

**WE ARE
HARD-WIRED
TO BELIEVE IN
GOD**

S. Saajid Amin Bhat

Contemplation

﴿أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا﴾

Will they not then reflect upon the Qur'an, or are there locks upon their hearts.
Al-Qur'an 47:24

Discussion - II

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A
Contemplation
Group initiative

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وَالشَّمْسِ وَضُحَاهَا ﴿١﴾ وَالْقَمَرِ إِذَا اتَّالَاهَا ﴿٢﴾ وَالتَّهَارِ إِذَا جَلَّاهَا ﴿٣﴾
وَاللَّيْلِ إِذَا يَغْشَاهَا ﴿٤﴾ وَالسَّمَاءِ وَمَا بَدَّاهَا ﴿٥﴾ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا طَحَّاهَا
﴿٦﴾ وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا ﴿٧﴾ فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا ﴿٨﴾ قَدْ
أَفْلَحَ مَنْ زَكَّاهَا ﴿٩﴾ وَقَدْ خَابَ مَنْ دَسَّاهَا ﴿١٠﴾ كَذَّبَتْ ثَمُودُ
بِطُغُونِهَا ﴿١١﴾ إِذِ انبَعَثَ أَشْقَاهَا ﴿١٢﴾ فَقَالَ لَهُمْ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ
نَاقَةَ اللَّهِ وَسُقْيَاهَا ﴿١٣﴾ فَكَذَّبُوهُ فَعَقَرُوهَا فَدَمْدَمَ
عَلَيْهِمْ رَبُّهُمْ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ فَسَوَّاهَا ﴿١٤﴾ وَلَا يَخَافُ عُقْبَاهَا ﴿١٥﴾

Consider the human self, and how it is formed,
and how it is imbued with moral failings as well as with consciousness of God!
To a happy state shall indeed attain he who causes this [self] to grow in purity,
and truly lost is he who buries it.

Al-Qur'an 91:07-10

Human beings have a natural inclination for religious belief, especially during hard times. Our brains effortlessly conjure up an imaginary world of heavenly things, and the more insecure we feel, the harder it is to resist the pull of this supernatural world. It seems that our minds are finely tuned to believe in god.

Until recently, science has largely shied away from asking why.

"It's not that religion is not important, it's that the taboo nature of the topic has meant there has been little progress." Paul Bloom, Psychologist, Yale University.

RELIGION-AS-AN-ADAPTATION THEORY

For scientists the origin of religious belief is something of a mystery, but in recent years scientists have started to make suggestions. One leading idea is that religion is an evolutionary adaptation that makes people more likely to survive and pass their genes onto the next generation. In this view, shared religious belief helped our ancestors form tightly knit groups that cooperated in hunting, foraging and childcare, enabling these groups to outcompete others. In this way, the theory goes; religion was selected for by evolution, and eventually permeated every human society (*New Scientist*, 28 January 2006, p 30)

The benefits of holding such unfounded beliefs are questionable, in terms of evolutionary fitness. I don't think the idea makes much sense, given the kinds of things you find in religion. A belief in life after death, for example, is hardly compatible with surviving in the here-and-now and propagating your genes. Moreover, if there are adaptive advantages of religion, they do not explain its origin, but simply how it might have spread.

COMMON-SENSE DUALISM

"There's now a lot of evidence that some of the foundations for our religious beliefs are hard-wired," says Paul Bloom.

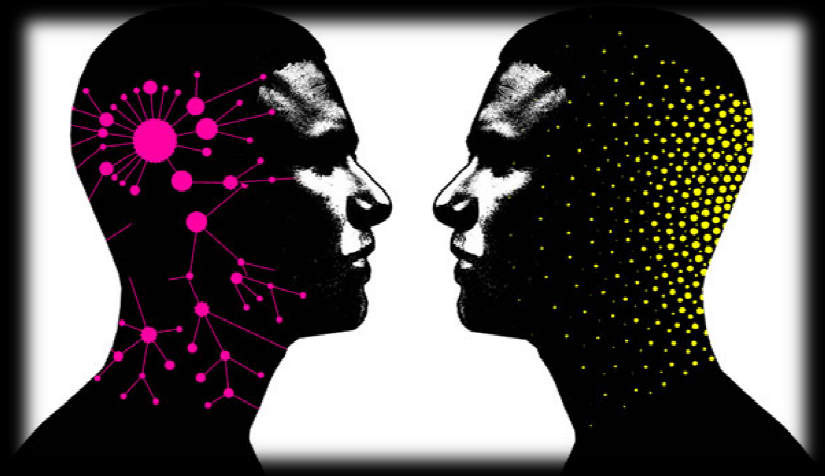
Much of that evidence comes from experiments carried out on children, who are seen as revealing a "default state" of the mind that persists, albeit in modified form, into adulthood. *"Children the world over have a strong natural receptivity to believing in gods because of the way their minds work, and this early developing receptivity continues to anchor our intuitive thinking throughout life."* Justin Barrett, Anthropologist, University of Oxford.

So how does the brain conjure up god? One of the key factors is the fact that our brains have separate cognitive systems for dealing with living things - things with minds, or at least volition - and inanimate objects.

This separation happens very early in life. Bloom and colleagues have shown that babies as young as five months make a distinction between inanimate objects and people. *Shown a box moving in a stop-start way, babies show surprise. But a person moving in the same way elicits no surprise.* To babies, objects ought to obey the laws of physics and move in a predictable way. People, on the other hand, have their own intentions and goals, and move however they choose.

The two systems are autonomous, leaving us with two viewpoints on the world: one that deals with minds, and one that handles physical aspects of the world. This innate assumption that mind and matter are distinct is called "common-sense dualism". The body is for physical processes, like eating and moving, **while the mind carries our consciousness in a separate - and separable - package.**

As Barrett points out, this is a useful skill. Without it we would be unable to maintain large social hierarchies and alliances or anticipate the unseen. **"Requiring a body around to think about its mind would be a great liability,"** he says.



Useful as it is, **common-sense dualism also appears to prime the brain for supernatural concepts such as life after death.** In 2004, **Jesse Bering of Queen's University Belfast, UK,** put on a puppet show for a group of pre-school children. During the show, an alligator ate a mouse. **The researchers then asked the children questions about the physical existence of the mouse, such as: "Can the mouse still be sick? Does it need to eat or drink?"** The children said no. But when asked more "spiritual" questions, such as **"does the mouse think and know things?"**, the children answered yes.

Based on these and other experiments, Bering considers a belief in some form of life apart from that experienced in the body to be the default setting of the human brain. **"Education and experience teach us to override it, but it never truly leaves us"**, he says.

The ability to conceive of god, however, is not sufficient to give rise to religion. The mind has another essential attribute: a well developed **sense of cause and effect which primes us to see purpose and design everywhere.**

Again, experiments on young children reveal this default state of the mind. Children as young as three readily attribute design and purpose to inanimate objects. **"It was extraordinary to hear children saying that things like mountains and clouds were 'for' a purpose and appearing highly resistant to any counter-suggestion,"** **Deborah Kelemen** of the University of Arizona in Tucson.

In similar experiments, **Olivera Petrovich of the University of Oxford** asked pre-school children about the origins of natural things such as plants and animals. She found they were seven times more likely to answer that they were made by god than made by people.

This cognitive faculty is so strong, says Petrovich, that children tend to spontaneously discover the concept of god without adult intervention: "They rely on their everyday experience of the physical world and construct the concept of god on the basis of this experience."

Pascal Boyer, a psychologist at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri, is keen to point out that religious adults are not childish or weak-minded. Studies reveal that religious adults have very different mindsets from children, concentrating more on the moral dimensions of their faith and less on its supernatural attributes.

Religion is an inescapable artifact of the wiring in our brain, says Bloom. All humans possess the brain circuitry and that never goes away. Even adults who describe themselves as atheists and agnostics are prone to supernatural thinking. Jesse Bering has seen this too. When one of his students carried out interviews with atheists, it became clear that they often tacitly attribute purpose to significant or traumatic moments in their lives, as if some agency were intervening to make it happen. "They don't completely exorcise the ghost of god - they just muzzle it," Bering says.





It Is Not Gullibility; It Is Imbued Nature (Fitrah)

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins argues that religion is propagated through indoctrination, especially of children. Evolution predisposes children to swallow whatever their parents and tribal elders tell them, he argues, as trusting obedience is valuable for survival. This also leads to what Dawkins calls "slavish gullibility" in the face of religious claims.

If we have an innate belief in god, however, where does that leave the indoctrination hypothesis?

God tells us in the Qur'an:

“When your Lord brought forth offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They replied, ‘We bear witness that You are.’ This He did, lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, ‘We had no knowledge of that.’

Or lest you say, ‘Our forefathers associated others with God before our time, and we are only the descendants who came after them. So are You going to destroy us for what those inventors of falsehood did?’

We explain Our signs in detail thus, so that perhaps they may return to Us.”

Al-Qur'an **07:172-174**



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and how it is imbued with moral failings as well as with consciousness of God!
To a happy state shall indeed attain he who causes this [self] to grow in purity,
and truly lost is he who buries it.

Al-Qur'an 91:07-10

We showed him the way, whether he be grateful or ungrateful.

Al-Qur'an 76:03

١ - باب قوله ﴿لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ
اللَّهِ﴾ لِلدِّينِ اللَّهُ ﴿خَلْقُ الْأَوْلِينَ﴾:
دِينُ الْأَوْلِينَ. وَالْفِطْرَةَ، الْإِسْلَامَ

٤٧٥- حَدَّثَنَا عَبْدَانُ أَخْبَرَنَا عَبْدُ اللَّهِ،
أَخْبَرَنَا يُونُسُ بْنُ الرَّهْرِيِّ، قَالَ: أَخْبَرَنِي
أَبُو سَلْمَةَ بْنُ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ، أَنَّ أَبَا هُرَيْرَةَ
رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ قَالَ: قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ:
«مَا مِنْ مَوْلُودٍ إِلَّا يُولَدُ عَلَى الْفِطْرَةِ،
فَأَبَوَاهُ يُهَوِّدَانِهِ أَوْ يُنَصِّرَانِهِ أَوْ يُمَجَّسَانِهِ،
كَمَا تَتَّجُّ الْبَهِيمَةُ بِبَهِيمَتِهَا جَمْعَاءَ، هَلْ
تُحْسِنُونَ فِيهَا مِنْ جَذَعَاءَ؟ ثُمَّ يَقُولُ:
﴿فِطْرَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا، لَا
تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ، ذَلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ﴾».

Prophet of God (peace be upon him) said,

"No child is born except on imbued nature (Islam) and then his parents make him Jewish, Christian or Magian, as an animal produces a perfect young animal: do you see any part of its body amputated?"

Then he recited:

"Devote yourself single mindedly to the Religion. And follow the nature as made by God, that nature in which He has created mankind. There is no altering the creation of God. That is the right religion. But most people do not realize it."

Al-Qur'an 30:30

"Say to them, 'Have you considered, if this Quran is really from God and you still reject it, then who could be more astray than someone who has drifted far away from the truth?'

We shall show them Our signs in the universe and within themselves, until it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth. Is it not enough that your Lord is the witness of all things?

Yet they still doubt that they will ever meet their Lord. Surely, He encompasses all things."

Al-Qur'an 41:52-54

Al-Qur'an, Chapter of The Land (Al-Balad)
90:08-20

- ❖ Have We not given him two eyes,
- ❖ and a tongue, and a pair of lips,
- ❖ **and shown him the two paths (good and evil)?**
- ❖ But he has not attempted the ascent.
- ❖ What will explain to you what the ascent is?
- ❖ It is the freeing of a slave;
- ❖ or the feeding in times of famine
- ❖ of an orphaned relative
- ❖ or some needy person in distress,
- ❖ and to be one of those who believe and urge one another to steadfastness and compassion.
- ❖ Those who do so are the people of the right hand,
- ❖ and [as for] those who are bent on denying the truth of Our revelations, they are the people of the left hand,
- ❖ and the Fire will close in on them.

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- **The Cognitive Psychology of Belief in the Supernatural**
Jesse M. Bering
- **Dueling with Dualism: the forlorn quest for the immaterial soul**
Michael Spenard
- **New Scientist**; 28 January 2006, p 30 & 04 February 2009, p 30-33.
- **A Brief History of the Philosophical Problem of Consciousness**
William Seager, University of Toronto at Scarborough
- **Purpose in mind: Exploring the natural foundations of religion in children and professional scientists**
Deborah Kelemen
- **Are Children "Intuitive Theists"?: Reasoning about Purpose and Design in Nature**
Deborah Kelemen, Boston University
- **Imagination and the I**
Shaun Nichols, 2008 *Conference on Imagination*, at Temple University

Recommended Readings:

1. **In Search of God**
Maulana Wahiduddin Khan
2. **God Arises**
Maulana Wahiduddin Khan
3. **The Evidence of God in an Expanding Universe**
John Clover Monsma
4. **Our Place in the Universe**
Norman K. Glendinning
5. **Universe's Invisible Hand**
Christopher J. Conselice
Scientific American, February 2007
6. **Allah Exists**
Haroon Yahya
7. **Islam The Voice of Human Nature**
Maulana Wahiduddin Khan
8. **Aqliyat-e-Islam (urdu)**
Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

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