



## How Religion Got in the Way

36 Shares October 10, 2014 By Tim Urban

For those readers frustrated with the late posts, *Why I Can't Post On Time*.

Wash your face before bed so the angels will come down and kiss you while you sleep."

What my grandmother told me when I was a child staying over at her house. I was about five years old, and not only did this information from a trusted authority not faze me, it was a very standard sort of thing for someone to tell me.

I was the first child in a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too Reform Jewish family who also did Christmas and Easter. Being born into that situation set me up to be told the following:

- Once a year, an obese middle-aged man breaks into our house in the least efficient way possible, leaves a bunch of wrapped gifts for me, and then instead of just walking out the door, decides to work his way back up the chimney, where he's then carried off by a group of large, wingless, flying mammals to do the same thing over a billion other times in a span of a few hours
- On Passover, an invisible man breaks into the house silently while we're all eating because he wants to drink a small glass of wine
- That same week, a 10-foot-tall sentient rabbit breaks into the house, possibly by morphing through the wall, and puts a bunch of chocolate eggs that he laid all over the house for no apparent reason
- When one of my teeth falls out, if I put it under my pillow, a flying woman will break into my bedroom while I'm sleeping and buy the tooth from me for an amount of her choosing
- Let's add in that no one ever explained that fiction exists, so I assumed that all Sesame Street creatures were actual biological things that existed in the wild

So flying people breaking into my room to molest me while I slept because I washed my face? Fuckin' sure, why not. It was a totally ordinary thing to happen—this exact kind of shit happened constantly in my world.

All this information came as part of the same orientation that taught me English, told me what shapes and colors were and how to poop, and explained that it's bad to stare at really short adults.

It was a lot of information, but I was handling it well, when suddenly I was hit with a disturbing twist. I began to be told, about certain parts of my reality, "Oh yeah no that's totally false." Wait. What? I'm a complete amateur at this, and busting my ass trying to gain knowledge and skills, and they've been fucking with me? Not only that, I learn that all the fun things are fake and all the mundane things are real.

The more questions I asked, the more of a mindfuck this huge web of lies turned out to be. Dragons are fake but dinosaurs are real. Kings and princesses are real but wizards and fairies are fake. Disney World is real but not Sesame Street. Farm animals do exist but they're disgusting, base creatures who act and look nothing like they do in fiction. Pirates and Indians are both real but in much less cartoony and racist ways than I'm used to, while witches and ghosts are fake altogether. Touching a toad doesn't give me warts, my eyes won't get stuck if I cross them, and no, Michael Dukakis is not a viable candidate despite his 20-1 landslide victory in my first grade classroom poll.

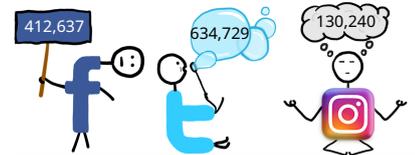
Only able to trust myself from then on, I created two buckets in my brain for "fake" and "real" and started dropping all new information into one or the other.

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Why Gen Y Yuppies Are Unhappy

If there was anything without a clear bucket, I asked someone about it, and one day I asked my dad about God. “Some people believe in God and others don’t, and everyone has to make that decision for themselves.” Yeah nope. Clear fake bucket answer. And from then on, I was an atheist. To seven-year-old Tim, this wasn’t any bolder than saying I was an a-Santa-ist or an a-fairies-ist—I had become cynical about all things that seemed out-of-this world after so many had been revealed to be fake. I developed an “If it seems too fun to be true, it is” rule, and why was there any reason to assess God differently than all the other supernatural characters?

The only thing that was confusing was why my dad hadn’t just come out and admitted that God was fake like he had with so many other things. Why had he been weird about it?

This became even more perplexing as I got older. The “If it seems too fun to be true, it is” rule had hardened into a complete rejection of anything that didn’t fit with the laws of nature. Every single life experience I had had backed this up, so why would I ever question it? And the world agreed with me—with one exception. Most of the Jews I knew believed in God. So did most of the Christians. People older, wiser, and smarter than me believed. Even people who weren’t totally convinced seemed uncomfortable talking about it. I found very few people who would just say, “Of course I don’t believe in God.”

Why was everyone being so weird about this? *What the hell was going on?*

The more I learned, the more I realized my whole country disagreed with me—I’d [read that](#) 96% of Americans believed in God, 90% believed in Heaven, 73% believed in Hell, [almost half](#) believed in the Bible literally—talking snake, Noah’s Ark, people living to like 200, etc.—and 61% believed that “a democracy cannot survive without a widespread belief in God or a Supreme Being.” I learned that the deeply religious even included a number of science-minded geniuses like Isaac Newton. Meanwhile, atheist was a bad thing to be, something derogatory, something to keep your mouth shut about, especially if you ever wanted to [run for office](#).

What started as an earnest frustration that I couldn’t understand so many other people’s core inspirational force turned into total shutdown on the subject by college. Anything having to do with the world of the supernatural—God, higher powers, spirituality—was *not* for me. As for Judaism, I happily joined the family for holidays, ate the chocolate coins, and became skilled at eating Chinese food with chopsticks, but the Torah? Not interested. On top of my rejection of divinity, I didn’t like the way organized religions behaved. Where I saw science being humble, collaborative, constantly under revision, and forward-marching, I saw religion being arrogant, divisive, hostile to change, and obsessed with the past. I graduated college as a staunch atheist with the kind of arrogance only a 21-year-old has the naiveté to feel.

What I missed at the time is that “atheist” isn’t something. It’s just “not something.” By declaring myself an atheist and calling it a day, I was basing my whole spiritual identity on what I *wasn’t*. Yes, I’m an atheist, but I’m also not from Uganda. If someone asked me where I’m from, answering “Not Uganda” would be unhelpful. Likewise, if my only spiritual identity is, “I don’t believe in the divine components of the world’s large, ancient religions,” that makes me a spiritual nothing.

At the time, of course, I saw no problem with being a spiritual nothing. Spirituality was for religious people, and I was a science guy, so who cared anyway?

What I didn’t realize is that I had inadvertently flushed down the toilet a critical part of the human growth experience.

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## What Is Spirituality?

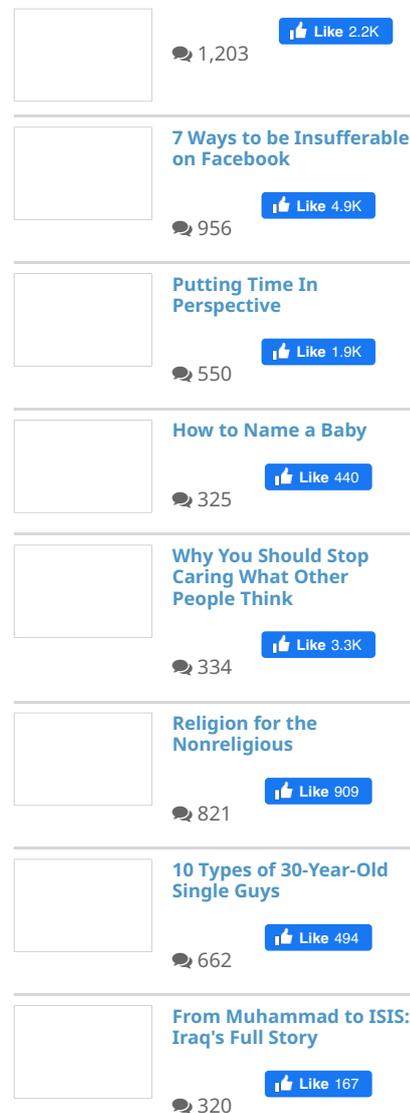
There’s almost no word ickier than *spirituality*. It’s vague, amorphous, somehow very annoying, and it manages to turn off both the religious and the non-religious. And if you gather five people who all say they’re actually fond of spirituality, they’ll be defining the term in five different ways.

So what exactly is spirituality, as we’re using the word today, and what do we need from it?

Ever since the human species began opening its eyes into consciousness, it has been an aggressively curious child, hungry to figure it all out. What was this world it was living in, and what did it all mean?

The first part of that question—What was this world?—became the job of science. The second part—What does it all mean?—is the job of spirituality.

Science is what we know, and spirituality is how we coexist philosophically, psychologically and emotionally with that knowledge. Science gives us the information; spirituality helps us wrap our heads



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I've observed that that yellow thing on the ceiling comes back every day and lights up the whole room.

Let's worship it?

Nice.

Later

What's your issue?

I'm trying to figure out what this room is we're in and how we got here.

Ooh good one. You work on that. I'm gonna go try to invent fire and then I want to figure out how far I have to go out to get to the walls of the room.

Okay let's deduce how all this played out.

Someone built this room and put us here.

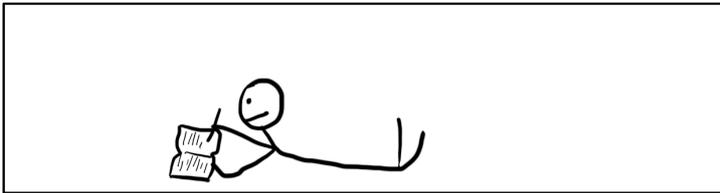
So they probably made the room first, then the yellow thing on the ceiling, then the trees and all weird creatures...

And then we're the most impressive thing here, so we were probably last...

**BUT WHY?**

It's a testing chamber!

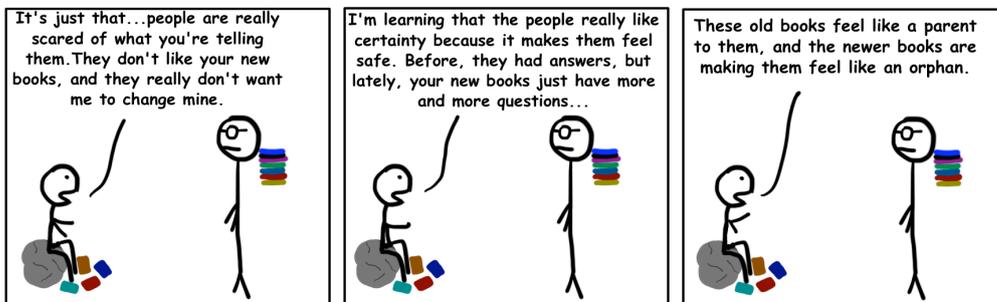
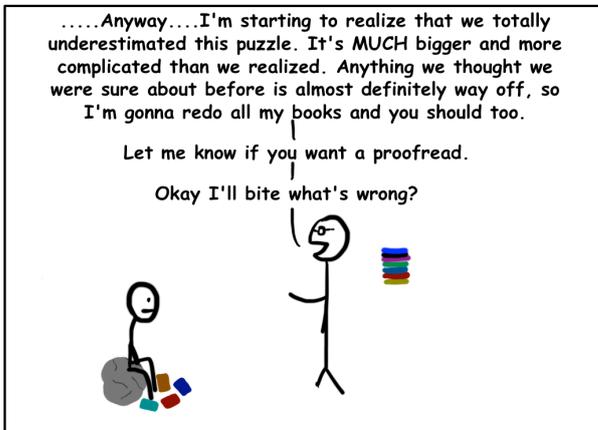
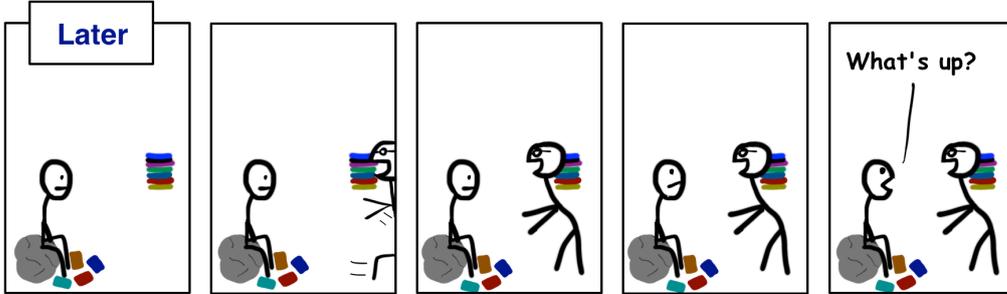
And whoever made it is probably watching...  
And *deciding* things about us!

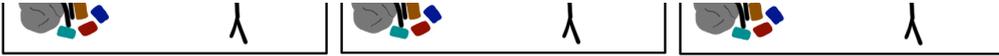


Hey you. How'd it go?  
It was cool. I learned how to harvest corn. You?

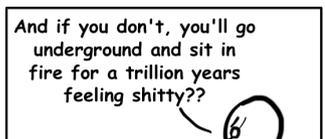
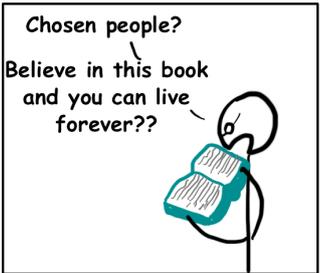
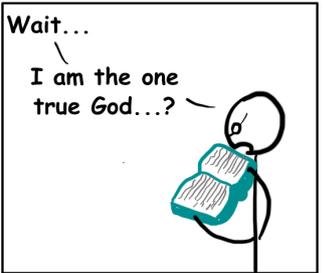
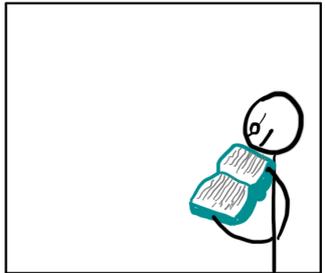
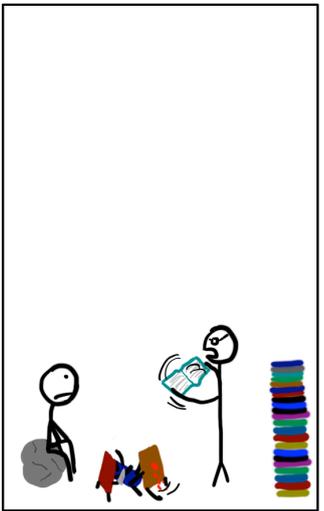
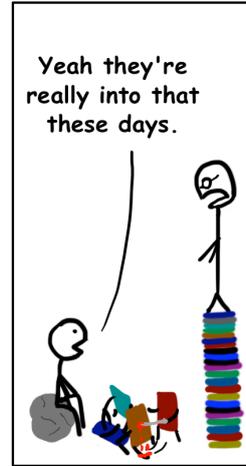
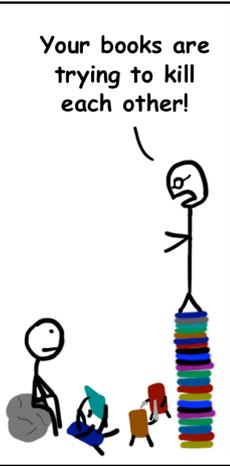
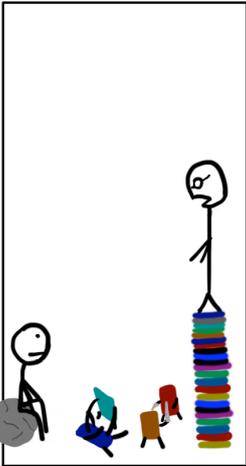
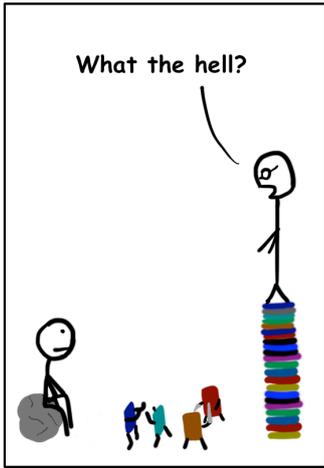
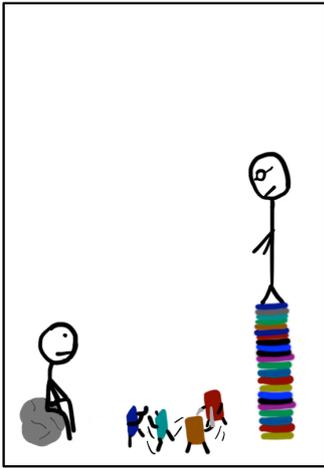
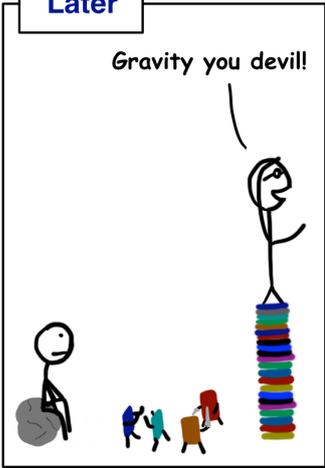
I figured out that whole mystery about how and why we got here.  
Yeah. Oh nice going.

I also started writing down the things I'm learning in these books.





Later





I know, I know. It's a situation. When I first made them, I thought we were being watched and judged and I really wanted to make sure people didn't mess it up...I...didn't think hard enough about this...what a mess.

The only solution is new books. This is causing a disaster and you're getting REALLY far behind me.

The thing is, I don't think people would even notice if I wrote new books.

They don't pay much attention to me these days. Those books are what they care about.

No one comes around here anymore...

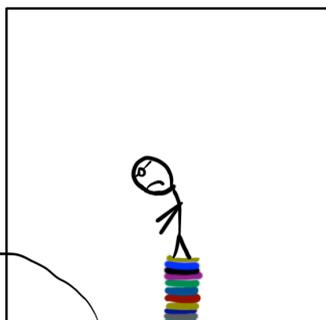
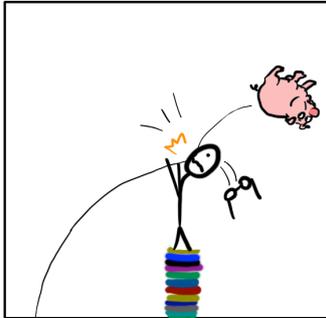
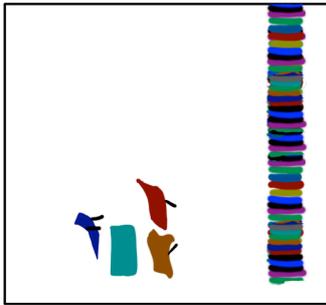
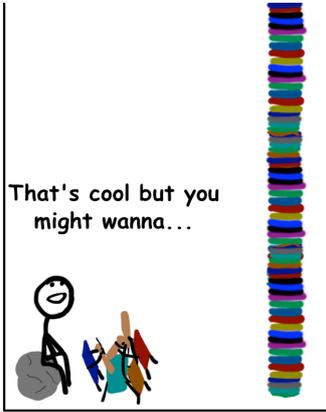
You...are really some kind of downer these days

Really cooling off my potato...

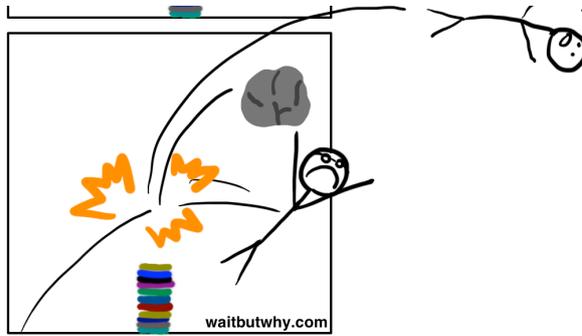
Saltin' down my driveway...

Later

DUDE!  
EVOLUTION!



This is shitty. Sorry.



That's what I think happened to our spiritual realm—it got elbowed out of relevance and into the fringes by religion, for a bunch of reasons:

- **Fear.** Religion grabs people by the fear and pulls them into its bosom of definitive answers and immortality. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to be doing a convincing job—a [recent study](#) found that how close you feel to God [makes no difference in your overall life satisfaction](#). If I were told right now that I could live forever and I believed it, I'd be *far, far, far* happier than I am as I type this sentence. If a religious person isn't happier than I am, I refuse to believe that they're convinced about God.
- **An evolutionary inclination toward tribalism.** Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt [explains it](#) well:

*I mean that we evolved to see sacredness all around us and to join with others into teams that circle around sacred objects, people and ideas. This is why politics is so tribal. Politics is partly profane, it's partly about self-interest. But politics is also about sacredness. It's about joining with others to pursue moral ideals. It's about the eternal struggle between good and evil, and we all believe we're on the side of the good.*

This is only a speculative theory, but it has a lot of backing in the social sciences. And it makes sense. Believing in something bigger than yourself and bonding with your tribesmen over it is going to make you more cooperative, and over time, those tribes will thrive over those who aren't as inclined towards sacred things. Cooperation is a magnificent species survival tool for ants and bees, so why not for people too?

- **An evolutionary inclination toward belief in the divine.** A similar type of not-totally-proven theory to the one above, this suggests that human tribes who happened to be more inclined to believe in the divine will be more honest, altruistic, and cooperative, because they believe they're being watched. Over time, those tribes will fare better—i.e. those are our ancestors, not the atheist tribes. <sup>1</sup>
- **Sigmund Freud believed that many humans seek God to serve as a strong father figure.** <sup>2</sup>

Against those forces, subtle, secular spirituality didn't stand a chance of making it to the big stage. But religion also caused it to suffer on the small, individual stage. Spirituality has often been neglected by both the non-religious—because they group it, unfairly, into the “not for me” pile as part of their rejection of religion—and by the religious—because they rely on their religion for spiritual growth, and religions aren't typically focused on the types of spirituality we've been discussing.

But we just established above that spiritual growth is important—*really* important—so now what?

What we need are good, simple, accessible, non-annoying, long-lasting ways to approach spirituality as individuals. I believe that starts with a spiritual framework that clicks with you and that you can turn to as your spiritual guide. And I happen to have one in mind that's been working pretty well for me (and which is plastered all over this blog in post after post, inadvertently). We'll discuss in [the next post](#).

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## God's Wounded Ego

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Name

**Zack Glickert**  
4 months ago



As a Christian I definitely don't agree with the framing but this is a super interesting way to look at it. It's great to understand how other people see the world

2 ^ | ▾ Reply

**John Scarlett**  
5 months ago



Pursuant to the blue dot #1, Dan Ariely does a TED talk about [our buggy moral code](#) that addresses the same issue.

^ | ▾ Reply

**Richard Wilkin**  
a year ago



Mmmm... It looks as though most comments emphasise whether the article (or another other commenter) does or does not support their existing point of view.

1 ^ | ▾ Reply

**Atheist**  
2 years ago



<https://media0.giphy.com/med...>

I love waitbutwhy. This post and the story of us and also the religion for the nonreligious peice inspired me to look beyond my beliefs and question why i believe them. So now im an atheist but growing up in a deeply pentecostal family i wont tell my parents.

I think a question all Cristians and other religious people should ask themselves is why they believe what they believe. At the sight of this question most Cristians will begin to run away from the question and begin quoting the bible. My question is why do you believe that the bible itself is true it makes all these grand claims about a creator and never actually gives proof. The question isn't 'Why don't I believe in God?' it's 'Why would I believe in God ?'

So all you Christians can hold on to your beliefs and continue to say that atheists like me will burn in eternal fire but you still don't have any thing to show for it. So just out of curiosity WHY DO YOU BELIEVE THAT ?!

14 ^ | ▾ 1 Reply

**AbundanceLeader** → Atheist  
a year ago



I am happy to have that discussion. Let me start with an olive branch: I find a lot of religious people arrogant in that they behave as if they have all the answer, instead of admitting we are all on a journey of discovery. I wonder if this is the main reason why many people shrink away from discussion about God.

There are so many levels to this discussion. In my opinion, every man has the freedom to have his own opinion and come to his own conclusions. Having said this there is still logic and we can debate the soundness of everyone's logic and arguments. My observation is that nature and the universe is well designed and so finetuned that it is crazy for me to think that this was random. Everything I potential create myself has less design than the design of a single cell. Any book I would write has less information it in than the DNA of a single cell. Let's say I write a book and I loose it and then someone else finds it, I doubt that anyone would try to argue that this book create itself. I work in IT and here is another interesting side note. The more we develop storage device the more date we can store on very small places. The more information we can store the more advanced / intelligent is the storage device. DNA is the blueprint of our cells. One gram of DNA can potentially hold up to 455 exabytes of data. For reference: There are one billion gigabytes in an exabyte, and 1,000 exabytes in a zettabyte. A DNA chain measured 2.2 to 2.6 nanometers wide and one nucleotide unit measured 0.33 nm long. In simple terms: lots of data on a very small place. Not only does DNS show that there is a blueprint by a creator but a very intelligent one too. Therefore, I believe there has to be a creator.