Godspells

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In a 2009 Harris poll, 82% of adult Americans affirmed a belief in God; 76% in Miracles; 75% in Heaven. More of them believe in the existence of angels and devils than in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. The explanation, according to Michael Shermer, is simple: our brains are "belief engines." We are hard-wired to find "meaningful patterns in both meaningful and meaningless data." We infuse those patterns with a deeply felt conviction that intentional agents control the world and individual lives, "sometimes invisibly from the top down." Discounting "bottom up causal laws and randomness," we then seek -- and find -- evidence for our beliefs in a process that constitutes "a positive-feedback loop."

In The Believing Brain, Shermer, a born-again Christian turned skeptic, who writes a monthly column for The Scientific American and teaches at Claremont Graduate University, draws on an avalanche of research in biology and the social sciences in a lively, lucid, tough-minded, throw down the gauntlet explanation of why our beliefs tend to be "content-independent." He also helps us understand our predilection, in politics and religion, to consider our beliefs as rationally motivated and the beliefs of others as emotionally driven. Although Shermer does not show how these tendencies might be checked so that conviction can be "recoupled" to good reasons and good evidence, The Believing Brain provides a splendid opportunity, for anyone open-minded enough to take it, to sort out the relationship between beliefs and reality, superstition and science.

Shermer challenges us to think hard about our beliefs. If God exists outside of time, space, and matter, he asks, then how can finite beings know anything about Him? If God is defined as that which need not be created, then why can't the universe just as credibly be credited with creating itself? Insisting that the burden of proof is on the believer, and dismissing the case for "Intelligent Design" as a faith-based sideshow, Shermer maintains that it is far more likely that God, in His diverse incarnations around the globe, is a human construction, a response to a powerful and pervasive desire for an ultimate pattern, an ultimate agent, and immorality.

Superb as he is at synthesizing well-known arguments, Shermer is at his best, in my view, when he gets into the weeds to de-bunk irrational claims on a wide array of issues. Consider, for example, his explanation of "death premonition dreams." Since, in the aggregate, Americans have billions of dreams a year, Shermer points out, it would actually be a miracle if a few of them did not accurately predict the demise of a friend or family member -- and specify the time, place, and cause. Blissfully unaware of this context, however, television talk show hosts shine the spotlight on what they mistakenly identify as "a million-to-one event."

Shermer demonstrates as well that near-death "out of body" experiences are the result of the brain activity of people who are very much alive. Feelings of euphoria, serenity, and transcendence, he indicates, can be artificially produced by electrical stimulation of the cortex; damage to the posterior superior parietal lobe; and hallucinogenic drugs.

An inability to provide a satisfactory solution for every mystery, Shermer reminds us, should not lead us to give credence to supernatural explanations. Instead, we should be ever mindful of "illusory correlation": a perception that there is a causal connection between two variables when none in fact exists, that leads to "illusory pattern detection."

In assessing every claim, including "the God question," Shermer suggests, it helps to invoke "the null hypothesis." We should assume that the claim under investigation is not true, until proven otherwise. And we should demand positive evidence for every hypothesis, rather than relying on evidence that punches holes in rival theories.

It won't be easy. The Believing Brain makes a compelling case that, although it ain't so, human beings persist in considering their views reasoned and reasonable; they deny that they are hooked on a feelin'. Knowing what Shermer knows about "patternicity" and "agenticity" may not make all that much difference. Even to Shermer. Apparently, reason did not crack his foundations of faith. His doubts surfaced because he was taught evolutionary biology by Bayard Brattstrom, "a showman extraordinary" and, since he had few Christian friends, "there were no social penalties for being skeptical." Although he is no longer subject to godspells, moreover, Shermer "has no problem" identifying himself with the libertarian philosophy of Ayn Rand and the economic theories of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, acknowledging that they resonate with his personality and temperament. The Believing Brain teaches us to take his disclaimer, that he dissents when their analysis conflicts with the data, with a grain of salt.

Our species, Shermer concludes, does not always (or often) carefully weigh decisions through data analysis and cold, hard logic. Although our brains are sophisticated information processing machines, we are susceptible to self-deception and illusion, "of fooling ourselves even when we are trying to avoid being fooled by nature."

And, perhaps, as well, of fooling ourselves that we can learn how to stop fooling ourselves.