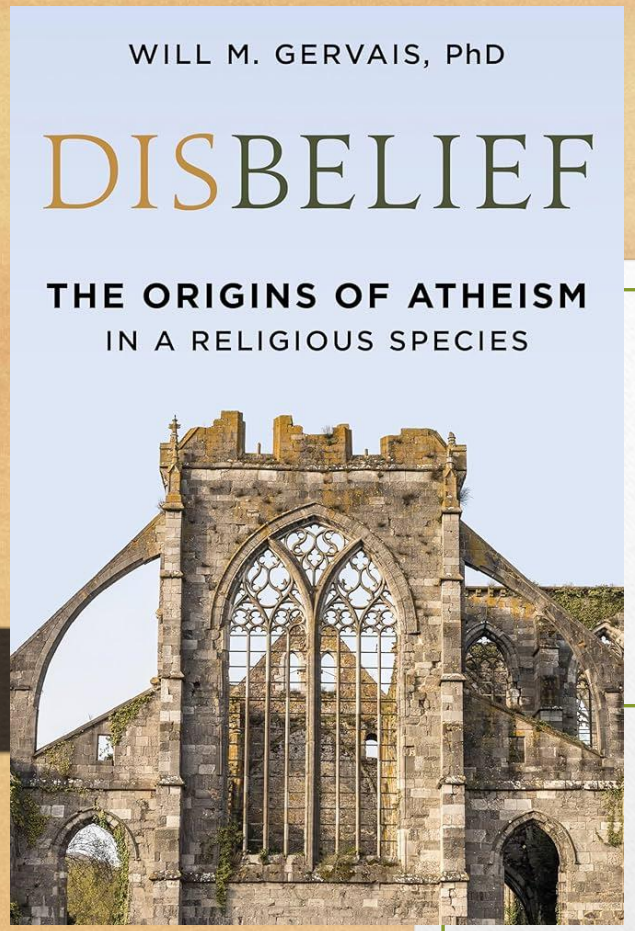


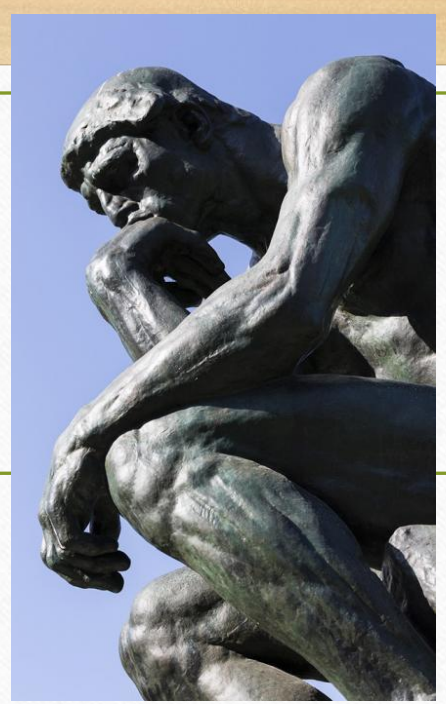
Scientific Study of Religion 4

Dr. Saeed Garmaroudi



Previously discussed

- Is Atheism more rational?
- Rational atheism thesis
- What does science say?
  - Upbringing or rational thinking?
- Rational vs. intuitive thinking
  - Cognitive styles
- Science Self-Corrects!



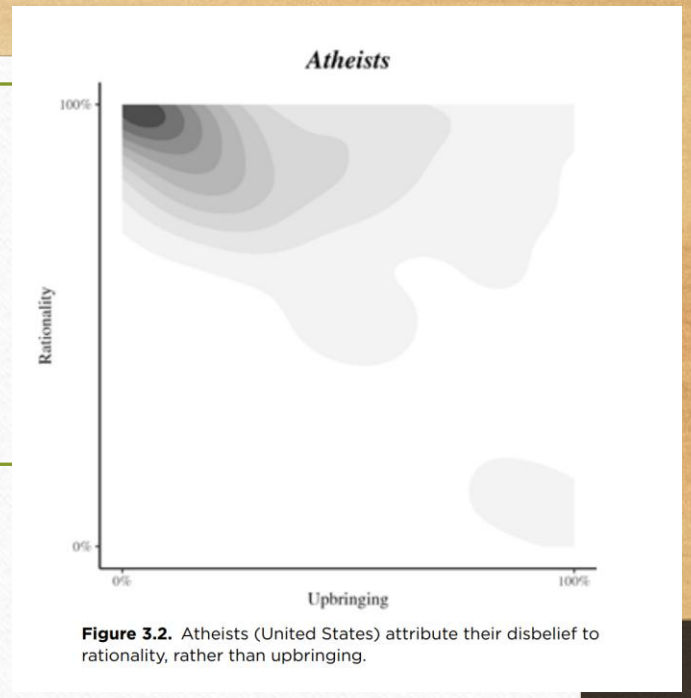
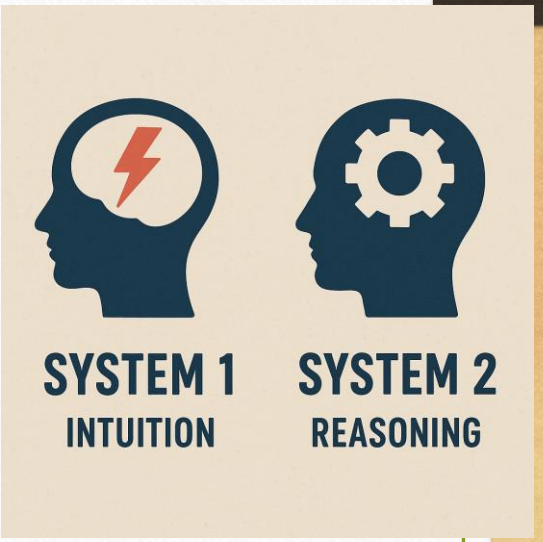


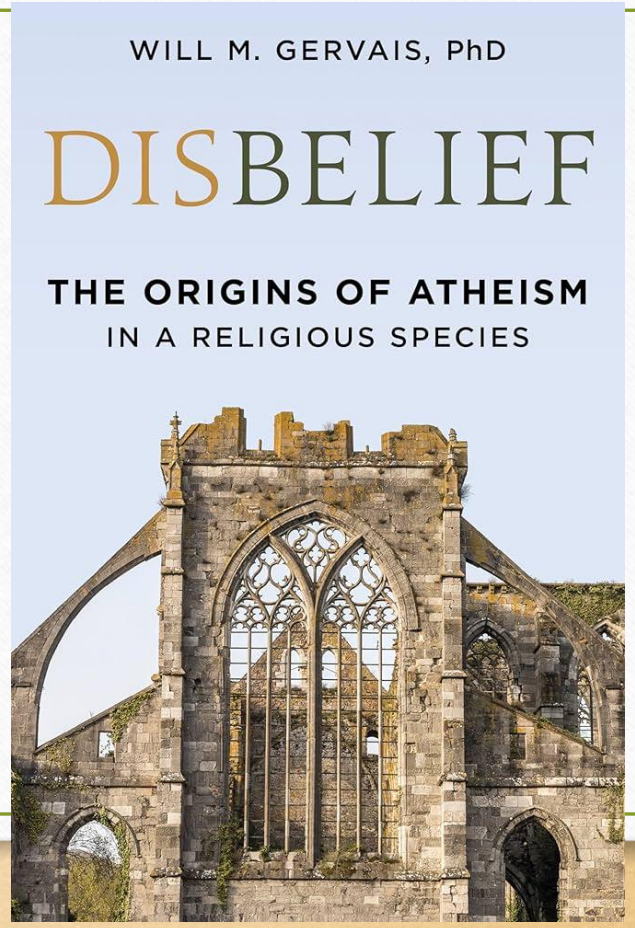
Figure 3.2. Atheists (United States) attribute their disbelief to rationality, rather than upbringing.





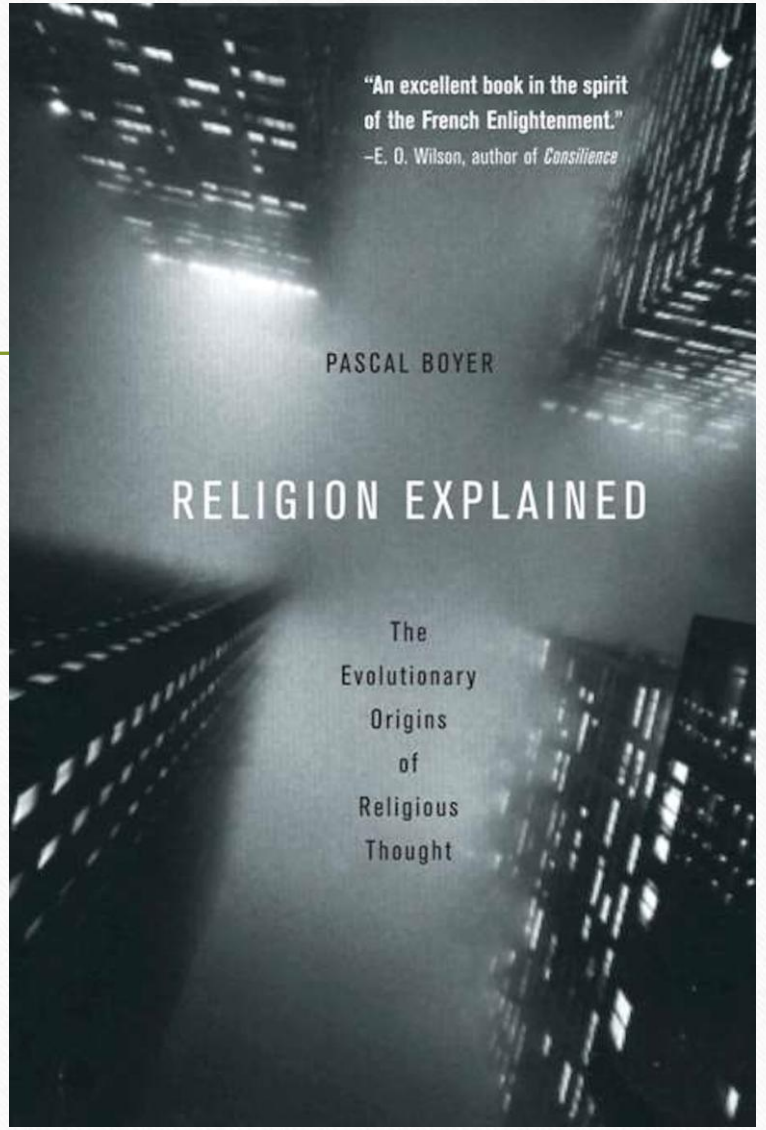
Why do we follow author's story?

- It comes down to a consistent position
  - Taking it seriously!
- Points of argument and disagreement with other positions



The beginning

- Pascal Boyer's Religion Explained:
  - Evolutionary psychology of religion
  - A weird upright primate like us could've started to ponder the supernatural



CSR ideas



- What kind of a brain could produce supernatural beliefs?
  - People have an easy time imagining gods and ghosts and djinn
- Religious ideas tend to grab the attention of most folks
- Supernatural agents (an example)
  - Local spirit and the universal God
  - More or less human minds
  - Desires and concerns
  - They want some outcomes rather than others
  - They have preferences
  - People work to please their deities.
- Universality and naturalness
- **Evolutionary psychology approach** to mind and psyche



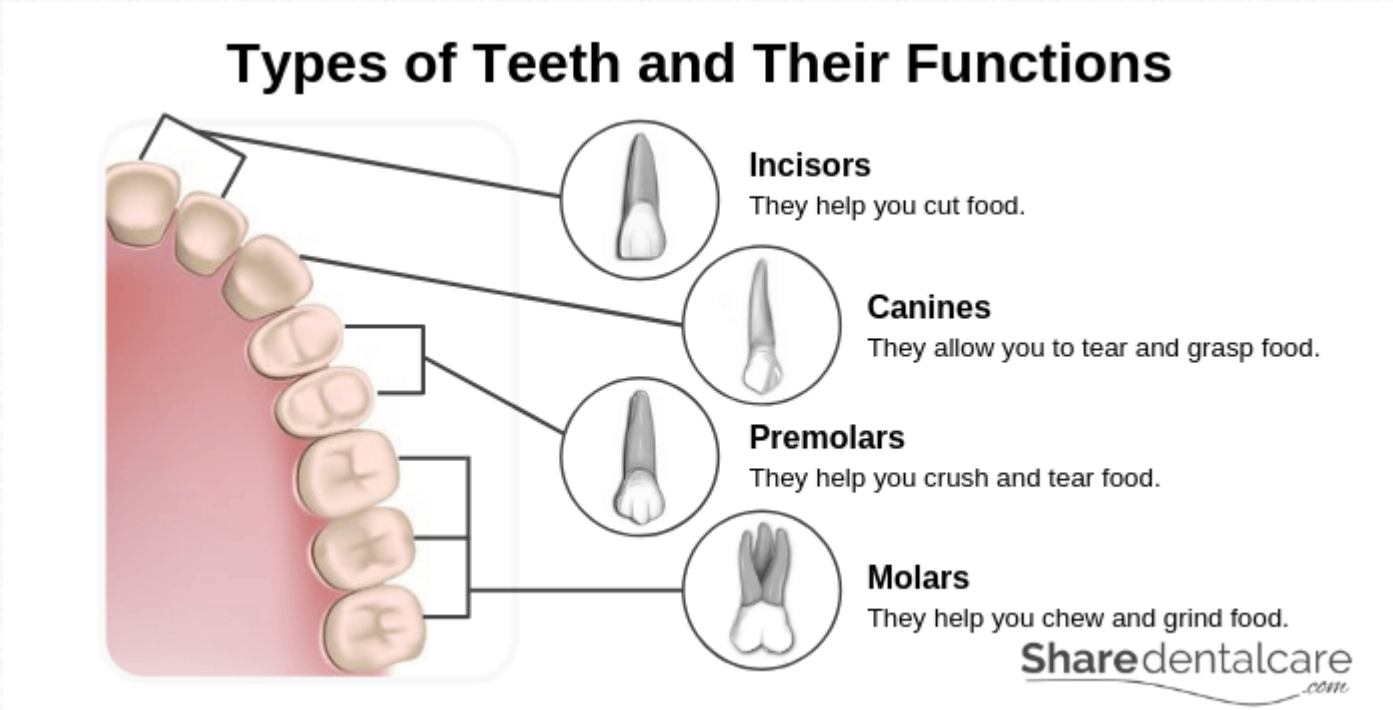
Adaptationist view

- When you consider religion as adaptive in a particular way, it contradicts itself or depends on the context
  - E.g., moralizing Gods
  - E.g., Stress-reduction

adaptationist

By-product view

- Are white teeth an adaptation?
- Calcium phosphate
- How about exaptation view?



By-product view



- Mostly considers the story as fabrication (Jesse Bering)
  - Some shaman made up some story of a talking tree
- The Shaman/priest is benefiting (Pinker)
  - Religion as a virus
  - Positive outcomes?
  - Not all of them are reductionist though (e.g., Barret)
    - Example of ascribing mind
- Cannot be linked to a unique outcome



Example



- انسان در اصل یک موجود روحانی جاودانه به نام «تتان» است که میلیاردها سال پیش درگیر فاجعه‌های کیهانی شده، به جهان مادی سقوط کرده و حافظه و توانایی‌های واقعی خود را از دست داده است. رنج‌های روانی و مشکلات انسان نتیجهٔ این تروماهای انباشته‌شده (اِنگرام‌ها) هستند. هدف ساینتولوژی این است که از طریق فرایند «آدیتینگ» فرد را از این اِنگرام‌ها پاک کند تا به حالت «کلیر» و در نهایت به آزادی و قدرت روحانی کامل بازگردد.

Religion as a By-Product?

- Conceptualizing an evolved mind
  - Finding mates, avoiding danger, tracking complex alliances, avoiding cheaters and liars
  - "human nature" is just the idiosyncratic set of mental adaptations
- Religions are just good fits for the minds we've evolved to have.
  - The biases work below awareness



Mentalizing

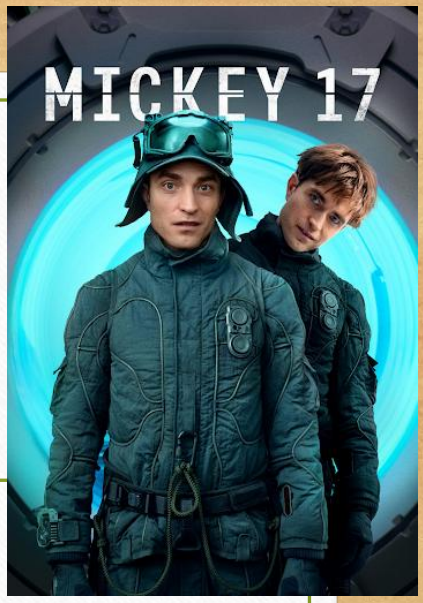
- The ability to track what's going on in other people's heads, to interpret human behavior in terms of mental states.
- Pascal Boyer
  - Folk physics and folk biology folk psychology
  - Mental models
  - But there is some level of plasticity



Minds and Bodies

- East and West
- The idea that minds and bodies are fundamentally distinct
- The soul is the seat of the personhood, personality, intellect, and unique identity
- Think about minds existing without bodies. Ghosts. Gods.
- Most solid in terms of evidence
- Future self







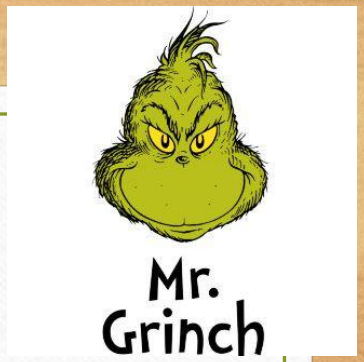


Agency Detection

- HADD
- Detecting and dealing agency
- False alarms
- A system primed to over detect agency leads us to suspect supernatural agents
- Maybe they're actual agents that just aren't visible by ordinary means
- Anthropomorphism







Minimally Counterintuitive Agents

- A cognitive sweet spot
  - Different enough from expectations to draw attention
  - But not so different as to be confusing
    - Everyday stories (even scientific work!)
- More memorable (Some research)
  - Cultural transmission
- A wolf that can talk and impersonate a grandmother? Memorable
- Also related to order and chaos introducing chaos
  - Mr.Grinch



Teleology and intuitive creationism

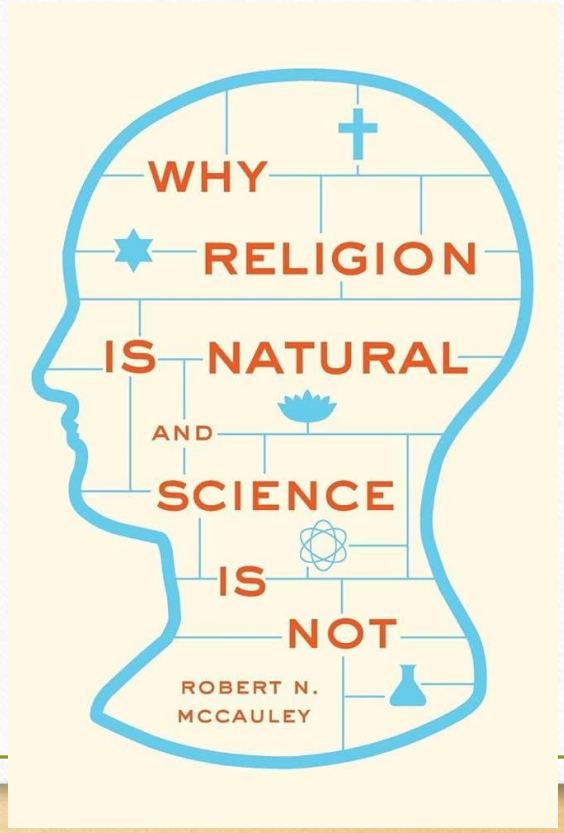
- Things that do serve a purpose
  - Bird wing serves a purpose
- There are things that do NOT serve a purpose
  - Bears need to scratch their backs sometimes
  - Functionality, significance and association
  - Flowers grow so that bees can make honey
- Promiscuous teleologists
  - In adults who are suffering from dementia
  - Higher cognitive faculties
  - Under pressure to respond quickly
- Our mentalizing system might be projecting (rather than detecting) agency
  - Function-intent-designer thinking
  - Intuitive Creationism ("Are Children Intuitive Theists?"





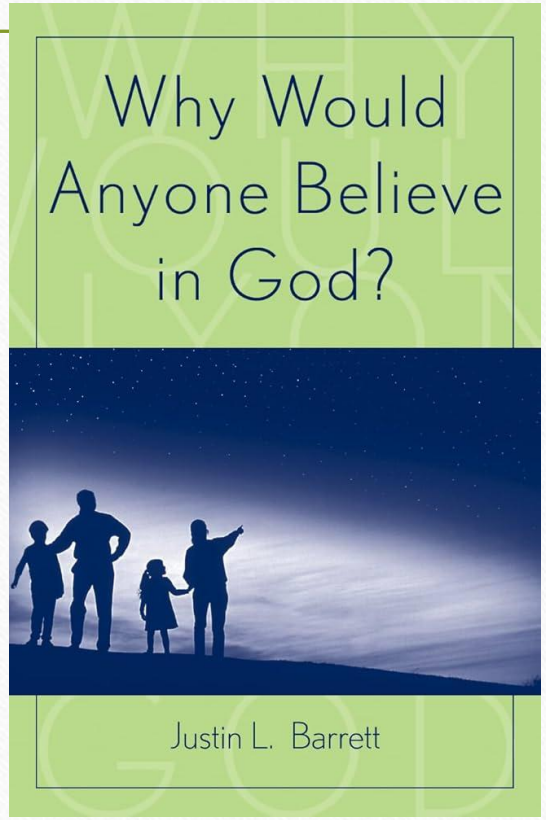
Religion as Natural

- Dualism, HADD, and minimal counterintuition
  - Thinking of supernatural agents in the first place
  - Memorable and culturally transmissible
- How these supernatural agents start to seem religious in nature
  - Teleology
    - Purpose and meaning
    - Intellects behind the apparent design we see in the world
- Religious concepts fit well with our evolved psychology, and thus sticky and persistent



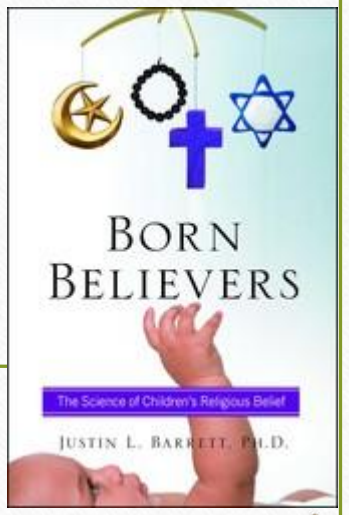
The gist!

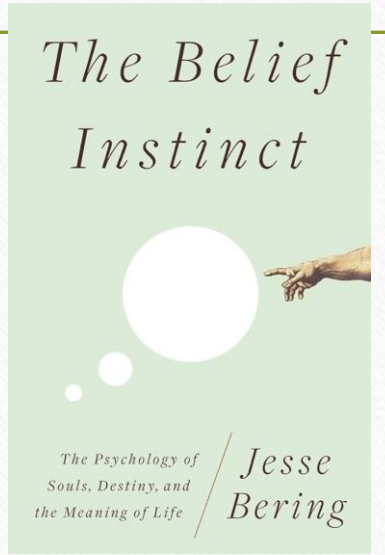
- Justin Barret
  - The more mental tools with which an idea fits, the more likely it is to become a (reflective) belief. . . . Belief in gods is common precisely because such beliefs resonate with and receive support from a large number of mental tools.
  - هرچه یک ایده با ابزارهای ذهنی بیشتری سازگار باشد، احتمال بیشتری دارد که به یک باور (تأملی) تبدیل شود. ... باور به خدایان رایج است، دقیقاً به این دلیل که چنین باورهایی با شمار زیادی از ابزارهای ذهنی هم‌نوا می‌شوند و از سوی آن‌ها پشتیبانی دریافت می‌کنند.

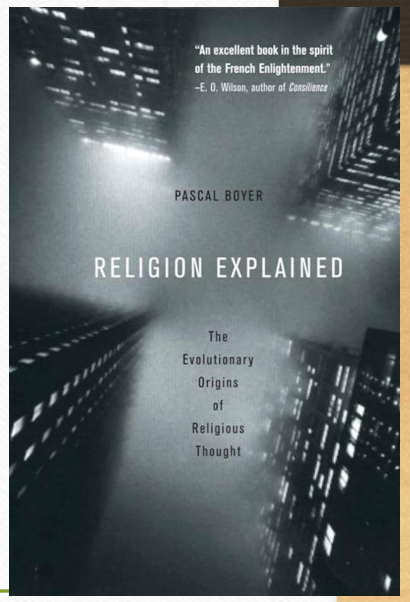


The criticism

- Starts at 2006
- Religion Explained and The Belief Instinct and Born Believers.
- Religion as a by-product
  - Heavy emphasis on mentalizing
- Arguments well beyond the evidence
- Holes in the claims and pieces do not fit together









The criticism

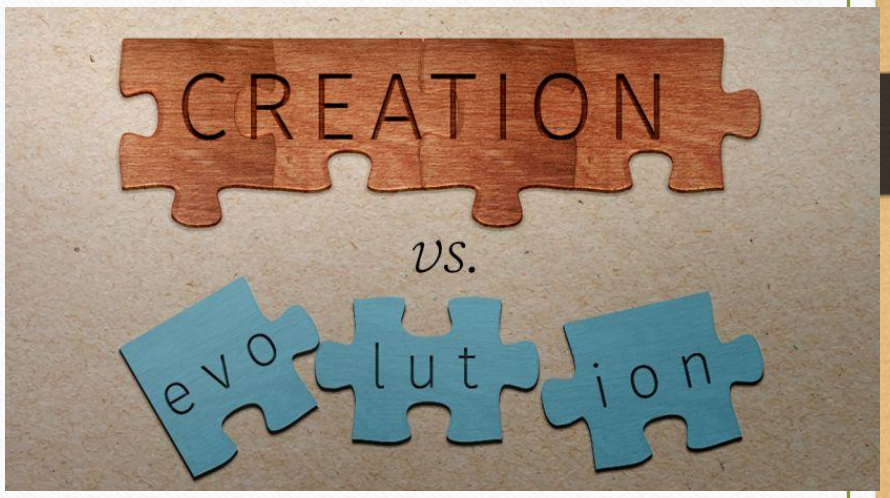


- HADD and evidence
  - Since 1990s, speculation linking religion to HADD has never really been supported
- The story
  - Ara Norenzayan: "low-hanging fruit," / true but lacks empirical results
  - It is discussed as settled science (even through Shermer and Dawkins and Dennett)
  - However, no link was found
  - At the conference!
    - The scholar of CSR
    - Others signaled their support
      - Even with the same guy!
- At the journal: Religion, Brain, and Behavior
  - Failed studies
  - HADD is a zombie theory



The criticism

- Intuitive creationists?
  - Disbelief and science curricula do not penetrate children's thinking effectively until around age ten (8-10)
  - Cannot be accounted for by their parents' own position
  - (aged five to seven or so) were largely random in their responses
  - eight-to-ten bracket, tended to favor creationist explanations.
  - older than ten largely mirrored their parents' views
  - Regular old public school: "non-fundamentalist,"
  - Private religious schools: "fundamentalist."
  - Rural Ohio
  - State standards lacked even a single mention of evolution in school



The chapter conclusions



- My reservations about the standard cognitive science of religion framing grew deeper,
- I began to focus less on individual evidence shortfalls and more on basic and fundamental conceptual issues
- CSR helps explain why they take similar forms across cultures and the popularity and being memorable
- They seem to entirely miss one defining feature of religion
  - Passionate commitment to gods
  - What about faith
  - The case of Zeus



Final thoughts

- The goal that the author reaches:
  - The evolution process and the religious phenomena should be considered more fully
  - Seems like the perspective of CSR is missing some components
  - Let's look at the cultural evolution
- The other stream that advocates the right blocks and could be put into conversation with the cultural evolution
- The Human niche
- Dunbar, Fuentes, Rossano, Vervaeke

