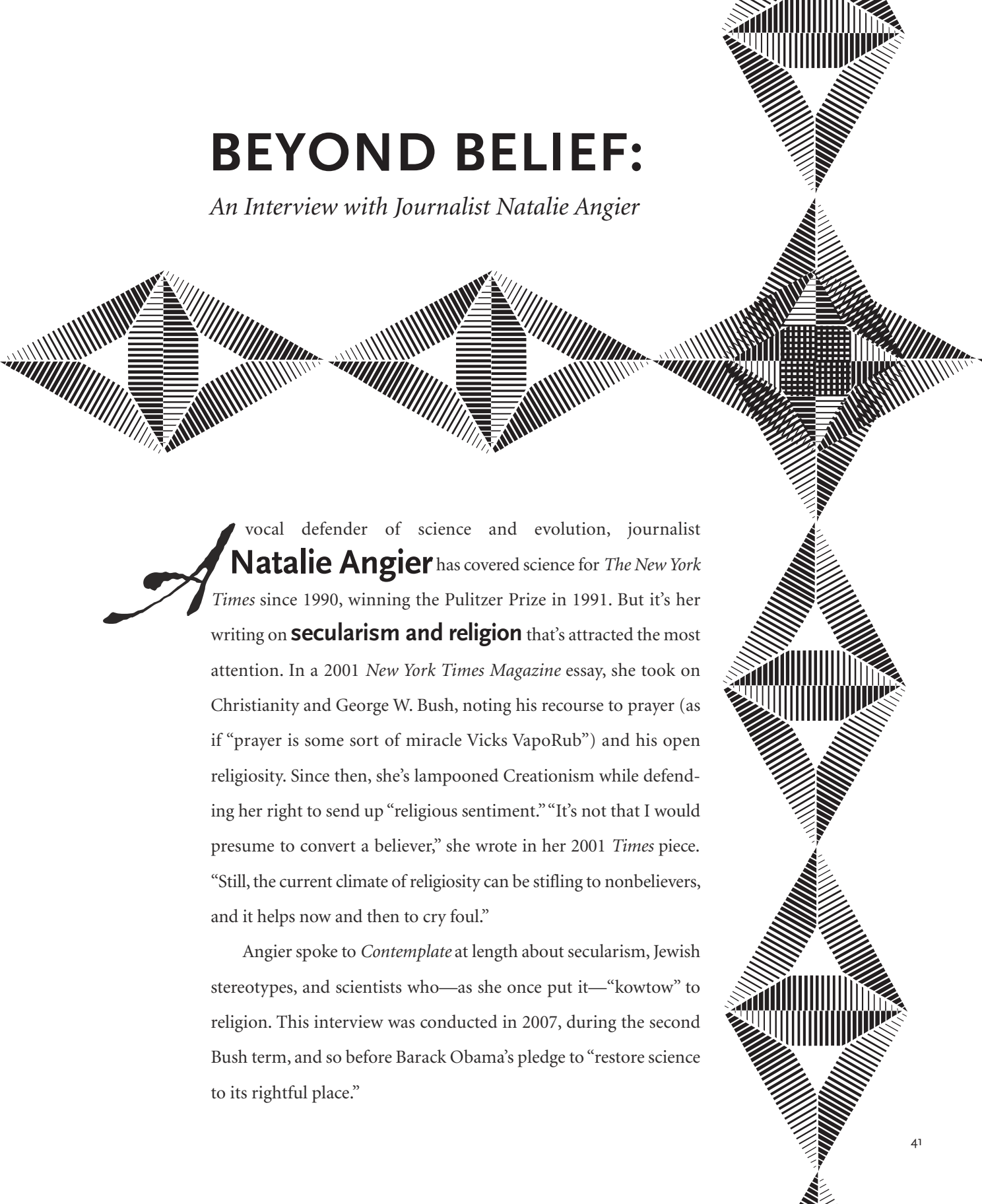


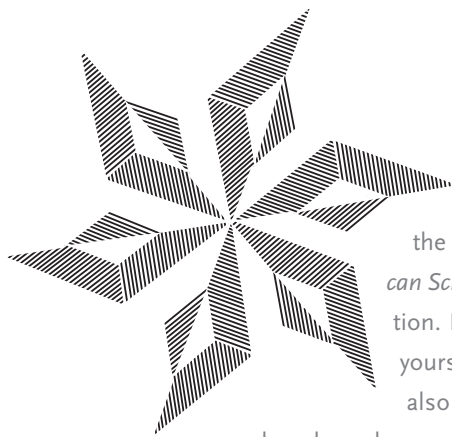
# BEYOND BELIEF:

*An Interview with Journalist Natalie Angier*



**A**vocal defender of science and evolution, journalist **Natalie Angier** has covered science for *The New York Times* since 1990, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1991. But it's her writing on **secularism and religion** that's attracted the most attention. In a 2001 *New York Times Magazine* essay, she took on Christianity and George W. Bush, noting his recourse to prayer (as if "prayer is some sort of miracle Vicks VapoRub") and his open religiosity. Since then, she's lampooned Creationism while defending her right to send up "religious sentiment." "It's not that I would presume to convert a believer," she wrote in her 2001 *Times* piece. "Still, the current climate of religiosity can be stifling to nonbelievers, and it helps now and then to cry foul."

Angier spoke to *Contemplate* at length about secularism, Jewish stereotypes, and scientists who—as she once put it—"kowtow" to religion. This interview was conducted in 2007, during the second Bush term, and so before Barack Obama's pledge to "restore science to its rightful place."



*Contemplate:*  
Your essays for the *Times* and *The American Scholar* got quite a reaction. In addition to outing yourself as an atheist, you also managed to “out” several readers who reacted strongly in letters

to the editor. Were you surprised by the responses?

*Natalie Angier:* See, the problem with the *New York Times* piece is that they found the half-dozen complaining or negative or defensive responses, whereas the overwhelming majority of the responses were supportive. And everybody was saying the same thing: they’re so glad to hear somebody express their dissatisfaction with the situation in America today.

But they all started off, “I’m sure this will be the only good letter that you receive...”

Do you think that’s because there are so few self-professed atheists out there? Or are they just very disorganized?

I think it’s probably a combination. The problem with being an atheist is that you’re not often in a position where you’re publicly declaring your stance. You’re not going to church; you’re not talking about your faith to get votes. It’s just not something you normally discuss.

You’ve written about a first wave of atheism, which ended rather badly. Do you see a more positive campaign emerging today?

Absolutely. After the 2004 election, I think that most people, even believers, felt like the religious right had taken

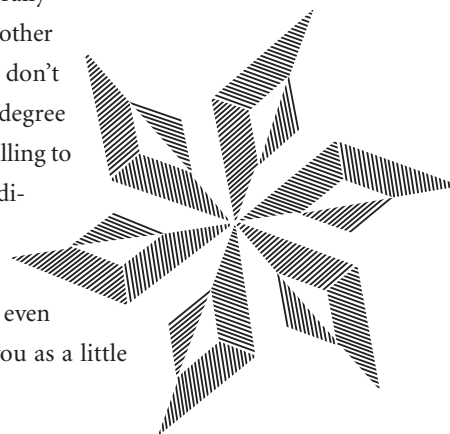
over, and we just had to push back. Now you do have this very vigorous kind of atheism coming to the fore, expressed in books like Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* and Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith*.

For an atheist, you don’t use the word secularism very often, though you’ve argued that America’s religiosity can be oppressive to secularists.

Ultimately, that’s what I am—a secularist. I don’t define myself as an atheist, as though this is my primary self-definition. I mean, I think of myself as a writer...

Well, there’s a hint of provocation to it—to calling yourself an atheist.

Yeah, well, I guess I do it in a reaction to the religiosity. I’ve thought also about why it is that there’s a relationship between religiosity and conservative politics. It’s almost like you have to believe whatever you’re told: This is an ordered society, we’re rule driven, so you’re not going to question it, you’re going to do it, the same way we expect our military to do what we tell them, regardless of whether it’s morally right. Religion is another system where you don’t question it; the degree to which you are willing to believe is a good indicator of your relative willingness to be a team player, even if the rules strike you as a little bit dubious.



You once mentioned your hair-trigger temper, but you seem to have a hair-trigger sense of humor when it comes to needling religious types.

Yes!

That's one of the striking things about your writing. Today, it seems like the greater risk for a writer—greater than being wrong—is coming across as churlish or smug or heavy-handed. But you've wrung an incredible amount of humor out of a particularly fraught subject.

Well, I try to use humor because humor is perhaps the best of all the human qualities. We all know that if there is difficulty in any situation and somebody cracks a good line, it just is a tremendous stress reliever, there's nothing like it. It can obviously be used to put people down—so I try not to do that too much.

One of the things that happened with the *American Scholar* piece is that a lot of people were offended by it. And a lot of that had to do with my attitude, rather than the actual argument itself. Houston Smith was obviously very offended by my tone. And then of course saying, "You're taking the Bible literally, and what a simplistic idea you have when you do that." All of which is well and good, but—do you really think most people who are true believers are not taking the Bible literally? I mean, I'm perfectly happy to read the Bible as a work of literature and analyze it in that regard. But then it's not a religious docu-

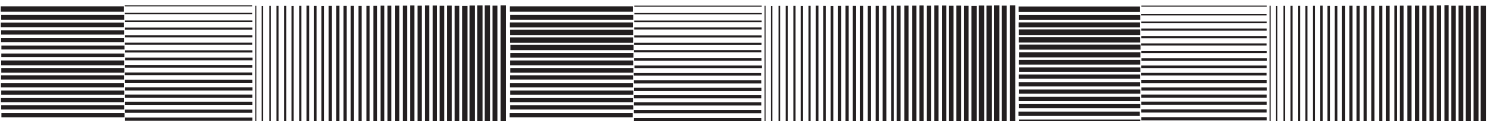
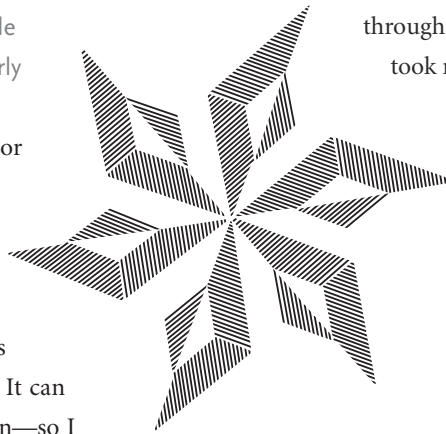
ment anymore, then it becomes a literary and cultural and historical document in the same way that the *Odyssey* is. Which I definitely prefer!


Can you talk about your connection to Judaism?

Sure. When my parents met, both of them were basically running away from their religious upbringing. At some point, my father kind of rediscovered his Christianity and went through a period of going to church and even took my youngest brother off and had him baptized on the sly, which my mother was really upset about. And so that kind of started off a little bit of religious wars. So we celebrated Christmas and we celebrated Chanukah, and we went to Passover Seder and there was a whole mix of all this stuff. I had a funny upbringing in that regard.

But you don't seem to identify as a cultural Jew.

Well, it's hard for me because of my personal background. It seems to me that the two things about Judaism are the food laws and the Sabbath. Right? These are the things. Obviously it seems to me that most Jews I know are atheists or at least agnostic or don't-care-istic. But I'm never quite sure, especially when it comes to perpetuating that tradition to their children, what it entails. I know plenty of secular Jews, I do, but I've never been quite satisfied on what exactly they're identifying with as Jews.





It might be Jewish history, values, culture; I guess the progressive answer is, there are many ways to be Jewish.

I think that identifying as anything is fraught for me. So it's much more complicated than usual. Whereas my husband Rick has none of that problem. He definitely identifies as a Jew, even as he is, as so many American Jews are, vaguely antisemitic.

How do you mean?

One of the reasons why he was attracted to me was that I was only half Jewish. If I had been all Jewish—he never dated Jewish women. He's very good in a way that very few Jewish intellectuals—and he is one—are. He's incredibly good with tools, he knows how to fix things. He was a Boy Scout; he got as high as an Eagle Scout. He has all these skills that are tremendously useful. If I were going to be caught out in the wilderness, I would want him there, since he would know what to do.

We were sitting in a restaurant once, looking through this window, watching a Jewish New York guy tying a table to the top of his car. And he's winding this thing up until it looks like some kind of insect inside a spider's web, this thing's so tied up. And Rick's watching this, going, "Oh, this is so embarrassing. This is terrible." Rick just sees this kind of thing, and he thinks that it's somehow part of the whole culture that he doesn't care for.

Are you saying Jews can't tie knots?

I'm saying that Rick thinks that, and that I may not disagree, having seen some of the members of my mother's side of the family when it comes to this. But—you don't think the term *Jewish handyman* is something of an oxymoron? It's almost just part of what different cultures


emphasize. Sort of the life of the mind and the life of scholarship that has been a legacy of the Jewish upbringing, verses the kind of handiness, knowing how to fix a leaky sink, or knowing how to tie a table to a car top without needing to clean out Home Depot. It's kind of hard to have a cultural identity without naturally giving rise to stereotypes, though, isn't it?

Philip Roth once wrote an essay called, I think, "Some New Jewish Stereotypes." Anyway, changing the subject somewhat, you mentioned Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins before. They seem to be the rare scientists who criticize religion. Is that because, as you've suggested, scientists are afraid to jeopardize their publicly funded research grants?

It's true, scientists are in a position of depending on taxpayer money. But then they get into this funny game of cherry-picking, "Well, you can believe this but not that..." They're pretty vitriolic when it comes to attacking astrology or spoonbending, but when it comes to the idea of an all-knowing God, they just won't go there.

What's at stake when scientists recuse themselves from these debates?

It kind of removes from them the right to complain. I have a really difficult time thinking that it's ok to have beliefs about this but not that. The question is, what are your beliefs based on, what is the evidence for what you think about any given situation, what do you think about our position here on earth, life after death... what is the evidence that leads you to believe what you're believing? For instance, as far as I can see, there is zero evidence for a sustained personality after death. Now it's true that our atoms and molecules are definitely recycled. But that's not what people want. People want to



have their personalities survive along with memories of every game of soccer their kids won. Then you have to say, well gee, the evidence looks pretty bad.

You've said that confronting death—the most profound reality of our lives—is part of becoming an adult, and that confronting death through reason, not superstition, is just part of growing up.

That's right. It is the job of becoming an adult. And in fact, this is something that I've had to deal with with my daughter, who used to have these terrible...almost seizures of panic, thinking about death. We'd be driving along and then she'd start screaming: "Mom, dad, I'm thinking about death!" and nothing could comfort her. And I've noticed that now that she's ten, this has definitely slackened off, and I think what's happened is that her ability to reason abstractly and kind of separate herself from the immediacy of the thing—this kind of abstractification that occurs at around this age—has ended up helping her cope with mortality, perhaps just by being able to push it aside.

One of the problems I have with religion, in fact, is that it's stifled the ability of society to deal with death. We're this highly aware species, how do we deal with the fear of death? Oh! I know. Let's pretend we don't die! Which is what religion is, it's pretending we don't die. So every time I read an article about somebody being interviewed after a terrible tragedy—their child dies of neuroblastoma, whatever—"how are you coping?" "Well, the Lord has blah blah blah..." I immediately turn off. It's like, ok, that person isn't really coping. This person has come up with this mechanism for pretending that their child is not dead.

You're talking less about death, per se, then about grief.

Grief is a difficult thing; unless you have some kind of religious ceremony, you're grieving alone, and therefore it is likely to linger on in your life. I know this personally as someone who lost my father when I was a teenager. And there was no coping—nothing—because my friends didn't want to have anything to do with it, because he died young, and this was not something they wanted to deal with. I didn't have a religion, I didn't have anywhere to turn. And so that's it, you're on your own. I think that one of the things religion has done is taken this tremendous social need and channeled it into a ridiculous story that I can't...and I think...I don't know what's going to happen in the evolution of the human race, because in my opinion, unless we evolve beyond where we are now, we don't have that much of a future. Because I think that, as Sam Harris eloquently put it, using religion in this time when we have these tremendous destructive weapons available, does not bode well for the future.

There are books—most recently, *The Year of Magical Thinking*—that deal profoundly with death and grief, and address some of the issues we're discussing.

People do want to address this, because books like *The Year of Magical Thinking*—bestseller. *How We Die*—bestseller. People are often very interested in this topic, and for those of us who don't have the palaver of an organized religion, you want some help with this. I mean here we are, this species, with—as one quote I came upon recently—a three-pound brain, that's able to imagine a universe a hundred million light years across. It's really an amazing thing that we have this capacity, but coupled with this incredible capacity is this rela-

tively short life span, especially since your life is kind of clipped on either end: you spend the first ten years not-really-quite-with-it, and then maybe the last ten years not quite with it. It's a pretty short time in which you're thinking about the whole vast universe and then you're thinking, oh, gee, you know, that's it, I'm going to go "blip," and then I'm not going to be aware of the wonderful vast universe, and how terrible that is. How do we cope with that? I think that being an atheist in some ways forces your hand on this issue, in a way that maybe Dawkins hasn't really addressed satisfactorily. How do you deal with the fear of death?

One of the things that I realize, as I've gotten older, is that my grandmother—I remember what my grandmother was going through. She had lost three husbands, and then, one by one, her four siblings died off, and I didn't have any sympathy for her while all this was happening because, well, my own father died and I thought my grief was much bigger than hers, because her siblings were older and blah blah blah. But I now know that to lose your siblings, to lose everything around you—this is a *terrible* thing, and I wasn't at all sympathetic to her. And I think that this is the way society deals with it—because when you get old, well, you're *supposed* to die, and don't you know you're supposed to die? Don't you know your old brothers and sisters are supposed to die? And young people feel that way, so you're left to it on your own, and how do you deal with it? Well,

## Empathy is absolutely the core of ethical living.



go to church. Well, ok. So atheism is necessarily tied up with this much larger question of dealing, on a social level, with these profound questions that we don't on a daily basis.

I want to ask you about your newest book, but first, can you talk about the relationship between ethics and atheism? Beneath the humor in your essays, there's a deep moral seriousness...

I was just reading this book *Darwin for Everybody*, by David Sloan Wilson, who's also dealt, as an evolutionary scientist, with religion. Sloan deals with the whole question of where our moral compass comes from, and he has a very nice way of saying that you would predict certain behaviors emerging under different circumstances, given the fact that we are this evolved species, like everything else on earth. So the question is to come up with circumstances that promote the best behavior, the behavior that we actually tend to admire.

The idea that religion is responsible for ethics strikes me as absolutely ludicrous. How could anybody feel that way? You read the Bible and it's filled with all these stories of people acting terribly, including God, so I think that the golden rule is, in a way, the foundation of most religions. Now, granted, the golden rule is usually thought to apply to your own group, your own religion, your own core of fellow believers, but the circle can be extended out to include everybody. And the way in which I have found it to be very effective in raising Katherine is to apply that all the time:

How would you feel if somebody did that to you.

You're talking about basic empathy.

Empathy is absolutely the core of ethical living.

Which is what you mentioned before, when you were talking about your grandmother. You seemed to lack, in its literal sense, empathy, having not gone through something similar.

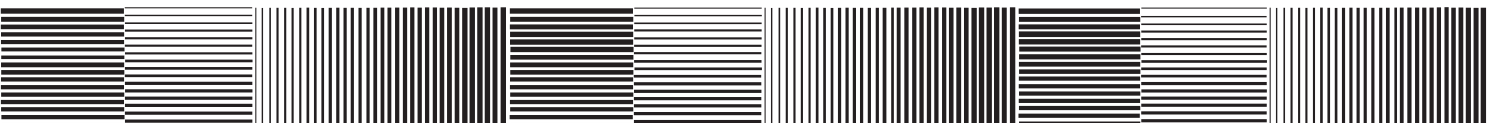
I did, I did. I think it's hard for young people: young people think of themselves as young, they want to be young, they don't want to think about being young (it's like, "don't bother me with that—I want to be young"). I think that most of the people I know who are very ethical are people who are very fair-minded and thoughtful. Somehow it seems to me that thoughtfulness can really go a long way. If you just really try to think about what you're doing, if you stop and think and consider what you're doing, that is almost always a good thing. We tend to prize—over much in my view—heroic acts: "oh, the guy who jumps on to the subway tracks to save that other guy." Which is fine. But it's only fine because it worked. Now let's say he had jumped onto the tracks and they had both been killed, and he left two very young daughters on the subway platform without him.

All of a sudden our opinion of him would not be so high. So he did this highly impulsive act, and we laud him for bravery, but I'd say that that kind of behavior...maybe we need it sometimes, but most of the time I think that thoughtfulness is really what gets us into our best place: when we're thoughtful, when we don't act on impulse, when we stop and consider not giving in to every hair-trigger emotion—and this is a ridiculous thing for me to be saying; I have such a hair-trigger temper myself—but I know that's what gets me in trouble, and I struggle with it, and I find that when I don't give in to it, it's almost always a good thing. So I think that thoughtfulness, empathy, the golden rule—all of these are a foundation of a highly, highly sophisticated ethical system.

I don't like sounding self-righteous, and I'm not at all going to put myself up as a model for anything—I'm just saying that I've thought about these things, and it strikes me that that is really the basis of morality. If you only do something because you're worried about being punished by some abstract God, what does that mean? Otherwise you'd go on a rampage and rape and kill and so on? I just can't even believe that; it strikes me as very strange that anybody would feel that way.

I think ultimately a lot of religious people feel themselves to be sinners, and that they're bad peo-

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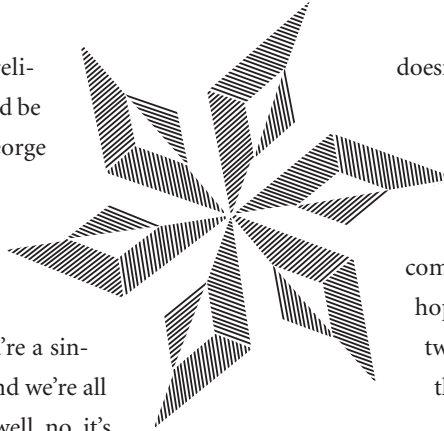


ple, and that unless they had religion making them be good, they'd be bad. Which may be true for George W. Bush; maybe he found religion because he felt like he was behaving badly—he was drunk, or whatever he was doing. So this idea that you're a sinner, and you have to be saved, and we're all sinners and need to be saved—well, no, it's not that we're all sinners. We're all a mixture of good and bad impulses and the question is, you know, trying to promote the good ones and control the bad ones. It's not that we're all sinners.

I think maybe people use religion to try to control their impulses, and to feel as though they are loved. I mean that's also a very deep desire on our part, to feel that somebody—in this case, God—cares about you when no one else seems to.

Well, you've written about the possibility that religion may be "hardwired." But then again, skepticism may be hardwired as well.

Yes. There's obviously a good reason to be skeptical when people tell you things. So there are all these needs and all of these impulses that are threaded together in our personality, and when you look at it and pull one apart after the other—which is of course what philosophers do and evolutionary scientists and psychiatrists—you see them all as complicated. But it



doesn't mean it's undoable without religion. As I say, I think we have to get beyond belief in a fairy tale and start to see life as it is, and as we are, in all our complexity, if we're going to have a hope of surviving for a thousand, two thousand, five-hundred-thousand years as a technologically advanced civilization. We have to address these other needs.

Lastly, let me ask you about your most recent book. Oh, yes—*The Canon*. It's a book about everything that you need to know about science. It's in part my reaction against superstitious religious thinking and also seeing science as this incredibly powerful way of understanding the world. And feeling like a lot of people are put off by it and having listened for my entire career to scientists complaining about the illiteracy of the public. Basically, I said, ok, well what would it take for somebody to count as scientifically literate? And I went and interviewed—and Rick did too—all these scientists, just trying to get at the core ideas of the different disciplines. If you have a grasp of them, you can sort of build everything on top of it, so that from then on, you won't be intimidated by science. And I just tried to get people to see some of the basic nutrients and vitamins you need to really appreciate the scientific way of knowing.

Some scientists, including scientists you've quoted in your essays, have suggested that education, exposure to science, can "give you an out" from religion. Right. Steven Weinberg is a very big proponent of this; he thinks that science has been so successful that there's really no reason to worry about merging science and religion.

But the idea that exposure to science can... I don't know—

Inoculate you against religion? I do think that there is a certain inoculation that occurs with science. One of the things I've found is that what you're exposed to when you're young makes a big difference. And if you're exposed to critical, rigorous, evidence-based thinking, it's kind of hard to ever get away from that when you get older.

One of the things I'm doing in raising Katherine is not just being dogmatically atheistic. It seems to me that when you respect your child as being intelligent, that's probably your best bet to try to inoculate against religion, or cults, or whatever. But ughh...what if I prove to be wrong—she could end up joining Hare Krishna.

Do you feel the same as you did in 2001, when you wrote your *Times* piece?

I think that it's gotten better with the rise of these activist atheists. That kind of gives you the evidence that a) you're not alone and b) you're going to fight back, you're not going to say, "Oh, I give up." So I do feel better about that. I think that there's actually a large number of Americans who seem to be pretty indifferent to religion; they may not hate it, but they don't go to church, they don't have much to do with it.

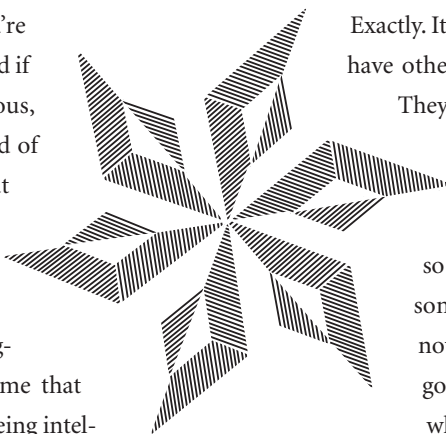
They're ambivalent, or indifferent. But that's a tough banner to march under.

Exactly. It's just not part of their lives. They have other things they have to deal with.

They have to get their kid off to child-care, they have to get to their third job. They just don't have time to be activists. And

so why am I hostile to religion? Well, sometimes I am and sometimes it's not even part of my sphere. I kind of go back and forth. I only get hostile when it starts to come at me from

all sides; I get tired of it. It's like, *oh, not that again*. So I just kind of wish that we could get past that.



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NATALIE ANGIER, a Pulitzer Prize-winning science reporter for the *New York Times*, is the author of *Woman: An Intimate Geography* (1999), *The Beauty of the Beastly* (1995), and *Natural Obsessions: The Search for the Oncogene* (1988). Her most recent book is *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science* (2007).

