

Is Belief in God Just a Natural Phenomenon?

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The attempt to explain every dimension of the cosmos in purely natural terms is one of the monumental projects of the modern age. If the existence of a supernatural Creator is denied, then everything — everything — must be explained by purely natural and material causes.

Explaining some aspects of human experience will pose an especially difficult challenge for those committed to a naturalistic worldview, but some scientists are working hard toward meeting the challenge.

For years now, [Daniel Dennett](#) of Tufts University has been attempting a purely natural explanation of human consciousness. Similar efforts have been devoted to finding a supposed natural origin of the moral sense. Now, others are working on an attempt to propose a purely natural origin for belief in God.

The Economist [London] reports that a group of scientists, armed with a multi-million-dollar budget, are working together in this effort, known as “[Explaining Religion](#).” The magazine explains that “Explaining Religion” is “the largest-ever scientific study of the subject. It began last September, will run for three years, and involves scholars from 14 universities and a range of disciplines from psychology to economics. And it is merely the latest manifestation of a growing tendency for science to poke its nose into the God business.”

From *The Economist's* [report](#):

The experiments it will sponsor are designed to look at the mental mechanisms needed to represent an omniscient deity, whether (and how) belief in such a “surveillance-camera” God might improve reproductive success to an individual’s Darwinian advantage, and whether religion enhances a person’s reputation—for instance, do people think that those who believe in God are more trustworthy than those who do not? The researchers will also seek to establish whether different religions foster different levels of co-operation, for what reasons, and whether such co-operation brings collective benefits, both to the religious community and to those outside it.

It is an ambitious shopping list. Fortunately, other researchers have blazed a trail. Patrick McNamara, for example, is the head of the Evolutionary Neurobehaviour Laboratory at Boston University’s School of Medicine. He works with people who suffer from Parkinson’s disease. This illness is caused by low levels of a messenger molecule called dopamine in certain parts of the brain. In a preliminary study, Dr McNamara discovered that those with Parkinson’s had lower levels of religiosity than healthy individuals, and that the difference seemed to correlate with the disease’s severity. He therefore suspects a link with dopamine levels and is now conducting a follow-up involving some patients who are taking dopamine-boosting medicine and some of whom are not.

So the scientists will use biochemistry to explain why people believe in God? Well, in one sense this is just made necessary by the intellectual commitments of those who believe that everything must have a natural explanation. On this question, those committed to naturalism and materialism have nowhere to look but the human brain and its biochemistry. Is belief in God nothing more than genes, chemicals, and neurons? Is theology really just neurology?

There is more to this story, of course. The reporting in *The Economist* is filled with its own strange assumptions.

For example:

Religion cries out for a biological explanation. It is a ubiquitous phenomenon—arguably one of the species markers of Homo sapiens—but a puzzling one. It has none of the obvious benefits of that other marker of humanity, language. Nevertheless, it consumes huge amounts of resources. Moreover, unlike language, it is the subject of violent disagreements. Science has, however, made significant progress in understanding the biology of language, from where it is processed in the brain to exactly how it communicates meaning. Time, therefore, to put religion under the microscope as well.

What are we to make of this? *The Economist* argues that belief in God “cries out for a biological explanation.” The evidence for this “crying out” is that religion, the magazine explains, “is a ubiquitous phenomenon” like language. It even asserts that religion may be a “species marker” for *homo sapiens*. But, the magazine then suggests that language has “obvious benefits” that religion lacks.

On the one hand, this separation of language from other aspects of culture flies in the face of what anthropologists like Clifford Geertz have been arguing for decades — that societies are grouped around “cultural-linguistic systems.” Language does not exist on its own.

On the other hand, *The Economist* argues that religion, “unlike language,” often leads to violence. Language never leads to violence? Do the authors of this report really mean that? Talk to the Basque separatists or visit Catalonia — or look even closer at Quebec.

The magazine then looks at some of the challenges belief in God poses for those committed to an evolutionary worldview. In the end, if belief in God has survived the evolutionary process, it must serve some purpose. As the magazine concludes:

Evolutionary biologists tend to be atheists, and most would be surprised if the scientific investigation of religion did not end up supporting their point of view. But if a propensity to religious behaviour really is an evolved trait, then they have talked themselves into a position where they cannot benefit from it, much as a sceptic cannot benefit from the placebo effect of homeopathy. Maybe, therefore, it is God who will have the last laugh after all—whether He actually exists or not.

Well, to believe in God is indeed to believe that He will “have the last laugh after all,” so to speak. Even some of those committed to the evolutionary worldview have to admit that, as David Sloan Wilson puts it, “secularism is very maladaptive biologically. We’re the ones who at best are having only two kids. Religious people are the ones who aren’t smoking and drinking, and are living longer and having the health benefits.”

Count on this study to gain a great deal of media attention. “[Explaining Religion](#)” is yet more evidence that naturalism just doesn’t work as a worldview. The “natural” order is just not self-explanatory. Do we really believe that morality is just a matter of brain chemistry? If so, why lock up criminals? Thankfully, most people have sufficient sense to realize that a biochemical explanation of morality means the end of personal responsibility. Want to live in that world?

The attempt to forge a completely natural explanation for belief in God is even more implausible. But, for those committed to evolutionary naturalism, this is a mountain they just must climb. It will be fascinating to watch. Keep your brain chemistry on alert.

