

My Assumptions

As a Christian monotheist and a psychological scientist, I approach life and work with two unoriginal assumptions: that (1) there is a God and (2) it's not me (and it's also not you). Together these axioms imply my surest conviction: some of my beliefs (like yours) contain error. We are finite and fallible. We have dignity but not deity.

This biblical understanding is why I further believe that we should hold our own untested beliefs tentatively, assess others' ideas with open-minded skepticism, and when appropriate, use observation and experimentation to winnow error from truth.

This ideal of faith-supported humility and skepticism, arising from a religious tradition that calls itself "reformed and ever-reforming," has helped motivate my own research and science writing. Truth cannot be found merely by searching our own small minds; there is not enough there. So we put our ideas to the test. If they survive, so much the better for them.

A FRIENDLY LETTER TO SKEPTICS AND ATHEISTS

If they crash against a wall of evidence, it is time to rethink. “All truth is God’s truth,” we’re fond of saying. So let the chips fall as they may.

Within psychological science, this ever-reforming process has many times changed my mind, leading me now to believe that newborns are not the blank slates I once presumed, that electroconvulsive therapy often alleviates intractable depression, that America’s economic growth has not improved our morale, that the automatic unconscious mind dwarfs the conscious mind, that personality is unrelated to birth order, that traumatic experiences rarely get repressed, that most folks have positive self-esteem (which sometimes causes problems), and that sexual orientation is not a choice.

Not all questions are amenable to science. Leo Tolstoy’s short list of ultimate questions—“Why should I live?” “Why should I do anything?” “Is there in life any purpose which the inevitable death that awaits me does not undo and destroy?”—are beyond the bounds of my psychological science. But science can shed light on most of today’s culture war issues. If we think capital punishment does (or does not) deter crime more than other available punishments, we can utter our personal opinion. Or we can ask whether states with a death penalty have lower homicide rates, whether their rates have dropped after instituting the death penalty, and whether they have risen when abandoning the death penalty.

In checking our personal opinions against reality, we emulate the empiricism of Moses: “If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord and what he says does not come true, then it is not the Lord’s message.” The same empirical spirit was exemplified in the New Testament by the wise Gamaliel when religious leaders wanted to kill the apostle Peter and his compatriots for refusing to submit to their authority. Leave them alone, counseled Gamaliel, “because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.” As Paul advised the Thessalonians, “Test everything; hold fast to what is good.”

So for the most part, my skeptical friends, I share your skepticism. As an appreciative longtime subscriber to *The Skeptical Inquirer* and to Michael Shermer’s interesting *Skeptic’s Society* mailings, I cheer on challenges to rampant irrationalism. Thus my *Psychology* (8th edition) begins with a chapter on “thinking critically with psychological science” and thereafter offers scientific analyses of alternative medicine, astrology, ESP, near-death experiences, repression, hypnosis, and lots more. I have critically examined the supposed powers of unchecked intuition (in *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils*). And I enjoy casting a critical eye on intriguing claims by asking “What do you mean?” and “How do you know?”

A FRIENDLY LETTER TO SKEPTICS AND ATHEISTS

Framed positively, the new atheist books are not just an attack on mindless, unbending religion but an affirmation of reason, evidence, and critical intelligence. Therein lies our common ground. We *agree*: let's, with a spirit of humility, put testable ideas to the test and then let's throw out religion's dirty bathwater. And we *differ*: is there amid the bathwater a respect-worthy baby—a reasonable and beneficial faith?