A common charge leveled against religion is that it is irrational. Although this charge has been around for centuries, it has recently gained new currency through proponents such as Ayn Rand, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins -- and now apparently Stephen Hawking.

What does it mean to say, "religion is not rational?" That's a good question, because rationality itself has many different definitions. They range from notions so vague that every thought not markedly insane is rational to formulations so strict that no idea is rational unless it meets several philosophical tests.

The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences gives its initial characterization of rationality as requiring "justified beliefs and sensible goals as well as judicious decisions." The three criteria here suggest an answer to our question. Since most religions and religious people are capable of formulating sensible goals and making judicious decisions, it must be the justified beliefs where the problem lies.

The Enlightenment of the 18th century attacked religion - Christianity in particular - for having "beliefs" that could not be justified or proven, such as the belief in a god, which it labeled as a superstitious fantasy.

On the one hand, this intellectual movement was highly successful, for it became the basis for the scientific and technological revolution that shaped and continues to shape our modern world. On the other hand, although the Enlightenment demonstrated that there was no rational proof for a god's existence, it failed to prove there was no god or gods. It ran into the problem that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. The Enlightenment showed by its criteria that religion was irrational, but it did not demonstrate that religion was wrong.

So religion is irrational. So what? Do human beings live such rational lives that religion should be seen as a detriment?

Of course not. Humans base surprising few of their decisions and actions on rationality.

What is your favorite color or ice cream flavor? Which sports team do you root for, or do you detest sports?

If you are married, did you pick your spouse on a rational basis or did you fall in love? Was it "love at first sight"? That's not rational!

What about your friends? Did you rationally choose them out of a list ranking their best qualities, or are they just people you happened to meet and hang out with?

What do you do as a hobby or when you are relaxing? What are your favorite TV shows? Are these rational choices or just what you enjoy?

You know you should loose weight, but just one more cookie . . .

Guys, what about your preference in cars? Or is it trucks or motorcycles? Do you lust after a Lexis or a Mercedes, or would you rather have a Ferrari or a Jag? Sure, you can debate their strengths and weaknesses, but (imagine a low, slow whisper here) what do you really want?

Think about the process of buying a vehicle. We select a few choices (rationally, of course!) and test drive them. We then pick the one we "like" or the one that feels "comfortable." Hardly a rational decision!

Gals, what about your look? You know, the style of clothes you choose to wear, the way you put on your make-up (or not), your hair style? Are these simply rational decisions devoid of feeling and emotion or do they result from aesthetic choices? To put it more simply, do you wear what "looks good" on you?

These observations are offered tongue-in-cheek, but they aim to make a simple point. Humans do not really lead rational lives. Many of our everyday thoughts, decisions and activities have little to do with rationality. Indeed, the real surprise is that we manage to think and act rationally as much as we do. So the accusation that religion is irrational simply means that it is like most of the way we live our lives.