



Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief

By Justin L. Barrett

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From a noted developmental psychologist and anthropologist at Oxford University, this fascinating theory about the value of religious faith finds that we are all predisposed to believe in God from birth.

Infants have a lot to make sense of in the world: Why does the sun shine and night fall; why do some objects move in response to words, while others won't budge; who is it that looks over them and cares for them? How the developing brain grapples with these and other questions leads children, across cultures, to naturally develop a belief in a divine power of remarkably consistent traits—a god that is a powerful creator, knowing, immortal, and good—explains noted developmental psychologist and anthropologist Justin L. Barrett in this enlightening and provocative book. In short, we are all born believers.

Belief begins in the brain. Under the sway of powerful internal and external influences, children understand their environments by imagining at least one creative and intelligent agent, a grand creator and controller that brings order and purpose to the world. Further, these beliefs in unseen super beings help organize children's intuitions about morality and surprising life events, making life meaningful. Summarizing scientific experiments conducted with children across the globe, Professor Barrett illustrates the ways human beings have come to develop complex belief systems about God's omniscience, the afterlife, and the immortality of deities. He shows how the science of childhood religiosity reveals, across humanity, a "natural religion," the organization of those beliefs that humans gravitate to organically, and how it underlies all of the world's major religions, uniting them under one common source.

For believers and nonbelievers alike, Barrett offers a compelling argument for the human instinct for religion, as he guides all parents in how to effectively encourage children in developing a healthy constellation of beliefs about the world around them.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Dr. Barrett provides a provocative, compelling, tender-hearted analysis of what young children believe, why they believe it, and what the implications are for us as adults and parents. A timely response to the New Atheists who argue that religious belief is unnatural or that religious values are inappropriate to pass on to the next generation.”

-- Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, Chairman, Cordoba Initiative, and author of *Moving the Mountain*

“*Born Believers* will challenge the anti-religion camp with Barrett’s careful science. His analysis shows that infants have a natural inclination to believe in a supreme being, and that their subsequent beliefs cannot be explained as the sole result of indoctrination or brainwashing by heavy-handed adults. This book raises profound questions about the origins of theism and the place of religious belief in human affairs.”

-- Larry Dossey, M.D., author of *Healing Words* and *The Power of Premonitions*

“For those of us adults who have wondered from where our certainty derives that there is a Divine Force embedded within the world and in our lives, Justin Barrett in *Born Believers* provides the well-documented answer. My research into the physical and biological wonders of life’s cosmic development cemented this belief for me, but the origins, the initial stirrings, had always eluded me. Barrett’s well-written book solved that quandary.”

-- Gerald Schroeder, Ph.D., author of *The Science of God* and *God According To God*

“A fascinating and readable account of why religious beliefs are perfectly normal and virtually universal. In an age of atheism, this book will challenge widespread assumptions that nonbelief is the default and that children must be indoctrinated to believe. Jam-packed with insight and wit, *Born Believers* should be required reading for all parents and for anyone else interested in the spiritual lives of children.”

--Robert A. Emmons, Professor of Psychology, University of California, Davis and Past-President, American Psychological Association’s Division of the Psychology of Religion

“A must read for anyone interested in knowing where and how spirituality develops in our life and our brain. A great combination of stories and information that will provide everyone with a new way of thinking about our beliefs.” (Andrew Newberg, MD., author of *How God Changes Your Brain* and *Why God Won’t Go*

Away)

About the Author

Justin Barrett is the author of *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* A senior researcher at Oxford's Centre for Anthropology and Mind, Dr. Barrett lives in Pasadena, California.

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Born Believers

INTRODUCTION



On the Train to Jaipur

THE HOT SEASON HAD begun, and the sun bleached the barren landscape outside the train from Agra to Jaipur, India. Inside, amber dust eddies scampered down the aisles and among the rows. I sat uncomfortably on the squeaky, sticky, turquoise-colored vinyl seat and glanced at my fellow travelers. Nearby was a middle-aged man dressed in a single bright orange cloth draped over one shoulder like a toga. In contrast with his bald crown, grizzled hairs carpeted his exposed shoulder, arms, and legs.

“He’s a saint,” a well-dressed man across the aisle commented, noticing my gaze. The clean-looking Brahmin with a thick black mustache initiated a lengthy conversation with me, offering explanations of various aspects of Hinduism. Eventually our talk turned to my purpose in visiting India. I went to India as a psychologist studying people’s concepts of gods.

“What have you discovered?” he asked. Being a young scholar convinced of the importance of not drawing conclusions without good evidence, I was reluctant to claim that I had discovered anything—at least not yet—but his inquiry required an answer. I told him that my first set of experiments on God concepts seemed to show that adults had a hard time using their stated beliefs about God in certain contexts. For instance, though denying that God has a particular location, most of the participants in my studies appeared to understand stories about God by assuming that God is in one place at a time, much like a human (more on these studies in Chapter 6). But I had also been working on new experiments with young children that revealed that they had much easier times thinking about God than I had anticipated. Adults surprised me with the difficulty they had using their God concepts, but children used God concepts with ease.

I assumed that the Brahmin would nod with that I-have-no-idea-what-you-are-talking-about-or-why-anyone-would-care-but-I’m-too-polite-to-say-so smile that several friends and family members had indulgently offered me previously. Instead, the man smiled knowingly and asked confidently, “Do you want to know why?” Sure. He explained to me that on death, we go to be with God and later are reincarnated. As children had been with God more recently, they could understand God better than adults can. They had not yet forgotten or grown confused and distracted by the world. In a real sense, he explained, children came into the world knowing God more purely and accurately than adults do.

Since that train ride, I have conducted numerous additional studies on religious beliefs, and colleagues in my field, the cognitive science of religion, have discovered more evidence that children have a natural affinity for thinking about and believing in gods. Perhaps surprisingly, the evidence to date suggests that as the Brahmin indicated, children show remarkable natural affinities for thinking about and believing in gods. This book shows how children naturally develop minds that encourage them to embrace belief in the god or gods of their culture. People may practically be born believers.

A comparison may be helpful. Maybe you've heard a pronouncement that someone was a "born singer" or "born artist." My mother recalled that on the birth of my brother, the doctor declared him a "born basketball player." (He wasn't.) Children aren't born singing or painting or shooting a turnaround jump shot, but these expressions mean that babies are born with capabilities that will—if given minimal opportunities and cultural support—unfold in such a way as to produce mastery in singing, art, or basketball. In a related (but not identical) way, essentially all human babies are born talkers—destined to acquire language—and born walkers—naturally going to learn to walk. In a similar way, children are born believers in some kind of god.

Children are prone to believe in supernatural beings such as spirits, ghosts, angels, devils, and gods during the first four years of life due to ordinary cognitive development in ordinary human environments. Indeed, evidence exists that children might find especially natural the idea of a nonhuman creator of the natural world, possessing superpower, superknowledge, and superperception, and being immortal and morally good. I call this type of supercreator god God for short. That's right: children's minds are naturally tuned up to believe in gods generally, and perhaps God in particular.

At this suggestion about the naturalness of religious belief, perhaps you are already considering an alternative account of childhood religiosity. Maybe you have seen video footage of Islamic schoolchildren in traditional garb, ritually repeating sections of the Quran over and over for hours every day, through what appears to outsiders as a system of coercive programming. Maybe, too, you have heard of monastic traditions that virtually imprison youths for years of their lives, disallowing them contact with the outside world until they have fully conformed to the values and behaviors of their elders. These examples convince some observers of religious development that what is needed to convince children of doctrinal beliefs is thorough, unmerciful, systematic brainwashing.

A more measured version of this common explanation for why children seem to so readily believe in gods might be called the indoctrination hypothesis. In short, children believe because their parents and other important adults in their community teach them to believe: they indoctrinate them. And as children do not really have the mental resources to think for themselves, they blindly go along with what these adults say. After all, to disagree could be dangerous.

Some very smart people mistakenly think indoctrination is the whole story. At a conference where Pascal Boyer, another cognitive scientist of religion, and I presented what might be called the "naturalness of religion" thesis—the idea that the natural architecture of human minds in ordinary environments makes belief in gods entirely expected—we were asked a question to this effect: "Isn't it the case that you can teach kids to believe in any crazy thing as long as it can't be disproven and you punish them if they don't believe?" Boyer put his answer this way. If you told a child that Dick Cheney was made of green cheese except whenever anyone looked at him, it would not matter how much you beat the kid if he did not believe or how much you threatened him with eternal damnation. The best you would get is for the child to pretend to believe that Dick Cheney is made of green cheese, but you could not coerce or indoctrinate the child into this belief, even though it could never be disproven. No doubt Boyer had in mind research by developmental psychologists such as Henry Wellman and Paul Harris that shows even preschoolers understand the difference between reality and fantasy.¹ Preschoolers know that an imagined pony or monster cannot be seen or touched by someone else, even if it provokes strong feelings of comfort or fear. In this way, preschoolers are not so different from adults who are getting emotionally involved while watching a movie: we know it is not real, but it can still get our heart pounding or move us to tears.²

Religious ideas are very different from pretend or fantasy. Since I have begun giving public lectures on the science behind this book, many people have relayed to me accounts of how readily their children have embraced religion or how difficult it has been to dissuade them of belief in God. A former coworker of mine

told me about her three daughters, the oldest only eight years old. “I’m a Christian but my husband is an atheist, so we agreed not to push our kids in either direction,” she explained. “But it doesn’t seem to matter. All three girls believe in God, and not just a bit. Sophie, my oldest, has rows with her dad and tells him he’s wrong about God not existing.”** An atheist mother from Oxford, England, was amazed to discover that her five-year-old son had a firm belief in God against her best efforts. Unbelieving parents in Indiana reluctantly let their kindergartner go to vacation Bible school, and she came home expressing a desperate desire to continue learning about God. A Danish colleague (to whom I return later) discovered his little girl had casually contracted a strong case of theism even in one of the most secular societies on earth. These and many other anecdotes are not my reasons for saying that children are born believers, but they suggest something beyond happenstance or indoctrination is going on here. Why is it so much easier to get kids to believe in some kind of god than other beliefs such as believing in the virtues of broccoli, that their great-aunt isn’t really scary, or that there isn’t any god?

Parents of young children (and especially teenagers!) know that they cannot just program their kids’ beliefs. Sometimes we can “indoctrinate,” but often it does not work. For instance, comedian Julia Sweeney has tried to raise her daughter as an atheist, but apparently it hasn’t been easy. In this amusing extract from a San Francisco Chronicle interview, Sweeney explains:

I said God is this idea of a big man who lives up in the clouds and he created everything. And she [Sweeney’s daughter] goes, “Well I believe that!” And I go: “Well yeah, because it sounds like a cartoon character. But the truth isn’t that, and I’ll tell you the truth.”

And then I actually teach her about evolution, and she asks me about it all the time as a bedtime story. She’ll say, “Tell me about how people weren’t here when the dinosaurs were here.” And then we’ll go over it again. I don’t know how much of it she really gets, but she likes the story. And then, she’s kind of over it now, but she would go, “I believe in God at school, but when I come home I don’t.”³

This excerpt illustrates how difficult it can be to indoctrinate children away from religious belief. Perhaps the daughter negotiates her mother’s opposition to God by conceding that she just will not believe in God at home. Sweeney’s persistent attempts to indoctrinate her daughter against belief in God face serious challenges because of children’s natural tendencies toward religious belief. Children are not ready to believe all ideas equally.

The indoctrination hypothesis persists because often people underestimate how much information children are born already having or are predisposed to acquire easily and rapidly. We often carry around the assumption that babies’ minds are like empty containers waiting to be filled, and it does not matter what you put in their heads as long as it is not too much. Under this view of human minds, learning to believe in gods or learning to believe in subatomic particles is pretty much the same process. The only differences might be opportunities for learning and motivation. Children have more people around telling them about God than telling them about subatomic particles, and maybe children have more motivation to learn about God because the idea of God gives them comfort on dark, stormy nights.

I will return to this issue, but here let me dispel the notion that human minds are like empty containers simply waiting to be filled.⁴ This view ignores that human minds have a considerable number of natural tendencies that allow them to solve problems important for their survival and life concerns. From birth, human minds acquire and handle some kinds of information more efficiently than others. For instance, research indicates that within hours of birth, full-term babies can already imitate some facial expressions, such as pursed lips or a gaping mouth. If babies see someone stick out a tongue at them, they are more likely to stick out their tongue.⁵ Such actions require that babies somehow recognize faces and what those faces are

doing, and they map that action onto their own facial muscles—even though they have never seen their own face! From birth, then, humans are excellent at recognizing human faces. By adulthood we can identify, remember, and distinguish among thousands of faces effortlessly—a feat that sophisticated computers find unwieldy. In contrast, solving multiplication problems with three-digit numbers requires considerable effort and targeted education. Computers from decades ago could easily solve such problems.

What the contrast between face recognition and multiplication shows is that human minds are specialized to handle some types of information and problems more readily than others. Likewise, not all ideas or beliefs may be acquired just as easily as any others. We find many of the ideas that physicists study more difficult to learn than many religious beliefs because they really are more difficult for our minds. Our minds find them more foreign, further away from what our minds naturally do, than many religious ideas.

Regardless of culture and without need for coercive indoctrination, children develop with a propensity to seek meaning and understanding of their environments. Given the way their minds naturally develop, this search leads to beliefs in a purposeful and designed world, an intelligent designer behind the design, an assumption that the intentional designer is superpowerful, superknowing, superperceiving, and immortal. This designer does not need to be visible or embodied, as humans are. Children readily connect this designer with moral goodness and as an enforcer of morality. These observations in part account for why beliefs in gods of this general character are widespread cross-culturally and historically.

Think of it this way. Perhaps you remember a preschool shape-sorter toy that is a nearly round, hollow, red and blue plastic object with lots of different yellow shapes that fit into matching holes. Ordinary child development provides children with a number of conceptual holes that have particular shapes. One of these holes is a god-shaped hole. Children are naturally ready to receive the shape—the cultural idea—that fits well into the hole: gods of various sorts. Some gods fill the hole better than others, but many fit just fine. In playing with the toy, however, you might remember that you can cram the wrong shape into some of the holes because it is a close enough fit. Similarly, the god-shaped conceptual hole can be filled with beings and ideas other than gods such as human idols, governments, or a personified Natural Selection or Chance. To put these misfits into the holes takes a little shoving—extra conceptual work—but they can be forced.

In the following eleven chapters, I tell the story of how children develop their beliefs in gods and highlight some of the scientific evidence that supports it. I cannot provide all of the evidence but offer enough to make my case compelling. The scientific research is new and ongoing, but it points to a clear general story of childhood belief.⁶

In Chapter 1, I describe how, from the first year of life, children show signs that they treat intentional beings—agents—in importantly different ways from inanimate objects and pay considerable attention to them. Without this propensity, children believing in gods would be as widespread as children believing in imaginary numbers—extremely rare. I then present evidence in Chapters 2 and 3 that children come into the world with a tendency to see order, purpose, and even intentional design behind the natural world, as if everything in the world had a particular function and had been intentionally ordered by someone for that purpose. Given their attention to agents and this tendency to see intentional design in the natural world, positing an intentional creator—a god—is not far behind.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I describe experiments conducted not only with American and British children, but also Greek, Israeli, Maya, and Spanish children that suggest children have a natural leg-up on predicting what God knows, sees, hears, and smells before accurately predicting the same for humans. Children also begin with an assumption that others will live forever and have to learn it is not true of humans and animals.

In Chapter 6, I begin discussing the implications of the science by summarizing what the science of childhood religion reveals to be natural religion—the sort of religious beliefs children seem to gravitate toward naturally. Given my argument that children are prone to believe in gods because of the way their minds develop in the first several years of life, one might ask if I think that belief in God is childish or infantile. Sigmund Freud answered this question in the affirmative. I share my own answer to this question in Chapter 7. I address the indoctrination hypothesis head-on in Chapter 8 using the research presented in the previous chapters and additional considerations. If children are born believers and religion is so natural, how do we account for atheists? Is atheism unnatural? These topics are addressed in Chapter 9. Chapter 10 provides a discussion of whether parents and other teachers and caregivers should teach children about God and religion. Is it good for children, or a form of abuse, as several new atheists have suggested recently? In Chapter 11, I offer some suggestions for how to healthily and effectively encourage children in their development, no matter your religion or lack thereof.

I hope that this book will whet your appetite for the burgeoning new psychological and evolutionary study of religion. At the end of the book are the source notes, a list of further readings, and the index.

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