

BOOK REVIEWS

WHY WOULD ANYONE BELIEVE IN GOD? By Justin L. Barrett, Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2004, 152 pp. \$23.47.

The title of Justin L. Barret's book *Why would anyone believe in God?* initially suggests the book should be shelved alongside the recent, strident anti-theism works by Richard Dawkins (2008), Daniel Dennett (2006), and the late Christopher Hitchens (2007). In fact, Barrett's book serves as a tonic against much of contemporary atheism's aggressive opposition and sneering disdain for religious belief. Unlike the 2011 book by Alvin Plantinga (2011), *Where the conflict really lies*, which effectively counters Dawkins' and Dennett's arguments against theism, Barrett's book simply offers compelling empirical research from the cognitive science of religion that demonstrates the naturalness of believing in God.

The cognitive science of religion is a particular subfield of cognitive science that focuses on the scientific study of religion across multiple disciplines and multiple methodologies, including experimental and laboratory research, ethnographic and linguistic research, and research from history and archeology. Other works within this subfield include Harvey Whitehouse's *Modes of religiosity: A cognitive theory of religious transmission* (2004), Scott Arran's *In gods we trust: The evolutionary landscape of religion* (2002), and Pascal Boyer's *Religion explained: The evolutionary origins of religious development* (2001).

Barrett's book is firmly grounded in cognitive science. He begins by establishing the presence of specific cognitive tools all human beings use to make sense of their environment and form so-called "non-reflective" or intuitive beliefs. Alternatively, we form reflective beliefs on the basis of non-reflective beliefs. According to Barrett, "Nonreflective beliefs form simply by looking at the world around us. Reflective beliefs form from wondering what to do about the world around us" (p. 11). Barrett uses his own idiosyncratic vocabulary to describe these cognitive tools, the chief three of which are *categorizers*, *describers*, and *facilitators* (Barrett, 2004, p. 5). *Categorizers* are cognitive tools we use to perceive, for example, entities with agency, or the ability to move independently in the environment without a causal agent such as a bird, a dog, or your neighbor. *Describers* permit us to attribute certain characteristics to that which we've categorized based on immediate perception and memory of past entities. Often, we attribute a *theory of mind* to agents, which allows us to assume that the agent has intentionality, motives, and desires. *Facilitators* help us determine the regulations of social exchange with the agent. How we interact with a porcupine will differ with how we interact with a supervisor, religious leader, or tree spirit. These cognitive tools, Barrett contends, are adaptive tools we require in order to interact optimally with our environment. Moreover, these tools provide the foundation for the human ability to form religious beliefs. Critical to the formation of religious beliefs are the *hypersensitive agency detection device* (HADD) coupled with the theory of mind (*ToM*), the plausibility of belief in *minimally*

counterintuitive agents, and the recognition of intuitive morality, one of the facilitators, and specific strategic information that accompanies this morality.

Our cognitive ability to detect agency provides the basis for belief in gods, which Barrett defines as “superhuman beings in whose existence at least a single group of people believe and who behave on the basis of these beliefs” (p. 21). Examples of gods include ghosts, spirits, demons, chimeras, local deities and the God of the Abrahamic religions. These gods are agents that Barrett terms as *minimally counterintuitive*, which means they violate a select number of expectations for the category in which they belong, but these violations are not to the degree where they would be implausible. For example, the talking animals found in Lewis’s *Narnia Chronicles* are minimally counterintuitive because we do not expect animals to talk. Similarly, disembodied spirits that otherwise behave as humans are minimally counterintuitive because we don’t expect people to be invisible or to live beyond death. Importantly, these violations are salient enough to garner our attention and remain in memory. The most successful of these minimally counterintuitive agents are those that have what Barrett calls inferential potential. In other words, their existence permits us to predict or explain the world around us.

Barrett uses a deft illustration to demonstrate how we can accept the plausibility of minimally counterintuitive beliefs in the story of the so-called “Chivo Man” (pp. 26-28). The Chivo Man is a California legend involving a creature who is half-man, half goat that haunts an abandoned dairy, guarding it jealously against intruders. Barrett relates the hypothetical story of Steve, who was told by a trusted source about the legend of the Chivo Man and who later is walking near the abandoned dairy. Steve’s initial reaction is to reject belief in the Chivo Man because it violates the expectations of the cognitive tools responsible for describing living things; a goat-man violates his so-called “living thing describer.” However, while walking, he is nearly hit by a shingle thrown from the roof of the dairy. Since shingles are objects and not living things, they require another force to animate them. Since it is a windless day, Steve’s hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD) concludes that an agent has used the shingle as a missile thrown with hostile intent to protect his territory. Earlier, Steve had come upon what looked like goat droppings, though there did not appear to be any goats around. These facts, coupled with Steve’s trust in the story-teller, lead him to belief in the Chivo Man because the plausible beliefs described above outweigh the implausibility of a chimera that is half-man half-goat. It is important to note that Barrett is describing the process of intuitive belief formation, not whether the beliefs are correct or accurate.

The Chivo Man also demonstrates how gods activate the human social exchange regulator. In this particular instance, Steve’s social exchange regulator inclined him to believe the story of the Chivo Man from his trusted source and to leave the abandoned dairy out of respect for the Chivo Man’s territoriality and his own safety, despite having never actually seen the Chivo Man. Barrett notes that such entities as the Chivo Man that are minimally counterintuitive are automatically afforded higher social status than ordinary humans. Moreover, because they possess supernatural (i.e., minimally counterintuitive) attributes, they must also possess super

knowledge about morality. Barrett argues that this super knowledge is reflective of many cultures' folk morality. "Contrary to what many believe," Barrett argues, "religions do not invent morality wholesale and insert gods as the final arbiters over right and wrong. Rather, people the world over seem to have massively overlapping senses of what constitutes moral behavior" (p. 47).

Agents identified as gods allow their believers to accept the gods' intervention in regulating social interaction particular in regard to what constitutes moral behavior. As such, these supernatural agents also possess super knowledge that enables them to determine who is acting morally and who isn't. Because of this privileged position, these powerful agents are worthy of being worshipped, appeased, and given scarce resources in the form of sacrifices.

Barrett also describes how beliefs initially formed by our HADD, theory of mind, and social facilitators become reinforced through ritual and repetition. Highly salient and singular events like rites of passage have strong emotional power and are easily and vividly encoded in memory. As Barrett notes, "the highly emotional intensity and unusual character makes the experience unforgettable" (p. 66). Regularly repeated events like weekly sermons are more effective for didactic purposes of communicating complex theological ideas. Moreover, Barrett cites Whitehouse's (2004) distinction between doctrinal and imagistic modes of religiosity, the former involving low salience events, verbal communication, orthodoxy regulation, and wide transmission, and the latter involving high salience events that are idiosyncratically interpreted and remembered, making communication and transmission more challenging.

Barrett also makes a compelling argument for why Abrahamic monotheistic religions are particularly well-suited for acceptance and wide transmission. He cites several studies in the cognitive development of children to support his claim. Most notably, Barrett demonstrates that the so-called "anthropomorphic hypothesis" (p. 76) where young children simply project what they know about adults onto deities is less tenable than Barrett's alternative hypothesis that children possess the innate cognitive faculties necessary to impute such supernatural qualities as omniscience to God while simultaneously rejecting those same qualities in their parents.

If belief in God appears to occur intuitively, why are there atheists? Barrett believes that certain characteristics are typically present to cultivate the reflective beliefs necessary to reject belief in God. "The distinctive characteristics of societies in which atheism seems to have a foothold include urbanization, industrial or postindustrial economies, enough wealth to support systems of higher education and leisure time, and prominent development of science and technology" (p. 116). Later in the book, Barrett writes "... belief in God comes naturally. Disbelief requires human intervention" (p. 123). In light of the direct assault on theism that has occurred over the last decade or so, Barrett's work is a welcome answer that offers argumentation on the same empirical ground that atheists claim as their own.

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