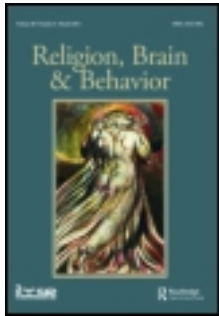


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Born believers: the science of children's religious belief

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BOOK REVIEW

Born believers: the science of children's religious belief, by Justin L. Barrett, New York, Free Press, 2012, 320 pp., US\$26.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-43-9119654-0

Karl Marx famously painted a metaphorical picture of religion as an insidious opiate that is societally manufactured to manipulate the minds of the masses. *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief* adroitly denies this widespread idea on two fronts by (1) presenting evidence to demonstrate that religion is not a simple product of top-down internalization, and (2) questioning the notion that religion is a dangerous mindset to be avoided. In particular, Justin Barrett claims that religious beliefs are a nearly inevitable product of human nature that may in fact promote well-being. Written with humility, clarity, and wit, *Born Believers* succeeds as a highly accessible introduction to the cognitive science of religion.

The book is composed of two major parts. Throughout chapters 1–5, Barrett builds an argument that children have a natural propensity to believe in powerful supernatural agents, such as gods, and perhaps even God in particular. According to this “preparedness hypothesis,” supernatural concepts are formed within the first few years of life as a nearly inevitable product of human development. This outcome is facilitated by a multifaceted hodgepodge of cognitive capacities that include an inclination to search the world for goal-directed agents; a propensity to form creationist beliefs about the purposes and origins of natural objects; biases to over-attribute knowledge and perceptual abilities when reasoning about minds; and default assumptions about immortality, moral goodness, and even grace.

Chapters 6–11 are largely a reaction to the notion that religion can be reduced to a product of cultural brainwashing, an idea that Barrett dubs the “indoctrination hypothesis.” Barrett uses the data presented in the first portion of the book to argue convincingly against this view, weaving in additional evidence to demonstrate that children's minds are not sponges that gullibly and indiscriminately soak up cultural information. This second half of *Born Believers* also includes discussions about the contextual and personality variables that affect the extent to which children form religious concepts at an early age. Despite the provocative title of the book, Barrett admits that children do not come out of the womb equipped with religious ideas (NB, he quickly clarifies this in the introduction, comparing a “born believer” to a “born singer” who is not actually born singing, but rather develops a natural and effortless propensity for doing so). Although Barrett makes the strong claim that children do not need any special cultural conditions to become religious believers, he notes that the tendency to believe can still be shaped and modulated through individual differences and exposure to various environmental conditions. For example, parental testimony that confidently attests to divine agents will reinforce beliefs, while post-industrial settings that encourage reflective thinking will tend to foster atheism.

Born Believers is primarily geared toward a general audience, and therefore potential readers should keep in mind that the book is intended to inform those who are making an initial foray into the cognitive science of religion. The book succeeds in meeting this objective. However, as a result of this goal, established researchers in the field will already be familiar with much of the material in *Born Believers*, as it is reminiscent of the information and ideas previously presented by Barrett in his 2004 book, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* In addition, current debates about the cognitive precursors for religious beliefs are examined only at a level appropriate for a broad readership. Theories that bear similarities to Barrett's, but with important nuanced differences (e.g., the idea that religion is based on a singular adaptation for theory of mind, as put forth in Jesse Bering's 2011 book *The Belief Instinct*) are left unmentioned. Instead, Barrett primarily addresses the much broader question of whether religious beliefs are produced by indoctrination or human nature; and the chasm between these distant viewpoints necessarily precludes any fine-grained treatment of the issues being addressed. As a result, the mechanisms of religious acquisition remain vague, and the necessary and sufficient developmental factors that lead a "born believer" to become a true believer are not specified.

Seasoned researchers in the field may also be slightly disappointed that, given the framing of the book, Barrett does not address potential critiques of his own research program. For example, the conclusions presented in Chapter 4 have been questioned in several recent papers (e.g., Lane, Wellman, & Evans, 2010) that do not receive mention. In Chapter 4, Barrett cites evidence of the oft-observed failure on classic theory-of-mind tests, where children younger than 4 mistakenly believe that ignorant agents know more than what is realistically possible, and thereby suggests that children have a default expectation that others possess super-knowledge. Specifically, because 3-year-olds attribute high levels of knowledge to agents in this task – which is accurate in the case of God but inaccurate for humans – Barrett suggests that young children possess a concept of super-knowing beings before they acquire a concept of humanlike mental limitations. However, even though responses about God's mind may be identical between ages 3 and 5, this does not mean that the cognitive structures that produce those responses remain the same across these two years. There is good reason to believe that the explicit concept of mind possessed by a 3-year-old and that possessed by a 5-year-old are not continuous, and that only the latter's concept is truly representational. Additionally, it is unclear how to interpret these results in light of more recent evidence that even infants have an implicit understanding that adults can have false beliefs. The question of whether very young children have un-verbalized *intuitions* about super-knowledge is an important issue that was unfortunately outside the scope of this book.

It is also important to note that *Born Believers* does not try to explain religion writ large. Typical for cognitive scientists of religion, Barrett focuses exclusively on the conceptual foundations of religious belief. His book therefore omits any discussion about the other plausible contributors to religious belief, such as emotions (e.g., awe), moral concerns about purity and sanctity, and ritual actions that unite communities. It follows that Barrett's focus is misleadingly narrow. The book expects readers to figure out for themselves (instead of straightforwardly alerting them) that they need to complement its perspective with more holistic views of religion from other sources. But arguably the fault lies more in the nature of the research program itself than in Barrett's particular treatment of the topic.

In many ways, Barrett seems to hurry past the scientific findings in order to reach the second half of the book. Here, his enthusiasm emerges in full force, making it by far the best part of *Born Believers*. Barrett does an excellent job of refuting the indoctrination hypothesis and this leads to an excoriation of the claims about the origins of religious belief that have recently been put forth by Richard Dawkins and other “New Atheists.” These critiques are spot on, exposing the blatant agendas that have not only impeded progress on this “hot-button” research topic, but also produced disappointingly unscientific models of religious belief. Even the staunchest of non-believers will be able to appreciate Barrett’s even-handed plea for a separation of ideological agendas from scientific treatments of religion. Although Barrett closes with a chapter on “encouraging children’s religious development,” a topic that has obvious potential to be highly controversial within a scientific community, he never lets his own personal beliefs stand in the way of his objective treatments of the subject matter. For this, he cannot be commended more highly.

Overall, this book is an excellent choice for anybody who has ever wondered about the ubiquity of religious beliefs and the early-developmental propensities that lead so many people to form them in the first place. It is especially recommended for readers who are religious themselves or who have previously been left unfulfilled by the anti-religious rhetoric that several other scholars have integrated into their discussions of the scientific findings. *Born Believers* will likely leave experts wishing for a more involved treatment of the subject matter, but it is sure to satisfy the curiosity of those looking for an easily graspable trade book that presents an important introductory perspective on the developmental roots of religious belief.

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