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Also published as "Being Not Quite 100% Atheist"

I'm an atheist. So why can't I shake God?

A woman holds a rosary during a Christmas mass.

Elizabeth King
Special to The Washington Post

I spoke in tongues when I was a kid. I went to church twice a week with my mom, stepdad and five siblings. I prayed before every meal, every night before bed and at various times throughout the day. I believed in the Bible, and I feared hell. Until my mid-teens, I was a "born again" Christian who loved God with all her heart. These days, though, I'm an atheist with nothing to prove.

The story of my departure from the church resembles those of many others who have abandoned the flock. When I was about 16, I started asking questions during services that my youth pastors couldn't or didn't want to answer: Why is it a sin to be gay? Why is it OK to spank children? Where does the Bible say we can't have premarital sex?

Youth leaders at my church smugly told me, when they answered at all, that I must be struggling with some things in my own heart to be so concerned about these topics; sometimes they pointed to a vague Bible passage. When I persisted, I was told to just "have faith."

Soon, I didn't. I didn't believe there was a God, or heaven and hell. It wasn't even a choice that I made. I just slowly stopped believing until all of it was gone.

Always lurking

Or so I thought.

Although I've been a content atheist for a decade, somehow God has found a way to stick around in my mind. Not the God of the Bible who created heaven and Earth — the God that lingers with me is harder to explain. The best way I can think of to describe it is like a character from a movie that I've seen over and over, or like the memory of my first friends. He's not real, but He's present.

The idea of God pesters me and makes me think that maybe I'm not as devoted to my beliefs as I'd like to think I am and would like to be. Maybe I'm still subconsciously afraid of hell and want to go to heaven when I die. It's confusing and frustrating to feel the presence of something you don't believe in. This is compounded by the fact that the God character most often shows up when I'm already frustrated.

"Why, God, why?" I ask myself when I've procrastinated before a deadline and am scrambling. When I experience mansplaining, I think, "I swear to God . . ." And I don't merely say these colloquially or as a joke. It's more a habit, from having spent so much of my life believing that I could expect answers to these questions. Even though now I know that nobody is "up there" to reply, I can't help but ask.

It's of some comfort to me, though, to know that I'm not the only one who feels this way. According to a Pew Research Center poll about religion and atheism last year, 8 percent of self-identified atheists believe in God or a "universal spirit." Not a huge proportion, but considering that an atheist is by definition a person who denies the existence of God, that 8 percent highlights something very curious about belief.

If asked whether I believe in God, I would answer with a quick and emphatic "no." But given that I will send a word up to a proverbial heaven if I'm on a turbulent flight, or silently ask that someone make sure my little niece and nephew stay safe, I can appreciate how some atheists may be inclined to say they believe.

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Mind games

I might be able to blame my lingering religiosity on my brain — our minds demonstrate a physical response to spiritual activity. In one study, Franciscan nuns, Tibetan monks and Pentecostals all showed similar brain activity on a scan when engaged in prayer, meditation or speaking in tongues; blood flow changed between different lobes of the brain, creating powerful emotions. As the researcher on the study, Andrew Newberg, put it, “It certainly looks like the way the brain is put together makes it very easy for human beings to have religious and spiritual experiences.”

Neuropsychology is also at play. According to Pascal Boyer of Washington University in St. Louis, research suggests that our cognitive systems evolved in a way that makes believing easy. In a 2008 essay for the journal Nature, Boyer wrote that several features of the human brain predispose us to religious belief. Among the psychological tendencies complemented or satiated by religious beliefs are an ability to relate to unreal or unseen figures (imaginary friends, deceased relatives, etc.), a desire to avoid danger, and the uniquely human ability to be a part of and maintain massive social structures. Research also suggests, Boyer writes, “that people best remember stories that include a combination of counterintuitive physical feats . . . and plausibly human psychological features. . . . Perhaps the cultural success of gods and spirits stems from this memory bias.”

Boyer contends that there is not one part of the brain solely responsible for religious belief, but rather that the particular overlap of several cognitive systems renders religious beliefs desirable to, and easily acceptable by, the human mind. This also means that when we opt for atheism, we are doing hard work to battle against what our minds are generally inclined and well-equipped to do: believe.

Boyer’s hypothesis rings true for me. Believing in God felt very natural. Internal red flags about logic and the ethical consequences of my faith didn’t start appearing until I was nearly an adult and had begun the difficult work of thinking through my beliefs. This meant research, debate and critical thinking before I eventually arrived at an atheistic understanding of the world. Not only is this enterprise mentally taxing, but for people who move from belief to nonbelief, it can also be painful.

Not 100 percent

I remember the exact moment I noticed that I was an atheist. It hurt to realize that the beliefs I had held so dear for so long were (in my mind) totally wrong. I also hated the idea that I probably had hurt others as a result of my religious devotion, a realization that brought about feelings of shame and regret. Meaningful epiphanies are not always pleasant.

Even within what seem like black-and-white issues of religious or nonreligious, God or no God, there are subtle differences in the way we believe. In 2015, Pew reported that 89 percent of Americans believe in God, and 63 percent feel certain that God exists — which is to say, they don’t harbor doubt about whether there is a God. (The share of people who say they are certain of God’s existence has dropped; it was 71 percent in 2007.) The same survey found that 97 percent of religiously affiliated Americans believe in God, meaning a curious 3 percent of self-identified religious people do not. So although I, the atheist, can’t stop myself from tossing up the occasional prayer, someone is out there kneeling in a pew, head bowed but mind free from any thought of a higher being. They do say faith is mysterious.

I’m not sure what to do about God. If I could figure out a way to banish this figure from my psyche, I would. But psychology is not on my side. Having been conditioned to believe in God for so many years, and having a brain hard-wired for belief, I may be stuck with his shadow forever. While I remain steadfast in my (non) belief, I also feel I have no choice but to accept that I’m an atheist with a sense for God and that without this kink in my beliefs, I might not strive to understand myself better.

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Elizabeth King is a writer in Chicago.