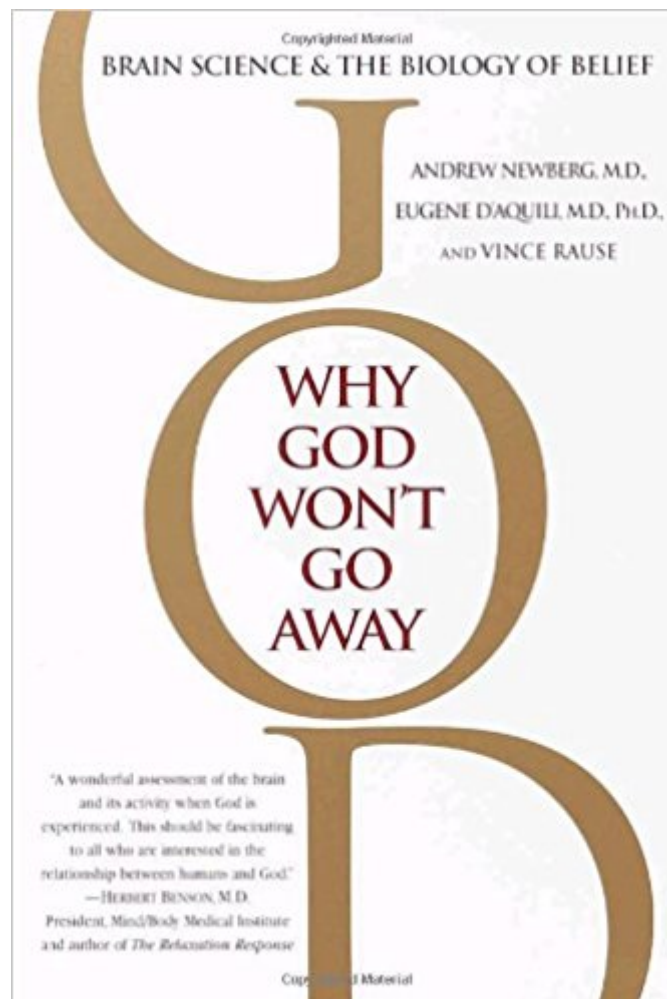


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Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science And The Biology Of Belief



Synopsis

Why have we humans always longed to connect with something larger than ourselves? Even today in our technologically advanced age, more than seventy percent of Americans claim to believe in God. Why, in short, won't God go away? In this groundbreaking new book, researchers Andrew Newberg and Eugene d'Aquili offer an explanation that is at once profoundly simple and scientifically precise: The religious impulse is rooted in the biology of the brain. In *Why God Won't Go Away*, Newberg and d'Aquili document their pioneering explorations in the field of neurotheology, an emerging discipline dedicated to understanding the complex relationship between spirituality and the brain. Blending cutting-edge science with illuminating insights into the nature of consciousness and spirituality, they bridge faith and reason, mysticism and empirical data. The neurological basis of how the brain identifies the "real" is nothing short of miraculous. This fascinating, eye-opening book dares to explore both the miracle and the biology of our enduring relationship with God.

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Customer Reviews

Over the centuries, theories have abounded as to why human beings have a seemingly irrational attraction to God and religious experiences. In *Why God Won't Go Away* authors Andrew Newberg, M.D., Eugene D'Aquili, M.D., and Vince Rause offer a startlingly simple, yet scientifically plausible opinion: humans seek God because our brains are biologically programmed to do so. Researchers Newberg and D'Aquili used high-tech imaging devices to peer into the brains of meditating

Buddhists and Franciscan nuns. As the data and brain photographs flowed in, the researchers began to find solid evidence that the mystical experiences of the subjects "were not the result of some fabrication, or simple wishful thinking, but were associated instead with a series of observable neurological events," explains Newberg. "In other words, mystical experience is biologically, observably, and scientifically real.... Gradually, we shaped a hypothesis that suggests that spiritual experience, at its very root, is intimately interwoven with human biology." Lay readers should be warned that although the topic is fascinating, the writing is geared toward scientific documentation that defends the authors' hypothesis. For a more palatable discussion, seek out Deepak Chopra's *How to Know God*, in which he also explores this fascinating evidence of spiritual hard-wiring. --Gail Hudson --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The collaborative efforts of science writer Rause, radiologist Newberg and psychiatrist d'Aquili (Newberg's late colleague at the University of Pennsylvania) result in a murky and overspiritualized remix of what should be a compelling scientific investigation into the neurology of mystical experience. The book's best material is its summary of Newberg and d'Aquili's research using advanced imaging technologies to study brain activity during "peak" meditative states, which not only suggests a characteristic radiological profile but also uncovers some specific correlations between brain function and subjective religious experience. For example, in subjects who reported a feeling of infinite perspective and self-transcendence during meditation, the researchers identified decreased activity in the brain's "object association areas" where perceptions of the boundary between self and other are normally processed. The authors conclude that these experiences are the result of normal, healthy neurophysiology, not to be dismissed as pathological or random events a point that believers and practitioners will doubtless appreciate. But the broader questions these results suggest questions about the origins and significance of human religious behavior lead the researchers quite out of their depth into a speculative rehash of Joseph Campbell, comparative religion and sociobiology. This culminates in a confused and confusing discussion of what it means to accept that religious experience is "neurologically real" or that spirituality "does us good."

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Even though this book was published 15 years ago, the research it's based on hasn't quite made it to the public sphere. And some of the work being done from this research has done everything possible to eliminate a Christian base by citing on the Zen monks as the sole research subjects.

The book is even-handed in dealing with all major religions, and I'm grateful that the authors didn't succumb to the zeitgeist and eliminate their research on Christian faith and Christian forms of prayer. I'm impressed that any scientist would be willing to suggested physical evidence for a non-rational experience, but this is what they've done. The book occasionally skirts the atheist's assumption that science can explain everything. I wish all those scientist who assert that God doesn't exist because we can't find him (with our limited sense based perceptual capacities) would take a hard look at the research referenced in this book. Now I want even more research.

It's a miracle!! Half like it, half don't. Perhaps a few less reactionary and emotional responses would be nice. Admittedly, this book is a chimera, positing reasonable hypotheses and presenting data, then waxing philosophical. However, to the rational naysayers I say that this book does NOT make any claim that the netherworlds of God exists, other than in the imaginations of the brains that conceive them. This would make the scientist smile and the believer cringe, maybe. In the end, we are all bent in both directions, living simultaneously rational and religious/ritualistic lives; scientists and philosophers. If you can't admit to that, you are either lying to yourself, or you are headed full speed for a Jungian enantiodromia. OK both Good luck!! for one enjoyed this little book Signed, The Devil

The religious worldview has been contrasted with the scientific one for the last five hundred years, but even more so in the last one hundred and fifty, due mostly to the advances and different perspectives in biology. It would be fair to say though that the religious worldview has "survived" the scrutiny of science, and that religion, in many different forms and holding to many different deities, is alive and well. Many have predicted the demise of religion due to scientific advances, but this has not yet happened. In fact, just the reverse has happened: religious belief has increased at a time when scientific advances have been the most rapid. In retrospect it is perhaps not surprising that this has happened. Science does not answer as of yet many fundamental questions that are deemed important by many to the human condition, such as the possibility of life after death. In addition, some of the scientific and technological advances have themselves caused extreme anxiety, motivating some to seek the spiritual comfort of religion. In the last few decades, advances in neuroscience have offered another challenge to religious belief. These advances have called into serious question the notion of free will and even that of personal identity. Further, many of the researchers in this field have claimed that religious feelings and visions are nothing other than neuronal activities in the brain. These researchers have not explained however the evolutionary

advantages of these feelings, if any. The authors of this book examine the evidence for the view that religious thought is purely neuronal, and the evidence that it can be given a purely naturalistic explanation. If religious belief or mysticism can be giving a purely biological grounding, this would be of significance to those who want to devote their lives to its practice. The authors' discussion is highly interesting, especially the first five chapters, where they discuss many of the latest results in neuroscience. The book is written for a general audience, and so no background in neuroscience is assumed. However, readers could appreciate the book more if they come to the book with some knowledge of the brain regions and neuronal processes, and familiarity with the experimental techniques used in the imaging of the brain. One of the more interesting discussions in these initial chapters concerns the authors' notion of "cognitive operators", which represent the collective functions of different structures of the brain. As an example of a cognitive operator, they give the one that is responsible for solving mathematical problems. This mathematical cognitive operator thus represents all of the structures and functions of the brain that are responsible for arriving at the solution of these problems. The notion of a cognitive operator is thus a kind of coarse-grained representation of brain activity, as it does not make explicit reference to the activities of individual neurons. As the authors explain, cognitive operators shape thoughts and feelings, but are not themselves ideas. A cognitive operator could be viewed as somewhat similar to the concept of a 'schema' that has been floated about recently in the literature on cognitive neuroscience. The authors discuss eight cognitive operators that they believe are most relevant to religious experience: the 'holistic operator', which, as the name implies, enables one to view the world as a whole, and arises in the activity of the parietal lobe; the 'reductionist operator', which allows the world to be dissected into its component parts; the 'abstractive operator', which forms general concepts from the perception of individual facts, finds links between facts; the 'quantitative operator' which allows the abstraction of quantity from percepts; the 'causal operator', which allows the interpretation of events as sequences of causes and effects; the 'binary operator', which allows space-time relationships to be reduced to simple pairs of opposites (up-down for example); the 'existential operator', which gives a sense of existence to sensory information processed by the brain; the 'emotional value operator', which assigns emotional responses to the processes of cognition and perception. The functioning of all of these operators, the authors assert, can be observed using brain imaging techniques, such as PET and fMRI. The authors do not depart from the neuroscientific viewpoint that whatever a human experiences can be associated with activity in certain regions of the brain. Therefore if an individual is having a genuine experience with a deity, it will show up in brain activity. This opens up the possibility of doing controlled experiments that show what areas of

the brain are active when certain individuals are having religious or mystical experiences. Myth-making, ritual, and other activities associated with religion are not a cause of alarm for the authors. Many have taken these activities to be proof of the scientific inadequacy of religion, but they are very comfortable in using them as support for their belief that the brain is actually meant for communication with a deity. Indeed, religious ritual results in neurological effects that convert a religious belief into a religious feeling. This allows the actual experience of the presence of a deity, an experience that mystics have reported throughout the ages. Humans, in the view of the authors, are compelled to act out their myths due to the neurological processes of the brain. They also want to distinguish between mysticism and psychotic delusion, arguing in particular that hallucinations cannot provide the mind with an experience that is as "convincing" as a mystical one. Mystical experiences are rich and coherent, and are actually remembered in the same way as ordinary past events. Further, mystical spirituality beings as an act of free will, and results in what the authors refer to as 'deafferentiation' in certain areas of the brain. This results in the "loss of self" that can accompany mystical experiences. The authors' assertions are interesting, and they clearly believe that they have given evidence that experience of a deity is in fact real. One could just as easily argue that these brain activities are mere fantasies. The authors acknowledge this also.

This is a great book to help Atheists understand to be more tolerant of those of faith. It explains religious beliefs are more than just early childhood development and a set of ideas forced into someone over and over. It delves more into the evolutionary reasons for the persistence of religious belief. If you want to understand why many people when presented with what some may consider a dramatic lack of evidence still cannot let go of religious thinking this book offers up some interesting insights.

I love this book. I had it in hardback but wanted to have ready access to it for reference so I purchased it on my Kindle. Exciting to see science take a serious look at the possibility that there may be more to God and its influence on man than the eye can see.

This is one of the most thoughtful and logical books that I have ever read. It helps resolve some of the conflict between science and the need people have to see that the life's journey may include a soul search for unity with some sort of wholeness, whether one chooses to call the wholeness God or perhaps joy, love, inclusion, whatever.

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