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Is God an Accident of Evolution? The Next Step in Evolutionary Theory

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Strangely enough, those prophecies have not proved to be accurate. To the contrary, a belief in God still characterizes the vast majority of human beings who, as the prophet Isaiah understood, will invent a god of their own imagination even if they do not know the one true God. Paul Bloom understands this. A professor of psychology at Yale University and author of *Descartes' Baby*, Bloom argues that human beings are wired for a belief in God. Not that he believes in God himself, mind you. Bloom is a determined rationalist and self-declared atheist. Nevertheless, he finds the persistence of belief in God to be a conclusive proof for Darwin's theory of evolution. Bloom's argument is worth a closer look.

In "Is God an Accident?," an essay published in the December 2005 edition of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Bloom sets his case clearly. "The United States is a poster child for supernatural belief," he observes. "Just about everyone in this country—96 percent in one poll—believes in God. Well over half of Americans believe in miracles, the devil, and angels. Most believe in an afterlife—and not just in the mushy sense that we will live on in the memories of other people, or in our good deeds; when asked for details, most Americans say they believe that after death they will actually reunite with relatives and get to meet God. Woody Allen once said, 'I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying.' Most Americans have precisely this expectation."

With that sentence, Bloom acknowledges what many others will not—that it is theism rather than atheism that is the normative belief of most Americans—and most others around the world, for that matter.

The prophets of secularization most often point to the advanced democracies of Western Europe, where very low rates of church participation and religious belief are often observed. Yet, Bloom is convinced that low church attendance does not mean that most of these persons have no belief in God whatsoever. Furthermore, he acknowledges that Western Europe is the anomaly, not the United States and the rest of the world. "After all, the rest of the world—Asia, Africa, the Middle East—is not exactly filled with hard-core atheists," he explains. "If one is to talk about exceptionalism, it applies to Europe, not the United States."

Beyond this, Bloom effectively deflates the secularist assumptions of the political elites, pointing out that the vast majority of persons who voted for Senator John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election identified themselves as

“religious.” This flies in the face of many in the academy who argue that belief in God, in any concrete and specific sense, is largely limited to the so-called red states and Christian conservatives. Even most scientists believe in God in one sense or another.

“These facts are an embarrassment for those who see supernatural beliefs as a cultural anachronism, soon to be eroded by scientific discoveries and the spread of cosmopolitan values,” Bloom asserts. “They require a new theory of why we are religious—one that draws on research in evolutionary biology, cognitive neuroscience, and developmental psychology.”

Bloom sets out to provide just such an explanation. He considers and then dismisses the functionalist theories offered by sociologists in recent times, focusing instead on an understanding based in evolutionary science. In essence, Bloom argues that belief in God is itself an accident of evolution. What he calls “the religion-as-accident theory” asserts that belief in God is a function of the fact that human beings are wired to believe in a distinction between the physical and the psychological.

“Where does the distinction between the physical and the psychological come from?” Bloom asks. “Is it something we learn through experience, or is it somehow pre-wired into our brains? One way to find out is to study babies. It is notoriously difficult to know what babies are thinking, given that they can’t speak and have little control over their bodies But recently investigators have used the technique of showing them different events and recording how long they look at them, exploiting the fact that babies, like the rest of us, tend to look longer at something they find unusual or bizarre.”

In essence, Bloom argues that the study of infants indicates that human beings, from the earliest stages of conscious life, possess a thought pattern that distinguishes between physical and psychological realities. Making the distinction between bodies and minds, these babies appear to be pre-wired to believe in something like a soul.

In a fascinating anecdote, Bloom recalls a conversation he had with his six-year-old son, Max. “I was telling him that he had to go to bed, and he said ‘You can make me go to bed, but you can’t make me go to sleep. It’s *my* brain!’ This piqued my interest, so I began to ask him questions about what the brain does and does not do. His answers showed an interesting split. He insisted that the brain was involved in perception—in seeing, hearing, tasting and smelling—and he was adamant that it was responsible for thinking. But, he said, the brain was not essential for dreaming, for feeling sad, or for loving his brother. ‘That’s what *I* do,’ Max said, ‘though my brain might help me out.’”

In other words, Max had conceived his personality as distinct from his brain—the psychological as distinct from the physical. From this starting point, Bloom argues that the move to believe in the survival of a soul after death—an afterlife—seems both short and natural.

Similarly, Bloom argues that human beings are also wired to be creationists. Bloom is a champion of evolutionary theory, but he is not willing to call creationists stupid. “Richard Dawkins may well be right when he describes the theory of natural selection as one of our species’ finest accomplishments; it is an intellectually satisfying and empirically supported account of our own existence,” Bloom affirms. “But almost nobody believes it.”

This is what drives so many evolutionary theorists crazy—the persistence of the belief that the cosmos can be explained only by a Creator. Bloom points to evidence indicating that the vast majority of Americans, including those with a college education, believe that God created human beings in their present form and largely reject Darwin’s theory of evolution.

While evolutionists like Richard Dawkins look down upon creationists with scorn, Bloom offers psychological understanding. As he sees it, “The real problem with natural selection is that it makes no intuitive sense.” Bloom compares evolutionary theory to quantum physics, arguing that such ideas “will never feel right to us.” As he explains: “When we see a complex structure, we see it as the product of beliefs and goals and desires. Our social mode of understanding leaves it difficult to make sense of it any other way. Our gut feeling is that a design requires a designer—a fact that is understandably exploited by those who argue against Darwin.” Throughout his essay, Bloom argues that children are actually *more* religious than their parents—more inclined to belief in God, more likely to assume a Creator, and more trusting in the assurance that the soul exists and will survive death.

All this makes for fascinating reading. Paul Bloom stands out among his fellow evolutionists in terms of his basic

understanding of how religious belief functions and why it is so pervasive—even in the postmodern age. He argues that belief in God is an “accidental by-product” of other evolutionary developments. For some reason (and Bloom goes so far as to suggest some of these reasons) human beings possess an ability to detect pattern and to infer a designer. Belief in a supernatural deity seems to be wired into the human species. Bloom resists the intellectual scorn and condescension of evolutionists like Dawkins. Instead, he soothingly assures us that belief in God is simply an accident of evolution—and an accident that has outlived its usefulness.

In the concluding section of his essay, Bloom argues that religion and science are implacable foes. He clearly wants the scientific to triumph over supernatural ideas, but he believes that this will come about when humans discover that their beliefs in the supernatural are simply by-products of the brain’s evolution.

Paul Bloom’s essay—and his intellectual project—represent a challenge to Christian thinking. His observations about infants and the near universality of belief in God serve as useful refutations of many trends in contemporary thought. If nothing else, his cogent observations along these lines will serve to refute the argument of the secularists.

Still, Christians know that Bloom’s explanation is almost precisely wrong. There *is* a universal awareness of the divine, but this is not an accident of evolution but the gift of the Creator.

As John Calvin explained, “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of the divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops.” As Calvin further explained, “from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all.”

Nevertheless, Calvin explained that the combination of ignorance and sin explains why some reject the existence of God altogether while multitudes of others worship idols or gods of their own invention.

Given his worldview, Paul Bloom would have us to recognize that we have outgrown the idea of God and that human beings should embrace a secular and scientific worldview, leaving the infantile residue of evolution behind. Christians will look at this same evidence and draw the opposite conclusion—that the persistence of belief in the divine is evidence of the way our Creator has made us and a reminder of the imperative of evangelism—preaching the Gospel to those who are groping in ignorance and confusion. Oddly enough, God leaves evidences of himself in very strange places—even in essays written by atheists.

