

## Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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*Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#). Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.*

### Why People Believe in God—or Don't

by David G. Myers

**[Laurin, K. \(2017\). Belief in God: A cultural adaptation with important side effects. \*Current Directions in Psychological Science\*, 26, 458–463.](#)**

Some aspects of human experience, such as hunger and sleep, are universal. Other aspects are prevalent — love, conflict, sex ... and religion. Worldwide, 84% of humanity identifies with a religion (Pew, 2015). Asked, “Is religion important in your daily life?”, 68% of people worldwide answered “Yes” (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011). With varying content, conviction, and engagement, most people claim belief in God.

In her research and in her new review, Kristin Laurin asks (from a psychological perspective):

1. What do people believe about God?
2. Why do people believe in God?
3. Why does believing in God *matter*?

Instructors can pose these questions for class discussion (with both junior and senior level students, Laurin recommends).

**What do people believe about God?** In “large-scale societies,” she reports, people view God as a “Big God” that is:

- watchful;
- morally concerned; and
- powerful.

### Why do people believe in God?

- People believe for *psychological* reasons — because of their tendency to perceive an active mind behind events, to presume that everything has a purpose, or to cope with the terror of their mortality.
- Laurin draws from Ara Norenzayan (2013) to argue that people believe for *cultural evolutionary* reasons. In human history, beliefs that enhance societal flourishing become widespread. Group members who share a belief in a watchful, morally concerned, powerful

Big God were more likely to cooperate with than cheat their neighbors, making their groups more likely to survive.

### Why does believing in God *matter*?

- When people feel watched (whether by others or by God) they are more likely to self-regulate.
- When people believe that a morally concerned God frowns upon cruelty, they are more likely to practice compassion — and also more likely to believe that their own virtue will induce God’s protection, and they are therefore more likely to take risks.
- When people believe that God is powerful, they may be more likely to perceive a just world in which God will punish norm violators — so they don’t have to administer punishment themselves.

Laurin speculates that if this cultural–evolutionary theory is valid, then we might expect that when other social institutions fulfill these functions — say, when a powerful Big Brother government watches over people and enforces moral norms — that people will be less attuned to a watchful Big God.

Support for an evolutionary psychology of religion comes from other theorists as well. David Sloan Wilson (2003, 2007), E. O. Wilson (1998), and their interpreters have contended that religion is widespread because it is socially adaptive. It fosters social cohesion, morality, and group survival.

Many students — especially students of faith — may appreciate E. O. Wilson’s (1998, p. 244) conclusion that religion “is largely beneficent. [It] nourishes, love, devotion, and above all, hope.” Yet, if familiar with rational arguments for theism, they may take offense and protest: Doesn’t explaining why people believe explain the belief away? Don’t psychological explanations of religion, from Freud’s wish-fulfillment to today’s evolutionary psychology, diminish religion’s credibility? Was E. O. Wilson (1978, p. 192) right to propose that “We have come to the crucial stage in the history of biology when religion itself is subject to the explanations of the natural sciences ... Theology is not likely to survive as an independent intellectual discipline”?

The point to emphasize: *Explaining a belief does not explain it away*. Learning about the psychology of a belief does not make or break its truth.

To illustrate, ask students to imagine the following scenario: Evolutionary psychologists, neuroscientists, and social psychologists have completed their work on the psychology of belief. Religious belief, for example, is fully explained. Imagine, also, that other researchers were simultaneously studying “the psychology of unbelief” (an actual book title from some years ago, which was echoed by later studies on the psychology of atheism in both the United Kingdom and United States) — and that these evolutionary psychologists, neuroscientists, and social psychologists similarly have completed their work. With a full and finished psychology of unbelief, could someone argue, paraphrasing E. O. Wilson, that atheism itself has become subject to the explanations of the natural sciences and is therefore not likely to survive as a credible idea?

Here, critical thinkers would rise to the defense of atheism. If both theism and atheism come to be fully explained, that cannot mean they both are false. Either God or some transcendent power exists or it does not, so musn’t one of these beliefs be true?

The point can be extended and is worth teaching. Knowing why someone believes something doesn’t tell us about the truth or falsity of that belief. Explaining why one person believes

vegetarianism is healthier and another believes that eating meat is healthier does not decide which is right. Explaining the determinants of people's beliefs that Clinton or Trump would be the better president does not indicate which was correct.

Thus we can advise students: Let no one say to you, and do not say to others: "Your beliefs are irrational, because you only believe them for such and such reasons." Archbishop William Temple (Jeeves, 1976) recognized this distinction between explaining and explaining away when challenged after an Oxford address: "Well, of course, Archbishop, the point is that you believe what you believe because of the way you were brought up." To which the Archbishop reportedly replied, "That is as it may be. But the fact remains that you believe that I believe what I believe because of the way I was brought up, because of the way you were brought up."

Ergo, much progress is being made in the psychology of religious belief, of unbelief, and of demonstrably false beliefs. No matter our beliefs, we can welcome the progress. Religion, like other universal or prevalent aspects of human experience, deserves scientific exploration.

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