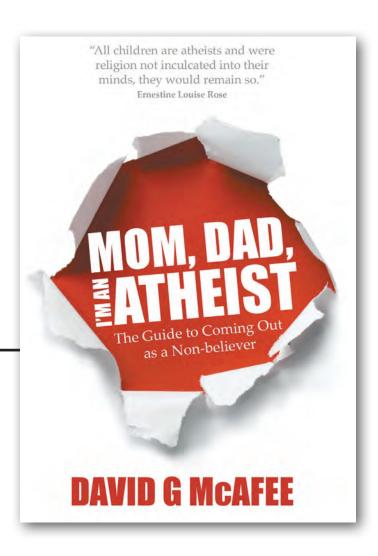# Religion and Grief

Adapted from David G. McAfee's new book, *Mom, Dad, I'm and Atheist: The Guide to Coming Out as a Non-Believer*, published by Dangerous Little Books

> "All children are atheists and were religion not inculcated into their minds, they would remain so."
> Ernestine Louise Rose

MOM, DAD, I'M AN ATHEIST
The Guide to Coming Out as a Non-believer

DAVID G McAFEE

One therapeutic benefit of spirituality is the hope of an afterlife. If you truly believe you'll see your loved one again in heaven, the argument can be made that the religious person's mentality provides a sort of peace with the loss. However, this can work in reverse. Regardless of your religious beliefs, you should never tell a mourning mother that it was "God's plan." For some people, that can be worse than saying nothing at all. For a non-believer, the words that are meant to console a religious person can do quite the opposite. A mother who loses her son, for example, might not wish to hear that God took her child or that she might see him as an "angel" someday. She probably just wants her son back.

Holly Samel was five months pregnant when she and her husband went to the hospital for an ultrasound. But, she said, the technologist was acting suspiciously. "She kept measuring stuff over and over," Holly said. "I asked her what was wrong, but it wasn't her job to tell me."

Holly and her husband left the ultrasound without being told any specifics, but they were happy. She began to call everyone she knew to tell them that her unborn child was a boy. Just as she was hanging up the phone after giving her mother the good news, her excitement quickly turned to immeasurable sorrow. Holly got the call from her midwife.

"She told me he wasn't going to make it. I started crying instantly," Holly said. "I have never felt anything that fast or real before. Even in my most uncontrolled emotional

moment, I did not lean on religion. I had been non-religious my whole life. It never even crossed my mind that it could help me out."

Holly's son had a rare form of dwarfism that meant his bones were improperly developed. Coupled with other genetic defects, he wouldn't survive.

"They offered me an abortion because there was absolutely no chance of him making it, but I chose to continue the pregnancy," Holly said. "My midwife allowed me to come in and listen to his heartbeat as often as I wanted. I wanted to keep what I had with him as long as I could. The stress put me into early labor anyway when I was almost six months along, and Ethan weighed 1.9 pounds.

"Looking back at how tiny and frail he was, plus [all] the religious sympathies getting to me, I started to think about what they could possibly think heaven would be like for him. They all wanted to tell me how sure they were he was now in heaven having a good afterlife, but no one had the details."

People told Holly many things about her experience, especially the typical "comforting" statements: "He's in a better place now" or "It was part of God's plan" or that God (for whatever reason) "needed Ethan." She just ignored the statements at first. She knew they meant well. That stayed true until a few years later, when her grandmother said something that Holly couldn't ignore.

"She found out I was an Atheist and e-mailed me. She said she knew that I had to believe in heaven because I want to see my son again. She

codes are, and some aren't. And then there's Robert Trivers' idea that we tend to deceive ourselves in order to better deceive others. So the Republicans who argue that lower taxes for the rich are good for everybody really do believe what they're saying.

We know that human behavior and culture rest on a biological foundation with varying degrees of latitude. That's the sociobiology premise, but what about culture feeding back on biology?

My response will upset some people, but I think it does. Culture creates a definite environment and there are going to be different selective pressures. I'll take the example of Steven Pinker's book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined.* Pinker asks if we evolved genetically to be tamer. It's a new idea, and somewhat taboo, so there's not a lot of evidence systematically gathered to evaluate it. But that doesn't mean it's false. I think it's almost certainly true. I don't see how we could go through the huge transformations in our environments without changes in selective pressures. And that's going to be one of them; we're going to be tamer.

I want to refer to the "naturalist fallacy" here. If we encounter a group that, given the history of their ancestors, is not as tame as we are, they are still entitled to the same level of dignity as we are and the same rights because they, too, are human beings. And that may be tough in some cases.

What is the naturalistic fallacy?

Basically it's the proposition that the fact that something is natural doesn't tell you anything about its moral qualities. It can be immoral, moral, or neutral—you just don't know. Morality comes from people arguing with one another in an attempt to work out a code about how to behave. And the codes that may be the most effective in holding a society together may not be the ones that encourage all of the natural behaviors. But it's even more complicated than that, because many of our natural tendencies are in conflict with one another. We kind of sort those out as we mature and become part of a society. We suppress some natural tendencies while encouraging others, but the ones that we suppress don't go away. They can emerge, and when they do, they may be socially destructive, in which case we would probably call them immoral.

Did you like Robert Trivers' *The Folly of Fools*?

Yes, but the tender-minded are not going to like it. If you read it and think about it, it's an upsetting book. I know him, and he has a different way of seeing the world and he sees things that other people miss. But they're really there.

You define the evolutionary concept of mismatch as the "failure of evolved adaptations to deal effectively with environmental novelty." Can you elaborate?

There are lots of mismatches. Mismatch is where you behave in a certain way because in the past your ancestors gained a reproductive advantage by behaving that way. But because the environment is different now, that way of behaving no longer works. Let me mention here a book by Lee Cronk, *That Complex Whole.* He was a graduate student of mine who is now at Rutgers. He did a study with Trivers in Jamaica that yields data showing that men who are better dancers have better mating success. It's documented, and that's not surprising.

It appears that religion and its influence in this country is waning, and we might need some cohesive agents. Would you care to speculate on what might replace religion?

I don't know what might replace it. But the idea that you can't be moral if you're not afraid of god punishing you is not valid. I don't think people will suddenly lose their morals if they stop believing in god. You can be concerned about the welfare of others for reasons other than being accountable to an invisible world. How they'll formulate what they're doing is a good question. Loose kinds of philosophies, I guess. Not the heavy philosophy they teach in philosophy class. There are lots of humanist groups that are trying to answer that question by saying in essence, We don't believe in religion, here's what we believe instead that tells us how to resolve moral issues and how to cope with life's problems.

In their book, *Sacred and Secular*, Ronald Englehart and Pippa Norris observe that people become less religious as quality of health improves, poverty declines, and life expectancy increases. So for religion to thrive it helps to have sick, poor, frightened people afraid that they're going to die. And they have data to back it up, country by country. It's rather crude data, but I think they're correct. As our lives become more secure, we feel less need for religion. That's a psychological phenomenon that's real. We all eventually die, and that stresses us. But I'm not sure that religion does all the wonderful things that it claims.

Ce Atkins is the creator and editor of PostGenetic.com, which proposes the development of crowd, computer, and individual-sourced, post-genetic codes integrated with technology to help us navigate the exponential increases in cultural complexity and reality in general. ■

said my Atheism was just a phase," Holly recalled. "She had the same thing happen to her first son. I couldn't help but think that it has been more than 40 years since she lost her son, and every day she's needed to believe she is going to see him in heaven. It has been only five years since I lost Ethan, and I never needed a similar comfort on my worst days. I feel like a non-religious grieving process allows you to deal with death more honestly."

Holly wanted to learn more about how and why this happened to her son. "I asked the midwife to explain to me as best she could," Holly said. "I was confused and I didn't believe that he really had no chance. They told me the science behind why he couldn't have lived, and about how horrible his life would have been if he had."

If anything, the experience reinforced her Atheism. She knew that no all-loving and all-powerful god would allow this type of injustice, not just for her, but for the millions in similar situations around the world. Holly said that with the complexities of religious portrayals of afterlife, assuming a pre-birth child is in heaven, there's no telling whether or not that would even be a good thing. Would he be a fetus in heaven? Would he grow? Who would care for him? Would he go to hell?

While none of that made sense to her, the scientific reason did help her through the grief. In the end, what really helped Holly were the logical explanations of her son's genetic disabilities, and not the false hope that religion offers. ■

Grief Beyond Belief is an online support network for people grieving the death of a child, parent, partner, or other loved one, without belief in a higher power or any form of afterlife. Atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers and anyone else living without religious beliefs are invited to participate. Grief Beyond Belief was launched by Rebecca Hensler after the death of her three-month-old son. Go to Facebook.com/FaithFreeGriefSupport.