Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Beliefs, by Justin L. Barrett.
Free Press, 2012. 336pp., Hb., £16.28. ISBN-13: 9781439196540.

Reviewed by Claire White, University of California, Northridge, claire.white@csun.edu

Keywords

God, religion, developmental psychology

Justin Barrett is noted as one of the primary contributors to the cognitive science of religion and his book draws primarily upon both the assumptions and research of this approach. Barrett's book stands out amongst other "popular" scientific books on the topic of religion due to the focus on religious development in particular and more generally, due to the value that he sees in religious belief. Many readers are likely to find this approach a breath of fresh air midst of so many contemporary books that are distinctly anti-religion.

The central claim of the book is that humans are naturally predisposed to believe in god. A book needs a catchy title, but this one is particularly misleading. In fact, Barrett goes to pains to demonstrate in the end that children are not literally "born believers." Barrett is careful to illustrate that his agenda is not nativist while at the same time discarding the "indoctrination hypothesis," the claim that belief in god/s are entirely learned, as ignoring the plethora of research in the social cognitive sciences which demonstrated that children are not blank slates. Barrett supports his claims by drawing upon research about children's understanding of agency, teleology and meaning as well as research—including his own—on children's representation of gods specifically. In one particularly useful analogy he argues that children's development is like a pre-school shape-sorter toy with conceptual holes that have particular shapes (p.15). It so happens, then, that gods have properties that fit these conceptual slots and thus god concepts are easily acquired by young children.

The book is divided into an introduction and two parts. The introduction, like the chapters throughout, contains anecdotes from Barrett's own personal experiences that some may find particularly reader friendly but the avid scholar may find detracts from the overall scientific feel of the book. Then again, the book is supposed to be accessible to a general audience. It seems that some of the anecdotes contain "take home" messages that are left for the reader to decipher. For example, Barrett describes an encounter with a Muslim student while he was conducting research in India. It seems that Barrett is conveying that his research can be used to confirm others' religious beliefs, even if they are not the same as

our own. At the same time, there is the implicit message that Barrett is not arguing that a particular conception of god is more natural than others.

Part 1, “the evidence,” contains first five chapters are dedicated to reviewing the experimental research that supports Barrett’s main claims. Barrett summarises and synthesises a range of studies from multiple approaches in a way that showcases his intimate familiarity with the cognitive science of religion and developmental research more generally. Part 2, “the implications”: Barrett discusses the broader repercussions of his claims, including the idea that children naturally gravitate towards a belief in an ordered and purposeful universe created by an all-powerful deity. Some readers may be surprised to find a chapter on atheism in a book on religious development. Through the use of personal anecdotes, openness, and careful rendering of research, Barrett situates this work against his research on theism in a manner that is thought provoking. Some readers may find the seven-point list on how to be a satisfied atheist at the end of this chapter inappropriate. Others may find it light hearted refreshment that is typical of popular science books. Likewise, some readers may find Chapters 10 and 11, on encouraging religious development in children as boarding on prescriptive suggestions and therefore ill-placed in a scientific account. However, parents—religious or not, are likely to find these chapters particularly insightful and applicable. Academic readers may also find it impressive that Barrett has managed to create practical advice based on scientific evidence, especially in a climate where readers are anxious for a ‘take home message’ with every purchase.

This book is recommended for parents, teachers, and those engaging with young children as well as students and those interested in learning more about the cognitive science of religion. Developmental researchers will find the application of research to issues about religion particularly interesting. Though the book is not promoting a religious agenda, religious scholars and religious practitioners, as well as religious folk generally, will definitely find value in Barrett’s approach. More importantly, perhaps, those who have come to associate scientific research with anti-religion are best advised to read this book. They will be most surprised.