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January 12, 2014: The God Belief of Martin Gardner

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Title: The God Belief of Martin Gardner

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1/12/2014—Teller—odd name, no?—wrote a review last week in the New York Times of Martin Gardner's autobiography, *Undiluted Hocus-Pocus*. The autobiography is a bit strange, since the book is new, yet Gardner died in 2010 at the age of 95. Yet, it is quite evidently all him. Gardner was best known, I guess, for his monthly column, *Mathematical Games*, which ran in *Scientific American* for 25 years. He was a pro-science skeptic, but was a warm human being, alive to all of life's joys. Very unlike skeptics of today. Teller writes that the final part of the book "may make science buffs uneasy" because Gardner counted himself a believer in God, though he admitted that "atheists have all the best arguments. There are no proofs of God or of an afterlife. Indeed, all experience suggests that there is no God." One wonders, then in what this faith consisted, since Gardner does not seem to be reenacting an unshakeable childhood faith, like so many of us—myself included sometimes. Teller recounts the following story, which I guess must be from the book: "Carl Sagan once asked Gardner if he believed in God simply because it made him happier. Gardner said yes. 'My faith rests entirely on desire. However, the happiness it brings is not like the momentary glow that follows a second martini. It's a lasting escape from the despair that follows a stabbing realization that you and everyone else are soon to vanish utterly from the universe.'" Here, the old Jew in me is puzzled. Abraham was not given this kind of reassurance and yet he was satisfied that the Jewish people—his descendants—would become a blessing to all people. Abraham was not in despair over his end and the finitude of human life. But it is not enough for Gardner that humanity itself is not soon to disappear from the universe. So I don't understand Gardner's despair. But I also don't understand Gardner's reassurance. Karl Barth has told us that God does not require the renunciation of any human faculty. Science, in other words, cannot conflict with faith. Usually, the conflicts are only apparent. The forces behind evolution, for example, are not evident and do not exclude some kind of teleology that inheres in matter. The claim that evolution disproves belief in God is not itself a scientific claim. But neuroscience does show that whatever it is that makes me, me, has to do with my physical brain. There is no Bruce Ledewitz without it—no human spirit without matter. Once I die, that physical brain dies with me. Therefore, so it seems, I as I cannot go on. Given that, even if I believe in God, I cannot believe in the kind of continuity that is reassuring to Gardner without holding that there is some reality in which science just doesn't count. Why would I find that reassuring? Looking at things that way seems to make science a kind of joke and God a kind of prankster.