from religiosity in Western societies has been accompanied by counter-trends, most notably the rise of Christian evangelism in the United States in the late 20th century. Also, a sizeable minority of Jews in Israel and elsewhere is returning to Orthodoxy. However, these counter-trends have been occurring against the backdrop of larger

secularizing trends within Christianity and Judaism.

Beyond just a questioning of religion, outright nonbelief has increased in the first part of the 21st century, and many Westerners are now willing to publicly declare their atheism. This process gained momentum after 9/11, with widespread public revulsion to religious fundamentalism. Another important factor related to the spread of atheism (and agnosticism) is the pace of new scientific insights within the past couple of decades, which have radically shifted worldviews among those who understand their full significance.

The Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study (<http://pewrsr.ch/1FhDs1C>) found that "nones" (people who self-identify as atheists or agnostics, or say their religion is "nothing in particular") made up roughly 23 percent of the U.S. adult population. This was a dramatic increase from 16 percent in their 2007 study. In 2014, a third of nones were atheists, answering "no" to the question "Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?" Younger Americans are even more likely to be religiously unaffiliated and more likely to be atheists. For example, the General Social Survey (GSS) reported that 20 percent of a nationally representative group of Americans reported no religious preference in 2012 compared with just 8 percent in 1990 (<http://bit.ly/2sbZYJj>). The GSS also found that lack of religious preference was more common among younger Americans. Corresponding statistics in other Western countries reveal similar trends toward loss of religious belief (<http://bit.ly/1VprJc2>).

Like Liam, many people still cling to a basic notion of some kind of higher power with a plan or purpose for the universe. For example, the 2012 General Social Survey, despite finding a high percentage of religious non-affiliation, found that only 3 percent of Americans identified as atheist and that the percentage answering yes to the question: "I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind" actually increased from 6.6 percent in 1991 to 11.6 percent in 2013 (<http://bit.ly/2sbZYJj>). Even in the Pew study, which reported a higher percentage of atheists (a third of the 23 percent of nones), most of the religiously unaffiliated respondents answered "yes" to the question "Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?"

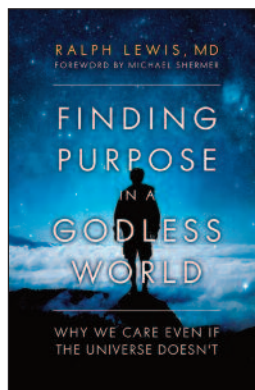
There are many other forms of post-religious beliefs besides New Age spirituality that attract people and that involve some sort of idea that the

universe is inherently purposeful. For example, my own previously held notion (fairly widely but loosely held by many secular-oriented educated people) that there is some form of intentionality underpinning the laws of nature—I vaguely imagined some kind of non-anthropomorphic abstract force that gave rise to the universe and that possibly continues to guide it in some poorly-defined way.

In my book I consider some of the reasons why many people in modern societies are increasingly questioning the fundamental basis of religious beliefs or now find them untenable, and consider why belief in a purposeful universe persists despite a decline of religious faith. Specifically, I consider the "big questions" that most compel people to search for purpose in the universe:

- "Why is there something rather than nothing?" and "How could something come from nothing?"
- "How could order arise from disorder?"
- "How could matter become alive, let alone become conscious and self-aware, and how could this happen spontaneously and unguided?"
- "How is it possible that our conscious selves could have formed as temporary phenomena and then just evaporate into utter nonexistence?"
- "How could human purpose, morality, and meaning have arisen in the absence of a higher power, and without being completely arbitrary?"
- "Would loss of belief in a higher power and a higher plan result in nihilism?"

It is the assumption that the big questions are beyond the realm of science, and the related assumption that a world reducible to scientific explanations would be a nihilistic world, that is the primary focus of the book. ■



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