should be. There are many truths in this world to live by, and if, after careful deliberation and consideration, one prefers an orthodox and traditional religious answer, that is commendable.

As the years progress, however, can we afford to exclude an ever-larger, sincerely candid cohort from our political spectrum? When we force our politicians to parade an unqualified belief in God, aren't we predisposing ourselves to be led by those who are evermore wily and disingenuous?

In our world of scientific, historical, cultural, and psychological breakthroughs, there is bound to be incredulity. Never in the last 2,000 years have a people been more confounded about religious issues than we are today, as the conflicting evidence mounts and becomes harder to ignore. To preclude those who doubt from representing us in public life is to disqualify an important and growing segment of our population, and is to lose perhaps the most aboveboard and perceptive segment of our people.

"Mankind are very odd Creatures," argued Benjamin Franklin in Poor Richard's Almanack. "One Half censure what they practise, the other half practise what they censure; the rest always say and do as they ought."

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When Explaining Is Explaining Away

Tom Flynn

Critics accuse secular humanists of reductionism, of assuming too hastily that mundane physical explanations explain away the need for mystery. Yet a sufficiently powerful explanation will explain some mysteries away. For example, once one truly understands the idea of living on a rotating planet, ancient notions of the sun circling the Earth lose all force despite our naïve experience of its east-to-west procession through the sky. A firm grasp of evolutionary theory dispels the need to posit a cosmic designer. Today, brain research is providing mundane explanations for phenomena that many relied on to demonstrate the existence of the supernatural.

"Religious experience" or "mystical experience" is an altered state of consciousness in which one's perceived relationship to the world shifts profoundly. One may feel oceanic oneness with the universe, or an eerie sense of encountering some exalted Other. Like out-of-body experiences and near-death experiences, mystical experience is valid in the very limited sense that some people genuinely have the experience. But it's subjective—a trick the brain plays on us, not an experience of anything real in the world.

New technologies that image blood flow and electrical activity in the conscious brain show how the trick is played. Recent studies reveal the mechanics of religious experience so fully that little room for mystery remains. University of Pennsylvania neurologist Andrew B. Newberg imaged the brains of meditating Tibetan Buddhist adepts. He found more activity in the frontal lobe, associated with concentration, and less in the parietal lobe that is thought to generate our sense of the body's orientation in space. Result: an intensely "real" sensation of passing outside the physical world—and a powerful, purely physical explanation for the sensation of oneness with the cosmos. What about encounter experiences? Michael Persinger, a Laurentian University neuroscientist, fits volunteers with a helmet that swirls weak electromagnetic fields into their temporal lobes. About 80 percent clearly experience a numinous Other; most interpret it in religious terms. Persinger draws the conclusion any atheist would: "Religion is a property of the brain, only the brain, and has little to do with what's out there."

Others disagree, Newberg for one. His book Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief triggered a spring flood of media attention, including a Newsweek cover.
story. To Newberg, the fact that religious experience has specific brain mechanisms is actually a sign that God exists: humans are hard-wired for religion because God gave us this avenue by which to experience him. University of Kansas psychologist Daniel Batson agrees. He scoffs at reductionism: "To say the brain produces religion is like saying a piano produces music."

Such arguments share an underlying desperation. The faithful yearn to cling to God, or spirituality, or the oneness of being while accommodating scientific findings that scour the foundations out from under those beliefs. As Christian philosopher Nancey Murphy admitted to the Washington Post, brain research into religious experience "reinforces atheistic assumptions and makes religion appear useless. If you can explain religious experience purely as a brain phenomenon, you don't need the assumption of the existence of God." Hear, hear.

Religious experience hasn't merely been explained. It's on the threshold of being explained away, if that hasn't already occurred—a development secular humanists should welcome. Believers will go on spinning rationalizations, trying to reconcile ancient mystical ideas with research findings that make them unnecessary. They'll probably generate a few more best-sellers along the way. But I can't help thinking that on some level, the Andrew Newbergs of the world already know they've lost. 

Notes

Tom Flynn is editor of Free Inquiry.

About the Op-Eds
Free Inquiry's op-ed section strives to present the full range of secular humanist opinion. Humane nontheists hold varying political and social views. Guest columnists' views are their own and may not reflect the position of the Council for Secular Humanism.