

Humans 'predisposed' to believe in gods and the afterlife

May 16 2011



Concepts such as gods and the afterlife are basic to human nature.

A three-year international research project, directed by two academics at the University of Oxford, finds that humans have natural tendencies to believe in gods and an afterlife.

The £1.9 million project involved 57 researchers who conducted over 40 separate studies in 20 countries representing a diverse range of cultures. The studies (both analytical and empirical) conclude that humans are predisposed to believe in gods and an afterlife, and that both theology

and atheism are reasoned responses to what is a basic impulse of the [human mind](#).

The researchers point out that the project was not setting out to prove the existence of god or otherwise, but sought to find out whether concepts such as gods and an afterlife appear to be entirely taught or basic expressions of human nature.

'The Cognition, [Religion](#) and Theology Project' led by Dr. Justin Barrett, from the Centre for Anthropology and Mind at Oxford University, drew on research from a range of disciplines, including anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and theology. They directed an international body of researchers conducting studies in 20 different countries that represented both traditionally religious and atheist societies.

The findings are due to be published in two separate books by psychologist Dr. Barrett in *Cognitive Science, Religion and Theology* and *Born Believers: The Science of Childhood Religion*.

Project Co-director Professor Roger Trigg, from the Ian Ramsey Centre in the Theology Faculty at Oxford University, has also written a forthcoming book, applying the wider implications of the research to issues about freedom of religion in *Equality, Freedom and Religion* (OUP).

Main findings of the Cognition, Religion and Theology Project:

- Studies by Emily Reed Burdett and Justin Barrett, from the University of Oxford, suggest that children below the age of five find it easier to believe in some superhuman properties than to understand similar human limitations. Children were asked whether their mother would know the contents of a box in which she could not see. Children aged three believed that their mother and God would always know the contents, but

by the age of four, children start to understand that their mothers are not all-seeing and all knowing. However, children may continue to believe in all-seeing, all-knowing supernatural agents, such as a god or gods.

- Deborah Kelemen from Boston University finds both children and adults imbue the natural world with ‘purpose’. For instance, respondents were provided with three possible answers to the question of why polar bears are white. Adult respondents, who were obliged to supply answers quickly without time to think, instinctively gave answers that implied ‘purpose’ in the natural world. They would reply that polar bears were white for reasons of camouflage, rather than the more scientifically accurate mechanistic explanation that a polar bear fur lacks pigment, or the silly answer that polar bears have been bleached by the sun. However, if the respondents were given more time to answer, they opted for a ‘mechanistic’ response i.e. that polar bears did not have pigment. The researchers conclude that the immediate, instinctive response was over-ridden by a scientific, reasoned response if participants had time to reflect. This research extends Kelemen’s previous research showing that children prefer purpose-based explanations: children were asked why rocks were pointed and were also found to choose answers that implied purpose, saying that rocks were pointed so the birds could sit on them.
- Experiments involving adults, conducted by Jing Zhu from Tsinghua University (China), and Natalie Emmons and Jesse Bering from The Queen’s University, Belfast, suggest that people across many different cultures instinctively believe that some part of their mind, soul or spirit lives on after-death. The studies demonstrate that people are natural ‘dualists’ finding it easy to conceive of the separation of the mind and the body.

Project Director Dr. Justin Barrett, from the University of Oxford’s Centre for Anthropology and Mind, said: "This project does not set out to prove god or gods exist. Just because we find it easier to think in a

particular way does not mean that it is true in fact. If we look at why religious beliefs and practices persist in societies across the world, we conclude that individuals bound by religious ties might be more likely to cooperate as societies. Interestingly, we found that religion is less likely to thrive in populations living in cities in developed nations where there is already a strong social support network."

Project Co-Director Professor Roger Trigg, from the University of Oxford's Ian Ramsey Centre, said: "This project suggests that religion is not just something for a peculiar few to do on Sundays instead of playing golf. We have gathered a body of evidence that suggests that religion is a common fact of human nature across different societies. This suggests that attempts to suppress religion are likely to be short-lived as human thought seems to be rooted to religious concepts, such as the existence of supernatural agents or gods, and the possibility of an afterlife or pre-life."

Provided by Oxford University

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