

# Is Religion Just An Assortment of Gut Feelings?

February 08, 2013



The vast majority of the planet's 7 billion people ascribe to some kind of religious belief—that is, a faith in things that cannot be proven. This makes no sense from a scientific and psychological point of view, because supernatural beliefs—in contrast to our evolved thinking in general—serve no apparent purpose. They don't help us comprehend and navigate the world. Why would the human mind create them, and allow them to persist?

Two cognitive psychologists now offer an intriguing explanation for this philosophical puzzle. Nicolas Baumard of the University of Pennsylvania and Pascal Boyer of Washington University in St. Louis argue that beliefs result from the interplay of two distinct human thinking processes that make up the human mind. Years of research have demonstrated that we all have a powerful intuitive system of thought—fast, automatic, largely hidden—as well as a slow and analytical system of thought. According to Baumard and Boyer's theory, religious beliefs originate in deep-rooted intuitions about things completely unrelated to gods and afterlives—intuitions that were once adaptive but no longer are. Beliefs are not simply intuitions, however. They are the slow, deliberate mind's attempt to explain these vestigial gut feelings.

Here are some of their illustrations:

- It made sense for our ancient ancestors to be keenly on guard for signs of peril in the world—a predator's tracks or natural poisons, for instance. As a result of this hypervigilance, humans learned to respond emotionally and defensively to threats and contagion, a response that continues today—even though those old threats are largely irrelevant to most of us. Other people were one source of dangerous contagion, and we still respond—on a gut level—to our intuitive avoidance of others, especially the sick. But this lingering gut feeling leaves a lot unexplained, like the biology of how germs are actually transmitted, so it's left to the slow reflective mind to make sense of these strong but mysterious impulses. Our modern mind elaborates on these old

intuitions, creating beliefs about magical contagion, both good and bad. According to Baumard and Boyer, this may be why believers worldwide will ritualistically touch relics and kiss the likenesses of saints. Modern belief in the protective power of these rituals “hitchhikes” on an ancient fear of germs.

- We all know that when someone dies, their “agency” dies, too. They are no longer active in the world in the same way they were. Even children get that when grandpa is gone, he’s gone. Even so, our intuitive sense of that person—the thinking, feeling grandpa—can still be activated by memories of the deceased. This intuitive discrepancy persists, and the rational mind steps in to make sense of it. The discrepancy becomes the dual nature of human beings—the body and soul. This in turn leads to idiosyncratic thoughts—that dead people are “still around”—and especially to beliefs in ancestral spirits.
- The human mind craves synchrony. Acting in unison with others—whether it’s a military procession or a church choir—triggers a biochemical surge in the brain, which increases social bonding and cooperation. This ancient bias was probably crucial to the forging of early societies, but the modern reflective mind—unaware of the original link between congregation and pleasure—seeks a supernatural explanation for the urge to unite, in the form of angels and gods.
- We all have an intuitive sense of right and wrong. Moral intuitions likely originated in the need to have fair relationships with others because, if we didn’t treat others fairly, we were excluded from future interactions. One of these ancient moral intuitions dictates that we should compensate others whom we have harmed, and if we can’t for whatever reason, that we should redress the unbalance with self-inflicted suffering. This could take the form of flagellation, mutilation, fasting, or giving away money to a third party—an orphanage or church, for instance. These actions seem intuitively to restore symmetry, yet to the reflective mind the reasons for such acts are mysterious. This mystery generates possible explanations, including divine justice and karma.

These are just a few examples of common religious beliefs and practices, drawn from an article to be published in the journal *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. There are many more. What they all have in common is that they all originate in intuitive beliefs, which “pop up” without deliberate thought, and demand an explanation. In that sense, Baumard and Boyer say, religious notions are not special. They are just one form of evidence that the human mind is motivated, as a result of evolution, to comment on its own gut feelings.

Wray Herbert’s blogs—“Full Frontal Psychology” and “We’re Only Human”—appear regularly in [The Huffington Post](#).