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Are Humans Hardwired for Belief in God? Darwinism Attempts a Naturalistic Explanation of Belief in the Supernatural

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Are we hardwired to believe in God? That is the strange and rather awkward question asked within this week's cover story in *The New York Times Magazine*. In "Darwin's God," reporter Robin Marantz Henig looks at how evolutionary scientists are trying to account for the fact that most humans believe in a supernatural being.

Naturalism is a closed system of thought. Within the naturalistic framework, every aspect of human life has to be explained in purely naturalistic terms. Beyond that, the evolutionist (if consistent) must hold that every aspect of human life can ultimately be explained within a purely naturalistic scheme. Given the presuppositions of the dominant evolutionary theory, everything from sexual behaviors to musical tastes must have an evolutionary purpose — and so must belief in God.

Henig explains that her focus is on how evolutionists explain belief in God, not the question of God's existence. She acknowledges the recent spate of books by militant atheists attacking belief in God, but insists that those who focus on such attacks miss something important:

Lost in the hullabaloo over the neo-atheists is a quieter and potentially more illuminating debate. It is taking place not between science and religion but within science itself, specifically among the scientists studying the evolution of religion. These scholars tend to agree on one point: that religious belief is an outgrowth of brain architecture that evolved during early human history. What they disagree about is why a tendency to believe evolved, whether it was because belief itself was adaptive or because it was just an evolutionary byproduct, a mere consequence of some other adaptation in the evolution of the human brain.

Which is the better biological explanation for a belief in God — evolutionary adaptation or neurological accident? Is there something about the cognitive functioning of humans that makes us receptive to belief in a supernatural deity? And if scientists are able to explain God, what then? Is explaining religion the same thing as explaining it away? Are the nonbelievers right, and is religion at its core an empty undertaking, a misdirection, a vestigial artifact of a primitive mind? Or are the believers right, and does the fact that we have the mental capacities for discerning God suggest that it was God who put them there?

In short, are we hard-wired to believe in God? And if we are, how and why did that happen?

In other words, is belief in God explained by how such belief might have assisted our ancestors in successful breeding and survival? The evolutionists agree on this much, but split over the question of how it happened. Some hold that belief in God was a byproduct of other human adaptations, while others hold that belief in God was an adaptive behavior all its own.

The consensus among the evolutionary theorists seems to shape up like this: At one point, human beings developed a tendency to believe in the supernatural. This may have been tied to a fear of death, a need for social cohesion, or a need to explain events in terms of a supernatural agent. Whatever the origin, human children are now born with "a tendency to believe in omniscience, invisible minds, [and] immaterial souls." As Henig explains, "then they grow up in cultures that fill their minds, hard-wired for belief, with specifics."

The article is worth close attention, not so much because of what it reveals about the question of belief in God, but because of what it reveals about the naturalistic worldview. Human beings are indeed “hardwired” to believe in God, but this is because we are created in God’s image, not because of the adaptive behaviors and capacities of our ancestors. Here again we face the inevitable clash of worldviews. There is no way to reconcile these two explanations of why so many humans believe in God. At the same time, it is fascinating to observe naturalistic scientists attempting to explain belief in the supernatural.

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