

Forthcoming in the [Journal of Cognition and Culture](#) and available [here](#), an article by Will M. Gervais and [Joseph Henrich](#), "The Zeus Problem: Why Representational Content Biases Cannot Explain Faith in Gods" that deserves being read and discussed.

Abstract: In a recent article, Barrett (2008) argued that a collection of five representational content features can explain both why people believe in God and why people do not believe in Santa Claus or Mickey Mouse. In this model—and within the cognitive science of religion as a whole—it is argued that representational content biases are central to belief. In the present paper, we challenge the notion that representational content biases can explain the epidemiology of belief. Instead, we propose that representational content biases might explain why some concepts become widespread, but that context biases in cultural transmission are necessary to explain why people come to believe in some counterintuitive agents rather than others. Many supernatural agents, including those worshipped by other cultural groups, meet Barrett's criteria. Nevertheless, people do not come to believe in the gods of their neighbors. This raises a new challenge for the cognitive science of religion: the Zeus Problem. Zeus contains all of the features of successful gods, and was once a target for widespread belief, worship, and commitment. But Zeus is no longer a target for widespread belief and commitment, despite having the requisite content to fulfill Barrett's criteria. We analyze Santa Claus, God, and Zeus with both content and context biases, finding that context—not content—explains belief. We argue that a successful cognitive science of religious belief needs to move beyond simplistic notions of cultural evolution that only include representational content biases.