

I spent my childhood experiencing some of the more intense, but not necessarily intellectually coherent, forms of American Protestantism — charismatic Christianity and Pentecostalism, tongues speaking and revivalism. Then, with my family, I converted to Catholicism as a teenager.

When you convert at a young age, it's natural in midlife to think about how your worldview has changed since that conversion. I have a clearer sense of why one might reject the stark binary choice between the Catholic church or nonbelief, and why the religious future — as far as we can see it — will remain more complex than just “Rome and the atheists” battling things out. It reflects the fact that I've entirely lost what faith I once had in the plausibility and durability of atheism.

The first shift has a moral, a theological, and a sociological component. Morally, the experience of the Catholic sex abuse crisis, which broke a little while after my conversion, gave me a clearer sense of why a reasonable Christian might retain faith in Jesus Christ while doubting the hierarchical order of the Roman church. Theologically, the shift from the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI to Francis has revealed an instability in Catholic doctrine, a lack of synthesis between the church before the Second Vatican Council and the church after, that was less apparent in my youth.

And then, sociologically, Catholicism has remained extremely successful at winning intellectual converts. Yet it is weaker as a mass religion than it was when I joined the church — and Christianity is not supposed to be a faith just for the intelligentsia. One need only look around the Christian world, whether at church attendance patterns in the United States or at the growth of charismatic and nondenominational Protestant churches in Africa and Latin America, to see that the future will be shaped powerfully by a kind of a Christianity that is neither Roman Catholic nor simply a stalking horse for secularism.

So in all this, I find it easier to understand how someone can be Protestant or Eastern Orthodox than I did as a new-minted Catholic convert. But at the same time, I find it much harder to understand how someone can be a convinced atheist.

Twenty years later, I'm still searching for atheism's solid reasons. I understand perfectly well how a reasonable person could have doubts about the exact nature of God, his specific intentions or his perfect goodness, or any of the particular claims that Christianity makes about the divine.

But the idea that the universe and human existence have no plan or intentionality or purpose behind them, that mind, consciousness, reason, logos are purely epiphenomenal rather than fundamental, that our existence is finally reducible to the accidental, to the undesigned, to the bouncing billiard balls of hard material determinism — I don't see how anyone can reasonably believe this.

I don't see how anyone can believe it given everything that we know now, not just about the basic order of the cosmos, but about the exquisite fine-tuning required to give rise to stars, planets, life itself. (The attempt by atheistic intellectuals to find refuge in the theory of the multiverse, which casts our universe as a rare life-supporter among trillions of dead ones that we can never actually observe, seems similar to the epicycles attached to the Ptolemaic system when it became clear it couldn't accurately describe reality.)

I don't see how anyone can believe it given the resilient mystery of consciousness and the ways in which it seems to be integrally connected to the basic order of the universe — both in our reason's ability to explore and comprehend level upon level of the system, heights and depths far beyond anything linked directly to the evolutionary needs of early hominids, and in the mystical-seeming link between observation and reality, the mind's eye and the material, that quantum physics has revealed.

And I don't see how anyone can believe it given that religious experience, all the weird stuff of mysticism and miracle, has not only persisted under supposedly disenchanted conditions but even revealed itself in new ways (near-death experiences, for instance) because of the ministrations of modern science.

We have done away with the cultural rule of religion, the institutional structures that many Enlightenment-era atheists believed imposed supernatural beliefs on a naïve population. And yet those beliefs have persisted, and in some cases even spread, because it turns out that supernatural-seeming experiences, intimations of transcendence that fall on nonbelievers as well as on the faithful, are just a constitutive part of reality itself.

At the very least, it seems clear to me at midlife that a religious perspective on reality, a basic assumption that all this was made for a reason and we are part of that reason deserves to be the serious person's intellectual default.

It's a perspective that makes coherent sense out of multiple features of reality, multiple converging lines — the evidence for design, the distinctive place of human consciousness, the varieties of religious experience — that atheism struggles and fails to reduce away.

And if that answer opens into further questions, further debates, I expect those debates to be different than just a clash between my own Catholic Christianity and the heirs of Voltaire and Richard Dawkins. Not just because the debates among different kinds of Christians will go on, but because the weakness of atheism means that eventually — and, in fact, soon if not already — the main alternative to Christianity may be something quite different from Enlightenment rationalism, something that blends the pagan and promethean, seeking supernatural as well as natural power. In that case, Christians of all kinds will be facing a spiritual rival, not a secular or atheistic one, in the contest for the human soul.

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