

Why we Believe (or Not)

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Many people seem to believe that there is a one-size-fits-all reason as to why people believe or disbelieve in God. However, in reality, there are many reasons why people embrace or reject a belief in God; and some people have more than one reason.

I have never assumed that my reasons for believing and then not believing in God were the same for everyone else. I believed in God because, like most people, I was inculcated with the God belief by my family, friends, neighbors and society long before I had reached the age of reason. In other words, I never really had a chance.

It seemed to me that the universe and life were obviously designed by God. Later, I had been exposed to the ideas of creationists and Christians that believed in biblical prophecy. It all just seemed to make good sense.

However, eventually, I was exposed to the ideas of freethinkers, atheist philosophers, comparative religionists, deep Black historians, skeptical biblical scholars and scientific critics of creationism. It was just a matter of time before I rejected the God concept.

Others have rejected the God concept due to religion's oppressive nature. Some Blacks have rejected the entire God concept because "sacred texts" condone slavery. Other Blacks have rejected a belief in God because many White Christians were hypocrites that believed in oppressing and discriminating against Blacks.

Some poor people have rejected a belief in God because many religious beliefs make and keep people poor, looking for pie-in-the-sky in the bye-and-bye. Similarly, some women have rejected a belief in God because of the patriarchal nature of many religions, especially Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Some people no longer believe in God because their prayers were not answered. Others, confronted with the unsolvable problem of evil, have concluded that God simply cannot exist.

There are those that believe in God because the belief is emotionally satisfying. That is to say, it feels good. Some believe because they fear death and want to be reunited with their loved ones in the afterlife.

Some do not believe at all but merely “get with the program” because they enjoy the art, music and sense of community for which religion is responsible. There is also a corresponding fear of being ostracized by believers should they admit to their atheism.

According to his biographer David J. Garrow in *Bearing the Cross*, Martin Luther King almost became an atheist. This is not surprising. While at Boston University, he learned about the pre-Christian savior gods after whom Jesus was modeled. However, what kept King in the church was the concept of Agape, or Christian love. It was this deep altruistic love that was primarily responsible for his continued embrace of the Christian faith.

Some people maintain that humans are genetically predisposed toward theism. Some even go so far as to claim that there is a specific God gene responsible for theism in humans. Others do not go that far but claim that a belief in God probably had been advantageous in our evolutionary past and has simply persisted unto the present day.

The genius of the late Paul Kurtz was that he understood that there are many reasons why people believe or disbelieve in God. He helped establish Secular Organizations for Sobriety, headed by James Christopher, to help recovering alcoholics and drug addicts from a secular perspective. He supported secular rites of passage and non-religious ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. He supported secular Sunday schools for children. He appreciated secular music with powerful uplifting messages. He helped form the Secular Humanist Aid and Relief Program (SHARP), which later became the Secular Humanist Aid and Relief Effort (SHARE). This organization was formed to donate money to people who were victims of natural disasters or “acts of God. (As secular humanist Tom Flynn used to joke, “When God beats up on you, we’re there.”)

Kurtz did all of this and more. Yet some of his critics complained that he was taking on the trappings of religion. These critics do not understand that a dry rationalism simply will not do the trick for everyone. Many atheists also have

other needs. They want to help others. They have deep emotional needs. They want to get married. They want to mourn their loved ones. There is simply no good reason why religious institutions should be the only ones that can fulfill these needs. European humanists have brought many people into the movement by offering secular alternatives to religious ceremonies. There is no reason why American humanists should not do the same.