

## Opinion

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# Children of God?

*AC Grayling*

There's no real evidence to suggest that religion is hardwired - it's just wishful thinking on the part of religious academics

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**E**arlier this week I had occasion to debate - if the soundbite culture of radio news permits that description - with a member of Oxford University's Centre for Anthropology and Mind the "findings" of its [cognition, religion and theology project](#), to the effect that children are hardwired to believe in a "supreme being". The research is funded by the [Templeton Foundation](#), an organisation keen to find, or to insert, religion into science and to promote belief in their compatibility - which, note, comes down to spending money on "showing" in the end that the beliefs of ancient goatherds are as good as modern physics.

Justin Barrett, a Christian and member of the centre's research team (whether it is research or propaganda is the moot question here) says with his colleagues on the centre's website:

*Why is belief in supernatural beings so common? Because of the design of human minds. Human minds, under normal developmental conditions, have a strong receptivity to belief in gods, in the afterlife, in moral absolutes, and in other ideas commonly associated with 'religion' ... In a real sense, religiousness is the natural state of affairs. Unbelief is relatively unusual and unnatural.*

This claim was the subject of Barrett's lecture at Cambridge, in which he exhibited his reasons for thinking that children are innately disposed to believe in intelligent design/creationism and a supreme being. His real reasons for thinking this, of course, are that he is a man of faith funded by a faith-based organisation; but the

reasons he professed were that children have an innate tendency when small to interpret what happens in the world to be the outcome of purposive agency.

Now on this point he and I, an atheist funded by no organisation keen on promoting atheism, agree. Children's earliest experiences are of purposive agency in the adults and other people around them - these being the entities of most interest to them in their first months - and for good evolutionary reasons they are extremely credulous, not only believing that things must be acting as their parents do in being self-moving and intentional, but also believing in tooth fairies, Father Christmas, and a host of other things beside, almost all of which they give up believing before puberty, unless the beliefs are socially reinforced - as with religious and, to a lesser extent, certain other superstitious beliefs. Intellectual maturation is the process in important part of weaning oneself from the assumption that trees and shadows behave as they do for the same reason that one's parents, other humans, and dogs and cats do; it is every bit as natural a fact about children that they cease to apply intentionalistic explanations to everything as that they give them to everything, on the model of their parents' behaviour, in the earliest phases of development.

But Barrett and friends infer from the first half of these unexceptionable facts that children are hardwired to believe in a supreme being. Not only does this ignore the evidence from developmental psychology about the second stage of cognitive maturation, but is in itself a very big - and obviously hopeful - jump indeed. Moreover it ignores the fact that large tracts of humankind (the Chinese for a numerous example) have no beliefs in a supreme being, innate or learned, and that most primitive religion is [animistic](#), a simple extension of the agency-imputing explanation which gives each tree its dryad and each stream its nymph, no supreme beings required.

Barrett and friends say that children are hardwired to believe that nature is designed. This Barrett infers, apparently, from asking small children such questions as "why is this stone pointed?" It does not seem to have occurred to him that the semantics of "why" questions are such that they demand an explanation in terms of reasons or causes in response - the language game is constrained to that pattern: "why is/did?" prompts an automatic "because" - and that even small children know that "just because it is" does not count as satisfactory. So of course, from the limited resources they have in which reasons are vastly more familiar than causes (the causes that natural science later most fully discerns by investigation), they come up with what they know the questioner wishes to hear - an explanation - but in the absence of knowing very much about causes, they give it in intentionalistic terms. A small child might know why something might be made sharp, and for what sort of purpose, but not as readily how it might become so, especially if it is a natural object. All that this shows, therefore, is that the question was ineptly framed, not that the Templeton Foundation has proved that religious belief is innate.

"Religious belief" and early childhood interpretations of how the world work are so far removed from one another that only a preconceived desire to interpret the latter in terms of "intelligent design" and "a supreme being" - the very terms are a giveaway - is obviously tendentious, and this is what is going on here. It would merely be poor stuff if that was all there is to it; but there is more. The Templeton Foundation is rich; it offers a very large money prize to any scientist or philosopher who will say things friendly to religion, and it supports "research" as described above into anything that will add credibility and respectability to religion. Its website portrays its aims as serious and objective, but in truth it is just another example of how well-funded and well-organised some religious lobbies are - a common phenomenon in the United States in particular, and now infecting the body politic here.

But the Templeton Foundation would do better to be frank about its propagandistic intentions, for while it tries to dress itself in the lineaments of objectivity it will always face the accusation of tainting the pool, as with the work of this Oxford University institute.

Indeed I question the advisability of Oxford taking funds from the Templeton Foundation for this kind of work. I wonder whether it has undertaken due diligence on this one. I hope it would not take money supporting research for astrology, Tarot divination, proof that the Olympian deities still exist, and the like. The general claims of religion differ not one jot in intellectual respects - or respectability - from these. Perhaps it should think again.

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