

Chapter 4: Conditioning, Curiosity, and Discovery

Conditioning

Several factors seem obvious in predicting someone's religious faith. The major ones in order of their ranking would appear to be:

Family— It is clear that family has the most influence on someone's religion. From a child's earliest days, this influence is nurtured, practiced, and honed to a fine degree. Growing up under this influence may make it almost impossible to see an alternative philosophy—hence the title of this book **Make The Break** (If You Can).

Society— Next to family, the extended family consisting of the local community or society as a whole, brings a sizable influence on the individual. In many situations, the society and its culture is just an extension of family beliefs and values.

Birthplace (Country)— In many ways, this is just a statistical influence. Your chances of being a member of a particular religion if born in country x, y, or z would be expected to track the percentages of people practicing a particular religion in that country. For example, the probability of finding a Christian in Iran is very low. Likewise, the probability of finding a Jew in Japan or India is not so good!

It is interesting to note that the influences listed above are similar to the primary influences on the individual considered by Confucius (the state, society, and the family). His philosophy also encouraged the exercise of the reverse process in order that the individual could influence the virtue exhibited by politicians and the state.

Among other factors influencing the flock, obviously, are those people who truly believe the doctrine and are active in its dissemination. With the exception of some recently revealed un-priestly behavior with regard to young children. Most clergy are good people and have your salvation and the community's best interest at heart. They were most likely indoctrinated at an early age to believe in a particular faith. The clergy have, in addition, been schooled in a particular doctrine for the majority of their careers. However, because they have been exposed to a liberal education, one might surmise that they have also had doubts along the way.

In all of the above, the choices provided the individual are limited. Wouldn't it be nice if the individual could first become an adult, study the various religions and philosophies, and then be allowed to make a reasoned choice?

Coming back to the influence exercised by the family on the young, it has been suggested that this constitutes a form of psychological child abuse [Dawkins, R. (2006)]. As children grow to adulthood, it is hard for them to come to terms with both the mythical ideas and reality. On a sad note, these children may also miss out on the fascinating and beautiful aspects of science, and the rewards of further study and research to benefit mankind. Often, the mythical beliefs become an obsession, making the individual a danger to society and to himself or herself.

On another level, the advent of TV has spawned a rash of what one could refer to as "The Merchants of God," some of whom have amassed huge sums of money. So much money has been garnered that universities have been spawned to continue the indoctrination and to present a good image. For other merchants, it is just sufficient to ask you "to continue to pledge in order to keep us on the air!" Some of these charlatans are so obvious in their deception; it is hard to realize that there are millions of people (often the poorest among us) who still fall for their gimmicks.

Curiosity

Curiosity is inherent in the human psyche. No amount of conditioning (indoctrination) can quell our curiosity and yearning for knowledge for long.

The first line above is attributed to Albert Einstein. The second line was added here to reflect the observation that the questioning of mythical details is often a losing battle due to ingrained prejudices and finely tuned and practiced arguments. A religious person develops a mythical picture satisfying their own individual needs. Religious practitioners and others reinforce this picture on a daily basis. Mythical stories, however, deviate more and more from the actual events with the passing of each generation. Succeeding storytellers embellish their tales to make them more interesting.

Humans also seek meaning and purpose in life, and religion has provided a broad framework from which they can easily find answers. Most of the answers, however, are couched in mythology and are hard to incorporate into modern day living. Despite this, every religion and philosophy has provided humanity with some good rules for living.

Today, there is strong emphasis on attaining wealth and the happiness that it may bring. In many cases, however,

individuals have attained great status, power, and sensual gratification, but happiness and meaning have eluded them. Gardner in his book *Self-Renewal* [Gardner, J. W. (2000)] defines happiness as:

The storybook conception tells of desires fulfilled; the truer version involves striving toward meaningful goals—goals that relate the individual to a larger context of purposes. Storybook happiness involves a bland idleness; the truer conception involves seeking a purposeful effort. Storybook happiness involves every form of pleasant thumb-widdling; true happiness involves the full use of one's powers and talents.

For some people, the development of a particular talent or profession provides a mechanism for fulfillment and happiness. For others, volunteerism in providing comfort for their fellow humans is fulfillment.

Discovery

Ultimately, the healing power of knowledge will prevail. In the information age, I hope that the following progression, styled after T.S. Eliot, prevails:

It is not necessary to explain everything we do not understand as the manifestation of some supernatural force. It is a mark of true maturity to be able to function in the absence of certainty. Questioning and skepticism define the scientist, not confidence and certainty. Scientific observations and theories have been developed by careful and detailed investigations.

Science is an inquiry carried on by people who raise questions for which answers are unknown, but who have gained confidence in their ability to reach conclusions, albeit tentative ones, through experiment and careful thought sharpened by the open criticism of others. (Physics in Perspective, National Research Council, March 17, 1972)

Many people are often in awe (and fear) of science. This fear is natural because scientists develop a highly sophisticated vocabulary specific to their discipline. The public is traditionally asked to accept their analyses and conclusions without question. This exclusion from the science is beginning to change as scientists begin to interact more with the public. In the final analysis, however, we rely on the individual to assimilate the knowledge and then synthesize it with his or her own personal wisdom.

Scientific discoveries cannot be scheduled or fit into a predetermined ideology. All of us enjoy the multitude of modern day scientific discoveries and developments that have made our lives easier, healthier and more productive. There are literally thousands of medical discoveries that give us prolonged, healthy lives. In the information age, scientific developments include television, cell phones, the Internet, and many others. Intelligent Design (ID) discoveries, on the other hand, are contained in a bare cabinet. Nevertheless, ID advocates make good use of the electronic developments mentioned above to promulgate their ideas, particularly the Internet. Would they forgo the use of these developments in order to maintain the purity of their message? One also wonders, if upon being admitted to a hospital, ID advocates would shun the many medical treatments that have been developed by science? If such a patient were to restrict treatments to only ID discovered and developed medicine, procedures, and drugs, heaven is just around the corner!

Religion is an inquiry into origin where answers are based in belief only. There are no experiments, observations, criticism or objectivity. In addition, the tenets of most religious beliefs are contradicted by physical and biological evolution. To discover one's own truths with regard to evolution of the universe and human origin is a slow, laborious process and requires knowledge in various fields: hence the easy acceptance of ready-made orthodoxies of every kind.

In order to arrive at the truth, every mythical statement has to be challenged before continuing to the next step, just as is practiced in science. In matters of faith and the unexplained, the truth is always there; one just needs help (knowledge) in revealing it. By refusing to recognize the accumulated state of knowledge, religion practices the highest state of arrogance: **Conscious Ignorance**. In one case, this becomes "dominion over all," much to the detriment of many living things! The practice of "dominion" is a formula for Earth's demise, which is beginning to show its ugly head in the rapidly accelerating extinction of species. In another case, clerics and their flocks attempt to force their beliefs on society as a whole with disastrous results—often supported by politicians, for electability.

Religion misconstrues many events. Simple statistical arguments are misinterpreted because of ignorance of the established science. For example, the Iranian earthquake of 2003 killed at least 30,000 people in the ancient city of Bam. A few people survived and were recovered in the rubble—these were attributed to a miracle. One has to ask just what was God's influence relative to the 30,000? Were they all sinners? In this instance, the miracle might better be referred to as a "fortunate circumstance" or "just plain luck." Another more pointed example was the great Lisbon earthquake (and tsunamis), which occurred while worshipers were gathered for mass on All Saints' Day in 1755. At the time, this sparked a lively debate about divine justice! But surely all of these parishioners were not sinners, too!

Science and exploration have come a long way. Only 450 years ago, Earth was thought to be the center of the universe. In 1492, Columbus showed that you could not reach China by sailing west from Europe, but did “discover” a new land for exploitation. A few years later, in 1507, 100 years before the founding of Jamestown, the earliest known map showing “America” was drawn on 12 wood panels. Today, science is expanding at an incredible rate and it is difficult even for researchers to keep up in their own fields. It is not surprising, then, that the assimilation of new knowledge about the universe, Earth, biology, etc., by the multitudes has been slow.

This is deplorable, because an educated populace is a necessity in order for humanity to advance in the twentieth-first century, and it is necessary for people to clear their minds of mythical stories. In their defense, most people have not had the background, the time, or easy access to information to study these topics. This is changing as modern scientific advances make life easier and provide more free time and information.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the Internet provides a wealth of information for almost any selected subject. Most of the references provided in this book are not technical articles, but are selected for informative, but enjoyable, reading. Each, however, is ultimately based on technical articles. For example, the Cosmic Vista poster, recommended in Chapter One, was published in *Astronomy* magazine in October 2005, but is based on a technical article by R. Gott, et al., which was published earlier in the peer-reviewed *Astrophysical Journal*, Volume 624, p. 463, (2005).