

Conjuring Up Our Own Gods

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The New York Times:

“Americans are obsessed with the supernatural,” Jeffrey J. Kripal, a scholar of religion, told me here at Esalen, an institute dedicated to the idea that “we are all capable of the extraordinary.”

Surveys support this. In 2011, an Associated Press poll found that 8 in 10 Americans believed in angels — even 4 in 10 people who never went to church. In 2009 the Pew Research Center reported that 1 in 5 Americans experienced ghosts and 1 in 7 had consulted a psychic. In 2005, Gallup found that 3 out of 4 Americans believed in something paranormal, and that 4 in 10 said that houses could be haunted.

One interpretation of these data is that belief in the supernatural is hard-wired. Scholars like the anthropologist Pascal Boyer, author of “Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origin of Religious Thought,” and the psychologist Justin L. Barrett, author of “Why Would Anyone Believe in God?” argue that the fear that one would be eaten by a lion, or killed by a man who wanted your stuff, shaped the way our minds evolved. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors were more likely to survive if they interpreted ambiguous noise as the sound of a predator. Most of the time it was the wind, of course, but if there really was danger, the people who worried about it were more likely to live.

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However, intuitive plausibility is one thing, and measured, sober faith is another. These are the two kinds of thinking that the Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, author of “Thinking, Fast and Slow,” calls “system one” (quick intuitions) and “system two” (deliberative judgment). When we’re scared in the dark, we populate the world with ghosts. When we consider in full daylight whether the ghosts were real — ah, that is another matter.

Read the whole story: [*The New York Times*](#)