Preaching the word of atheism

by Sandi Dolbee

Robert Zeps doesn't believe in prayer. He doesn't believe in God. He believes it's all in your head.

"It has to be in the brain," he says. "Your brain is your brain and all your thoughts and feelings and what you believe, it all happens in the brain."

Sitting in the conference room of his San Diego business, Zeps speaks rapidly, passionately, his British accent making him sound like an English version of Elmer Gantry. Except his is a theology of atheism.

"I don't think there's any difference between religious belief and whatever else you might believe," he says. "It's just a particular type of belief. I believe my car will start in the morning, and when it doesn't, I don't think it's evil spirits. I believe it's something probably mechanical."

HE OF LITTLE FAITH - Robert Zeps helped fund the seminar 'Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason and Survival.' Held in November at the Salk Institute in San Diego, the seminar still has much of the religious and science communities buzzing. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin.He is curious about why people believe in God.

"Why does it persist?" he says. "The answer comes from our brain. Our brain through evolution has evolved to not only allow us to have some of these beliefs, but almost to require us to have some of these beliefs in order to get on with everyday life."

Zeps is doing more than talking. The 37-year-old investor, who lives in the upscale Rancho Santa Fe area of San Diego County with his pregnant wife and young son, gave $200,000 last year to fund a seminar at the nearby Salk Institute that still has much of the religious and science communities buzzing. Called "Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason and Survival," and organized by Salk scientist Roger Bingham, the November gathering featured a who's who of researchers - many of whom, as it turned out, were less than enthusiastic about religion.

There was Richard Dawkins, the Oxford biologist whose best-selling book, "The God Delusion," calls the Bible "just plain weird." And Steven Weinberg, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist from Texas, who once said the "historical mission of science has been to teach us that we are not the play things of supernatural intervention." And Sam Harris, author of the religion-blistering "Letter to a Christian Nation."

A Web site of the presentations, beyondbelief2006.org, has drawn 3 million hits, according to Bingham, who also runs the Science Network, a science education organization that sponsored the gathering.

"It generated an absolute firestorm of activity," says Bingham.

ANTI-RELIGIOUS 'SCREEDS'

Even while the sessions were still going on, one audience member stood and cautioned a panel of speakers that they were comparing "the best of science with the worst of religion." Looking back, one of the presenters who was at odds with many of the speakers is more blunt.

"The core of the meeting for the most part was intellectually unimpressive and excessively propagandistic," says Charles Harper Jr., senior vice president of the John Templeton Foundation, a leading funder in studies that have been more sympathetic toward the intersection of science and religion.

Harper describes the event as "excessive grandstanding for authors of recently published nonscholarly, pop conflict screeds against religion."

Bingham says the seminar was not a revival meeting for atheists and agnostics.

"The purpose of this was enlightenment. The more information we get, the better we are able to make rational decisions about all this," Bingham says.

Zeps was so impressed with the gathering that he's already agreed to help fund a sequel this year. He dismisses "uncharitable things" being said about the seminar.

"It just so happened that the people who were there just happened to be nonreligious, which for a scientific group is hardly surprising," he says. "But the seminar wasn't about let's discuss religion, let's bash religion. It was more about the neurology of religious beliefs."

He's hoping "Beyond Belief II" will delve even deeper into that subject.

NOT RAISED RELIGIOUS

Even as a young boy, attending daily religious assemblies in school in England, Zeps found it "very uncomfortable" to bow his head for prayer.

"I never had that religious feeling," he remembers, adding that his parents also weren't religious. "I never thought there was a God out there."

When he was a teenager, he became interested in Zen Buddhism. But that didn't stick.

"I wanted it to be true," he said. "It felt great for it to be true. But it wasn't true."

He was infatuated with science and studied physics at Imperial College in London. He went into the business world and was working for a global consulting firm when he met his wife, Diane, who worked for the Los Angeles office of the same company. They were married eight years ago.

Diane Zeps is the granddaughter of the late Bernard and Dorris Lipinsky, who were well-known in San Diego for their philanthropy - particularly for Jewish causes, including launching the Jewish studies program at San Diego State University.

Diane Zeps says she can't remember how the subject of his atheism came up, but it wasn't a big deal. She describes herself as Jewish by birth but not religious.

The couple's investment portfolio ranges from property development to new technology. They, along with Diane's sister, Jane Murphy, also own Donum Elite Gifting, a luxury gifting service run out of an upstairs office of a shopping plaza.

Funding "Beyond Belief" was a joint decision, says Diane Zeps. "I think it's really important that people discuss these things."

SCIENCE JUNKIE

Those who know Zeps describe him as an exceptional science enthusiast.

"He's one of the few people I know who is widely read in science," says Bingham, who approached Zeps about funding the seminar after he began to see interest in the subject building through books and research projects.

"He loves science," says Michael Shermer, editor-in-chief of Skeptic magazine. Zeps has been a supporter of Shermer's education organization, the Skeptics Society.

"He's a Brit, but he lives in America now and he recognizes some of the peculiar problems we have here to resistance to particular aspects of science, particularly in regards to religion," Shermer says.

Zeps isn't hostile toward religion.

"In my opinion, religion is wrong, and believing in a personal God is not true. It doesn't mean that having that belief isn't helpful to you or to a society," he says.

So what does it mean?

"It means that we as humans have to acknowledge that we have a lot of different things that we believe in our heads," Zeps says. "And they help us get through our lives, and they just may be wrong."

Take death, for example. Some people cope with the prospect of dying by ignoring the topic, says Zeps. Others cope by believing in an afterlife.

"That's a pretty good belief to have, if it's true."

Does he think he'll change his mind as he gets closer to his own mortality? Will he regret his stands?

He shakes his head.

"I'm of the opinion that says if there is a God and he's supposed to be merciful and all the rest of it, he will find me infinitely better company than most Christians who just believed in him blindly," he says. "And if he isn't that kind of God, then I want no part of him anyway."

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