

Scientists Hell

Transcript

All of us are born curious. Scientists keep that original curiosity throughout life. We like to explore everything: the physical universe, and whatever people do. Finance? Look, we find equations! Romantic love? We find hormones and heart rates! We love it all!

Well, one exception. We usually stay out of religion. When we do venture in, we don't always feel welcome. That's no surprise, because when scientists do look at religion, they are usually trying to disprove some part of it. For example, this paper concluded that intercessory prayer had no benefit for cardiac bypass patients. Scientists and religious people do a lot of arguing, especially in political contexts. So do we need to just keep them away from each other?

Let's take a look at what it is about religion that makes it so different from every other human activity. Is it the fact that we can't do lab experiments on it?

Well, no, in science we have plenty of ideas that are beyond experiment. Physics includes items such as wormholes, dark matter and energy, extra space dimensions, and parallel universes. For the most part, these are just mathematical creations that may be useful for something, and may not be.

Religions tell us God and human souls live in a spiritual domain of reality, which is equivalent to a parallel universe. We don't know what it looks like, but here's a traditional picture. Now, living people are supposed to have access to both physical and spiritual universes, so the spiritual domain should be more accessible to scientific reasoning than a lot of physics theories. But I really can't say that scientists take an unbiased approach to spiritual phenomena, at least not very often.

There are two things the spiritual universe is supposed to do for us. The first is life after death in heaven. The second is a better life here and now.

There have been many attempts to explore life after death. The 1990 movie “Flatliners” is a good illustration. But most of us are not convinced that anybody has died and return to life on earth. The chemical reactions in the brain don’t come to a screeching halt when the heart stops.

So scientists generally look at life after death the same way we look at parallel universes from quantum mechanics or string theory or whatever. We explore possibilities and check how many of them are logically consistent with things we can measure experimentally.

Most scientists come to a screeching halt when we hear about heaven and hell. Heaven is not so far out; we believe consciousness is something special. Hell is a different story. All of us in the United States have heard the Christian doctrine that God makes sinners burn in hell for eternity.

About 60% of Americans believe in hell, according to a recent survey. And the first red flag for scientists is the eternal part. Scientists are really into math, and eternity is an infinite amount of time. We live for only a finite amount of time, maybe 100 years or so. Nobody could possibly commit an infinite amount of sin, so an infinite amount of punishment is wrong. God is supposed to be good, with justice and righteousness, and even mercy. What kind of theory says God can punish people for an infinite amount of time? This is a contradiction, so we can't believe it.

Then there is the definition of sin. Here's something one of my Christian friends posted on Facebook. It tells us the way to escape hell is to have the correct beliefs. Now suppose I told you that I'm going to chop off your head unless you believe in Santa Claus. Well, you could say, "Sure, I believe." But could you do it? I could not. I have a human brain that processes information the way all human brains do, and it does not include a function to believe something just to escape punishment.

Again, Christian theology tells us God created the human brain, and God will punish us for eternity because our brains work the way they do. This is another contradiction that we can't believe.

And this is where most scientists stop. We can't believe in hell, so we throw out all religious belief. Maybe we should just throw out the part about hell and see what's left.

Participation in religious activities has well-documented health benefits. In the U.S., about 40% of people do not believe in hell, so they don't have to practice religion. Many of them still do, so they must be getting something out of it for the here and now.

My perspective as a physicist is that the doctrine of hell had some benefits in the ancient world and in the middle ages, because governments did not have a well-developed criminal justice system. The threat of hell was a reasonable deterrent for a lot of sins which are now crimes.

As far as I understand, the doctrine of hell has been softened over the years. In Dante's Inferno, it was a place of fiery torture; today many Christians tell me it's just separation from God, whatever that means. And over the last 2,000 years, life on earth has improved enormously. Earlier generations had hellacious living conditions for all too many people. I suppose they had no trouble believing in eternal hell because the only life they knew was not much better.

I believe scientists have contributed to the reduced belief in a hell of eternal torture, because our work is the basis for technology that makes life better. I hope we continue to improve living conditions for everyone, and that the belief in hell continues to fade out. So yes, I think scientists should get the hell out of religion.