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Justin Barrett, *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief*, Free Press, 2012

In the last decade or so, new literature on the biology and psychology of religion has accumulated. Some popular treatments of this literature have already been published: Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained* (2001), Justin Barrett's *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (2004) and Robert McCauley's *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not* (2011), to name just a few. *Born Believers* (henceforth, BB) by psychologist Justin Barrett is a new addition to this literature. In the book, Barrett, while bracketing the evolutionary issues and some of the cognitive ones as well (such as ritual and practice), focuses on the development of religious belief in childhood. His argument is, simply, that children are in fact naturally prone to adopt religious beliefs. In addition, he wants to fend off suspicions that his conclusion might produce in the minds of religious sceptics and maintains that religious belief is not 'childish'.

To be sure, BB is targeted at a popular audience, so the reader should not expect detailed descriptions of research methods or too much theoretical background or philosophical reflection. The tone of the book is light and the text is peppered with amusing (and sometimes less amusing) stories. However, for those of us who are not too keen to trudge through great amounts of psychological research articles and reports, Barrett's short summaries of various experiments are useful and there is enough depth to the description of studies. Actually, one of the most interesting aspects of the book are the numerous descriptions of the ingenious experimental designs that developmental psychologists have devised to understand the beliefs and mental lives of young children and even babies.

The main thesis of BB is that 'children are prone to believe in supernatural beings such as spirits, ghosts, angels, devils, and gods during the first four years of life due to ordinary cognitive development in ordinary human environments' (p. 3). Barrett also makes the somewhat more controversial suggestion that children might have a bias towards more specifically Judeo-Christian-type god-concepts. Indeed, 'evidence exists that children find especially natural the idea of a nonhuman creator of the natural world, possessing superpower, super knowledge, and super perception, and being immortal and morally good' (p. 3).

In order to understand BB's basic argument better, it is useful to briefly examine what Barrett means by 'natural' in this context. Often naturalness is associated with something being innate or hard-wired, but this is not what Barrett means by it. Instead what is being referred to are actions characterized by cognitive ease and automaticity. Robert McCauley has made a useful distinction between practiced naturalness and maturational naturalness. Maturationally natural capacities emerge normally in human development and are mostly independent of specific cultural influence. Learning to walk and speak one's native language are the most typical examples of maturational naturalness. Whereas maturationally natural capacities require no special instruction, training, artefacts or tools, there are capacities that require exactly these. McCauley holds that capacities like reading, effortlessly driving a car or doing basic algebra are natural in the latter (practiced) sense: they require specialist instruction, training and tools.

Given these distinctions, BB's argument is that certain kinds of religious beliefs are maturationally natural to children, that is, children tend to adopt certain kinds of beliefs given that they are reared in a normal environment and have normal biological makeup. This does not result into any kind of biological determinism, because maturationally natural capacities are not necessarily determined by our biology. As Barrett puts it, 'just because we have a biological disposition towards a trait does not mean it will develop without the right kind of environment, and just because something is not built in does not mean that it is not nearly inevitable as a part of human development' (p. 19).

Now, BB consists of two parts. In the first part, Barrett goes through various developmental studies to support his argument, and in the second he considers some of the implications of his argument.

He first reviews evidence that suggests children finding and positing agents easy and natural. With early-developing capacities, like agency detection and theory of mind, thinking about invisible agents and their special powers is cognitively easy for children, which in turn makes it likely that they will adopt god-concepts, if they are around. He then describes several studies (some of his own) on how god-concepts that include superknowledge and immortality might be natural for children to understand.

Barrett pits some of his conclusions against the received view of the religious development of children, that of the developmentalist Jean Piaget. According to Piaget, children anthropomorphize God, that

is, they think about God as if God were just like another human (like their parents in most ways). Only when capacities for abstract reasoning develop around eight or nine years of age do they begin to distinguish between God and humans. Barrett argues that Piaget got something the wrong way around. It is not the case that children learn to think about God by extrapolating on the basis of their parents, but instead children before the age of four tend to think that all agents are like God, super knowing, immortal and super powerful. So the more sophisticated children's reasoning gets, the more children learn to restrict their intuitions and understand, for example, that not all people know what they themselves know and that biological life has an end point. So, instead of anthropomorphizing God and gods, children might actually make their parents and other agents god-like.

One of the main points in the first part is that the common assumption of children simply soaking up whatever their parents teach them is wrong. Against this (what Barrett calls the) Indoctrination hypothesis, Barrett defends the Preparedness hypothesis, namely, that children have a natural cognitive tendency to adopt religious-type concepts and not just any religious-type concepts but specific kinds of god-concepts. In other words, children do not learn everything that their parents teach them with similar ease, but instead some ideas make more sense to them than others.

For instance, Barrett argues that because teleological and design thinking is so intuitive for children (and adults too), teaching children evolution is rather hard. Children have the tendency to assume several things that make understanding evolution difficult. First of all, they assume that there is inherent teleology in nature. This is shown by series of ingenuous experiments conducted by Deborah Kelemen, among others, that suggests children (and adults) prefer functional explanations for natural kinds and substances. Second, children also tend to think that there is a link between agents and order: order does not come about all by itself but is a product of intentional agency. Third, children also have a strong intuition that natural kinds and entities are not human made: children can readily distinguish between artefacts (human made) and natural entities (designed but not human made). These tendencies give rise to a kind of 'intelligent design' bias, that is, a tendency to see nature and especially animals as designed for some purpose. Having this tendency makes it rather counterintuitive to believe that the natural world is a product of biological evolution, which is not driven by any

agent or does not operate with a goal in mind. Thus, even in cases where children have grown up in an environment where evolution is explicitly taught and supernatural belief actively discouraged, children have trouble understanding and believing evolution and favour agent and designer type explanation over standard biological ones.

The second part of the book deals with some of the implications of the naturalness of religious belief hypothesis. Barrett begins the part by rarefying the main point: not all god-beliefs are maturationally natural, but only certain basic ones. The core ‘natural religion’ includes the belief in some sort of creating and super powerful god and design in nature but it does not, for example, entail strict monotheism. Furthermore, at least some of the attributes of orthodox monotheistic gods are not supported by maturationally natural cognition, but are, in fact, contrary to it. For example, the Trinitarian view of God and the notion of God being outside time and space are rather unnatural and, thus, more difficult for both adults and children to believe. Here we encounter some interesting studies about what Barrett calls the ‘theological incorrectness effect’. Some theologically correct attributes of God, like omnipresence and ‘omniattention’ seem difficult for people to process in situations where reflection is not especially encouraged. Several studies revealed that although religious believers verbally profess that God is everywhere and can do all things at the same time, they nevertheless made systematic distortions to stories about God’s actions and presence. They tended to ‘anthropomorphize’ God in ways that made God more like normal agents, such as being able to direct attention to only to one place instead of some other or being in one place rather than another. The theological incorrectness effect, thus, reveals the difference between natural religion and theologies. Natural religion, according to Barrett, provides an anchor-point or the basic building blocks for religious elaboration and actual theologies.

Some critics of religion, such as Richard Dawkins, have famously argued that teaching religion to children is a form of child abuse. Given what Barrett has said so far, it is not difficult to figure out that he disagrees. Although he acknowledges that religious education can be in some extreme cases abusive (as all education), there is nothing abusive in teaching children what their parents genuinely believe and practice. This applies to both religion and non-religion. Barrett then makes a pragmatic argument for this. Because children have a natural tendency to seek role models and wanting to become like their parents, if parents

do not teach their children what they themselves believe and profess, the children will naturally feel excluded. Behind the worry of Dawkins and others is the view that children are blank slates and learn anything that their parents teach them. But if the research that BB presents is correct, this assumption is false. The reason why most children adopt the religious beliefs of their parents is not that their parents and their religious communities indoctrinate, bully or abuse them to believe, but simply because it is easy for children to adopt religious ideas, if they are around.

Finally, I want to briefly discuss one philosophically salient topic in BB. Given BB's basic claim, the natural question to ask is whether the fact that we do indeed have some maturationally natural capacities that make the emergence of certain kinds of god-beliefs likely provide problems for the truth or justification of religious beliefs. More specifically, the philosopher of religion is interested in whether psychological explanations of religious beliefs will have any significant impact in the philosophical debates about atheism and theism.

This question is pressing, because naturalistic explanations of religion are often used as parts of critiques of religion. It also looks at least intuitively plausible that if we can explain the emergence of a belief in such a way that the explanation makes no reference to the truth of the belief, the belief itself is undermined. In other words, if we can explain how god-beliefs come about without making references to gods or such, god-beliefs must be false or unjustified. In the first case, the argument would be that the fact of naturalistic causal explanation for religious belief gives us a reason to think that religious beliefs are false. The problem, however, is that such an argument would commit the genetic fallacy. There is no logical contradiction between the statements 'religion is completely naturally caused' and 'God exists', so we should not infer straightforwardly from a naturalistic explanation of religion to the falsity of religious belief. As to the justification of religious beliefs, things are more complicated. It seems at least intuitively plausible to think that if I learn that the causes of my god-belief is purely natural, this would constitute a defeater for my belief and I would not be any longer justified in believing in God.

Apart from assuring that the BB account does not by itself debunk religious belief, Barrett does not really deal with these issues. There are a few hints towards an answer to the justification problem, though. Barrett points out that many trustworthy beliefs that adults have

(e.g., permanence of solid objects, other people have minds, gravity) are based on maturationally natural cognition. From this a general rule is derived: 'our minds as basically trustworthy to deliver true beliefs and ... our naturally arising "childish" beliefs should be regarded as true until we have good reason to suspect them as being problematic' (p. 173). More philosophically put, deliverances of our cognitive faculties in their proper conditions are *prima facie* justified and since religious belief is a product of such faculties, it should be considered as *prima facie* justified. Here we have a kind of Reidian (after Thomas Reid) answer to the justification problem.

There are some worries here, though. First, might there be something in the BB account itself which functions as defeaters for the *prima facie* justification. One could, for instance, argue that a benevolent and all-powerful God would be unlikely to use such fallible mechanisms as hair-triggered agency detection to provide people with beliefs about God. There might be some divine hiddenness-type worries about the goodness and trustworthiness of God. Nevertheless, some (including Barrett himself in his other works) have argued that the Christian God would most likely create natural psychological mechanisms that would favour at least some kind of belief in God. Reformed theologians often talk of *sensus divinitatis* as fulfilling such a role. If this were plausible, the BB account of religious beliefs (if true) would be (albeit modest) evidence for the existence of God.

The second problem is that *prima facie* justification of the kind suggested by BB is rather weak, especially in a cultural context where alternative religious beliefs to one's own (and even a wide variety of non-religious worldviews) are readily available to all. So, without any independent reasons for one's religious belief other than the basic, intuitive support of one's own cognitive mechanisms, specific religious beliefs would be unlikely to survive for long. From the remarks that Barrett makes elsewhere in BB, we can infer that he believes that some such reasons could, nevertheless, be given and at least some types of religious beliefs might not be any worse off than most non-religious beliefs. However, the original point still stands: even if the BB account does not all by itself make religious beliefs unjustified, epistemically responsible religious (and non-religious) believers need to reflectively consider defeaters in order to maintain justified belief.

In conclusion, let me just say that a book that is as well written and concise as BB deserves a readership outside psychological circles. From

a philosophical point of view, it does not offer much, especially in terms of the problems relevant for philosophy of religion. But again, this might be too much to expect from a popular book such as BB. Fortunately, there is an emerging literature on philosophers engaging with psychological and biological explanations of religion (e.g., *The Believing Primate*, OUP 2009). Further, Barrett himself has addressed the topic in several articles and his other 2012 book *Cognitive Science, Religion and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds* (JTF Press), which I would suggest as a companion piece to BB.

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Charles Taliaferro. *Dialogues about God.* Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009.

In his excellent book *Dialogues about God*, Charles Taliaferro gives a comprehensive introduction into the main questions concerning the subject of God. The theist Taliaferro presents his introduction in the form of a dialogue, because he appreciates the abilities of self-questioning and of placing oneself into the opposing position (p. xii). He chose the form of a friendly dialogue in order to enable a constructive discussion and reduce the hostility which sometimes occurs in philosophical discussions (pp. xiii-xiv). The four characters of this dialogue are the secular naturalist Pat, the theist Chris, the agnostic Tony and the negative theologian Liz who holds that God is beyond human concepts (pp. xiv-xvi).

Is Theism coherent and valid as an Explanation?: Pat begins the dialogue by arguing that theism is incoherent. Theism assumes the existence of God, a conscious immaterial person. But we are only familiar with bodily beings. Without a face there can be no grin. Without a body there can be no thinking, feeling and acting. The idea of an immaterial person is incoherent (pp. 2-4). Chris objects to that and argues that human beings are conscious immaterial persons. Hence conscious immaterial persons are possible. Chris argues that materialism with respect to human beings is false. Beliefs, purposes and desires cannot be reduced to physical processes in the brain. We can imagine that human beings are zombies, i.e. that they behave as if they had mental life with conscious experiences while in fact lacking mental life altogether. This conceivability is