

God knows what's in the biscuit tin

Small children have no trouble believing in omniscient beings and they do so after they have learned that humans are fallible

Andrew Brown

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"You have to indoctrinate someone into being an atheist" said [Justin L Barrett](#) at a seminar this week. He was being a little provocative, but his remark is much closer to the truth than the opposite claim, that you must indoctrinate people into religious belief. Barrett is [the Oxford researcher](#) into the cognitive science of religion whose psychological experiments have a knack for gathering headlines; though these are often misleading, the experiments themselves are solid, and represent some of the most interesting research being currently done into the relationship between science and religion.

For Barrett, as for [Scott Atran](#), [Pascal Boyer](#), [Jesse Bering](#) and others, children generate religious ideas quite naturally, as a result of the way our brains have evolved. This isn't in itself an argument for (or against) the truth of religious beliefs. But it does tell us something important about whether they will persist, and whether rigorous atheism will ever supersede superstition as a popular belief.

The experiments that Barrett was discussing built on the distinction between what God can know and what humans can know. Originally - that is to say before the age of about five - children cannot understand that other people do not know facts about the world that they do. One most elegant demonstration of this is the biscuit test: show a three-year-old a biscuit tin and ask what's in it: "Biscuits!" they say. Open the tin to reveal pebbles instead. When the child has overcome its disappointment, ask what's in the tin: "Pebbles, of course!". OK, what would your mother think was in the tin if we showed her? "Pebbles!" says the three year old. But by the age of five, they know that mother is human and can be fooled. If you ask then what mother will think is in the biscuit tin, the answer is biscuits.

How does God come into this? The answer is that God always knows what's in the tin. At the age of three, God and mother are both assumed to know it holds rocks, but at the age of five, mother thinks it holds biscuits, because she sees only the outside, but God still knows it's rocks inside.

This, to Barrett, shows that the idea of an omniscient god is one that makes intuitive sense to children. It is not a later theological development, but something intrinsic to at least one idea of god. There is some support from this from a very similar experiment that was done with Mayan children, who grow up in a polytheistic culture. There is there one creator god figure, partly Christian, and a variety of lesser deities; and the experiment is done with a tortilla gourd, not a biscuit tin. The lesser gods come to believe that the tortilla gourd holds tortillas, as the children grow older; the creator god is not fooled.

Two things struck me about this research. The first is that the idea that children would have no idea of God if they weren't told by wicked grownups is a very persistent atheist myth. I don't know how it could be completely disproved except by rerunning these experiments in North Korea, which would be difficult, or possibly the former East Germany, which seems to

