

“When even the brightest mind in our world has been trained up from childhood in a superstition of any kind, it will never be possible for that mind, in its maturity, to examine sincerely, dispassionately, and conscientiously any evidence or any circumstance which shall seem to cast a doubt upon the validity of that superstition. I doubt if I could do it myself.”

—**Mark Twain** (1835-1910), *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*

Despite Mark Twain’s amusing but insightful quote above about how indoctrinating children in superstition (i.e., religion) can permanently retard them, such a lifelong deficit is not necessarily foreordained.

Notwithstanding vigorous, prolonged religious instruction in childhood, many American kids (myself included) still retain their natural reasonableness and mature into thoughtful skeptics, agnostics, and atheists. Most, however, don’t: Indeed, more than 70 percent of Americans today remain self-described Christians. For true believers, Christianity is the gift that keeps on giving, over generations.

All Americans—true believers, provisional doubters, and unrepentant heathens alike—are awash in Christianity. Yet, I expect few of us ever feel even slightly damp.

When we have a day off on Sunday, that’s Christianity. When the death penalty is still condoned (“an eye for an eye”) or abhorred, that’s Christianity. When we justify the morality of going to war (“just war”), or not, that’s also Christianity. Even when we react with startled disbelief to unbelief, Christianity again. When we open a drawer in our hotel room and find the Bible there, yes, Christianity once more. Even our manners, clichés, day-to-day morality, and habits of sex and marriage, all Christianity, too. We’re soaked in it.

Why? Because, a compulsion to believe in fantasies of all kinds seems deeply embedded in our genes, because the Bible has forever told us about the Christian tales, and because human nature all-too-readily accepts time-honored traditional ideas and authority. For most us, unquestioning obeisance to “received wisdom”—the cultural mythologies that we let define us—has become an indivisible part of our shared humanity.

In this country, it’s just the way it is. The Christian overlay that enshrouds our society is so all-encompassing and seemingly natural, many of us probably give little thought to its many residual manifestations and effects. We aren’t by law or original intent a “Christian nation,” yet, in a lesser sense, we totally are. While there isn’t a single formal mention of the personal Christian God or Jesus in the US Constitution or Declaration of Independence, and our founders pointedly wanted even atheists protected, somehow we’ve still ended up with “one nation under God” in our national Pledge of Allegiance, and “In God we Trust” on our money and on walls behind judges’ benches. Countless examples clearly demonstrate how Christianity has perpetually permeated our culture, a few of which weren’t stealthily stitched into public life until well into the twentieth century.