

The Social Construction of Divinity: Understanding the Human Belief in God

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Abstract:

The belief in a divine being, or God, has been a significant aspect of human life and has been the subject of intrigue in the field of socio-psychology. This research paper aims to explore the reasons behind the widespread belief in God among humans. The paper delves into the origins of this belief and how it has been shaped through social processes. As social creatures, humans have not only sought basic necessities like food, shelter, and clothing but have also developed other needs through socialization. To address these questions, the researcher has developed the "beg, blame, and bear" theory, which is supported by previous research findings. Furthermore, the paper discusses the functions of religion and God, although they are often considered two sides of the same coin, their roles are distinct.

Keywords: Belief; God; Religion; Socialization; Supernatural Power

Introduction

Initially, humans are not inherently social beings but rather become social through a process called socialization. At birth, humans are merely animals, lacking self-consciousness and a defined sense of self. Over time, through interaction and engagement with others, they develop their self-identity and self-awareness (Dodds, Lawrence, & Valsiner, 1997). Similarly, humans are not born with the concept of a divine being or supernatural phenomena. If this were the case, one would expect feral humans and chimpanzees, considered our closest animal relatives, to exhibit similar belief systems. However, there is no evidence suggesting that animals or feral humans believe in gods or comparable concepts (Marcz, 2018; Steeves, 2003). While some studies indicate that animals may possess beliefs, proving this is more challenging than with humans (Newen & Starzak, 2020).

Throughout various nations and continents, regardless of whether it's a tribal society or the most advanced societies in the world, people hold beliefs in god or supernatural forces. The discovery of carvings on a snake-shaped rock, along with 70,000-year-old spearheads in the vicinity, provides the earliest evidence of religious practices (Minkel, 2006). This commonality in belief, whether observed in the oldest societies or modern ones, remains a consistent aspect across both.

Exploring the supernatural beliefs within human cultures is of great significance in understanding the evolution and origins of such convictions. It is crucial to acknowledge that there was once a point in human history where no one believed in a divine entity. Today, over 80% of humans identify as theists (Zuckerman, P., 2007). Despite governments imposing penalties for traffic rule adherence, many individuals still disobey. Interestingly, while gods do not enforce consequences, numerous people remain devoted to them. This raises several intriguing questions: First, what common factors exist

between the oldest and most recent modern societies that foster belief in a deity? Second, what motivates individuals to believe in god? Third, what forces or necessities drove humanity to turn towards divine entities? Lastly, is religion synonymous with god, and do they serve similar functions? In this paper, we aim to provide insights into these inquiries.

The intriguing subject of religion has long captivated the attention of anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists. In recent years, research dedicated to understanding the reasons behind belief in a divine entity has intensified. Studies on this topic predominantly emphasize psychological factors while minimizing the significance of social factors (Mercier, Kramer, & Shariff, 2018). Some research has attempted to define the concept of supernatural beings as entities believed to have created or governed all reality, intervening in human affairs, and upholding moral standards (Botero, Gardner, Kirby, Bulbulia, Gavin, & Gray, 2014). However, these explanations are not considered scientifically valid. According to researchers, there are two categories of causal explanations: ultimate and proximate. Ultimate explanations focus on the question of why people believe in god, exploring its functional necessity. Proximate explanations, on the other hand, delve into the aspects of how and when individuals come to believe in a deity.

Emile Durkheim, a founding member of sociology, recognized that religion extended beyond merely believing in "supernatural beings." Instead, he viewed it as a unifying system of beliefs and practices centered around sacred things, which brought members of a community together. According to Durkheim (1965), religion is "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set aside and forbidden-beliefs and practices, which unite into one single moral community, all those who adhere to them." From this definition, it becomes evident that religion is an institutionalized set of beliefs and practices associated with sacred entities, often referred to as gods. These gods are considered as immaterial beings capable of performing actions similar to humans but possessing additional powers. A prominent Christian philosopher defined god as "a person without a body (i.e., a spirit) present everywhere, the creator and sustainers of the universe, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy, and worthy of worship" (Swinburne, 1977).

Numerous disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, theology, and even biology, have delved into the study of religion and the concept of god. Each field approaches the subject from its unique perspective and with specific interests. In this paper, we aim to explore the evolution of the belief in god from a sociological standpoint. Although it is commonly assumed that god created human beings, Charles Darwin's theory of the "origin of species" in his work "On the Origin of Species" (1859) directly contradicts this belief (Darwin, 1968). In the following discussion, we will examine how and why humans developed the concept of god. Primarily, there are three fundamental reasons or needs that have driven humans to conceive the idea of a divine entity.

Berger and Luckman argue that individuals collectively create and maintain the reality they inhabit through everyday interactions, language, and shared meanings. This perspective challenges the notions of reality as something inherent or external to human experience, highlighting its dynamic and socially constructed nature. Consider the concept of money. While money itself may have tangible properties, such as paper bills or metal coins, its value and significance are socially constructed. Through collective agreement and societal institutions such as banks and governments, individuals assign value to currency, enabling it to function as a medium of exchange and a symbol of wealth.

The Process of Socialization

Socialization is the lifelong process through which individuals acquire the knowledge, beliefs, values, and norms of their society. From birth, individuals are socialized into existing social structure, roles, and institutions, which provide a framework for understanding the world. Through socialization, individuals internalize shared meanings and cultural codes, shaping their perception of reality. Children learn societal norms and values through interactions with family members, peers, and other socializing agents. They are taught to distinguish between right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and appropriate social roles. Through these socialization process, individual develop a shared understanding of reality within their cultural context.

Berger and Luckmann highlight the role of institutionalization in the social construction of reality, whereby shared meanings and practices become embedded in social institutions such as family, education, religion, and media. Through institutionalization, abstract concepts and social norms are objectified into concrete, tangible forms, shaping individuals perceptions and behaviours.

The "Beg, Blame, and Bear" theory.

Beg

In this context, the first aspect, "Beg," highlights the dependency of children on their parents for fulfilling their basic needs and desires during early stages of life. As children grow, they learn to rely on their parents to meet their requirements. However, when parents age or pass away, they can no longer cater to the adult child's needs. This leads to a vacuum in their lives. To fill this void, individuals often turn to a supernatural entity, which they perceive as a god. These supernatural beings are often imagined as having human-like personalities, desires, and the ability to make decisions and take action (Eller, 2007).

We can observe a similar phenomenon in our daily lives, particularly when children are alone and have no one to play with. In such situations, they create imaginary friends who are not physically present. This observation can be related to the development of religious beliefs. Research suggests that two fundamental aspects of religious belief—belief in mind-body dualism and belief in divine agents—naturally emerge in young children (Bloom, 2006). The ease with which humans can imagine the presence of supernatural power can be attributed to the by-products of social cognition (Forstmann & Burgmer, 2015). The innately occurring cognitive features serve as psychological raw materials, which are then culturally shaped and adapted into beliefs in a higher power, ultimately leading to the concept of God (Gervais et al., 2011).

Studies have indicated a correlation between intelligence levels and belief in God. Researchers have found that individuals with lower intelligence are more likely to believe in a higher power (Lynn et al., 2009). A longitudinal study on adolescent health revealed that as intelligence increases in adulthood, it leads to higher levels of liberalism and atheism (Kanazawa, 2010). Some researchers argue that highly intelligent individuals may not require the psychological benefits that religion offers, as they might find alternative ways to fulfill their needs (Zuckerman et al., 2013). Additionally, more intelligent people tend to be conformists, which may cause them to feel more comfortable deviating from the religious majority.

Blame

Humans have a tendency to blame external factors when they encounter events beyond their control, often without understanding the true cause (Malle et al., 2014). Researchers suggest that cognitive

adaptations have led humans to believe in supernatural agents as an explanation for such occurrences (Norenzayan et al., 2014). A prominent example of this cognitive evolution is our heightened sensitivity to cues of humanlike agency (Guthrie, 1993). Our ancestors attributed natural disasters, such as earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, and forest fires, to the actions of beings with supernatural powers. This is because our agency detection system evolved to over-perceive agents, resulting in a predisposition to perceive gods behind every natural phenomenon. To protect themselves from these catastrophes, people felt the need to appease these supernatural powers.

Several studies support the idea that children have a propensity to explain natural phenomena in terms of purpose and intention-based accounts, leading them to attribute divine intentions to the origins of natural entities (Kelemen, 2004). The compensatory-control theory suggests that people strive to maintain a belief in a predictable and controllable world (Kay et al., 2008). Consequently, researchers propose that the need for perceived control drives belief in God, which they demonstrated by showing that diminishing people's sense of control can increase their belief in God. Additionally, heightening mortality awareness has been linked to increased belief in God (Vaill et al., 2012), possibly explaining why religiosity tends to rise among individuals as they age, face terminal illnesses, or experience natural disasters (Jong, 2013). Furthermore, research indicates that people are more religious when residing in regions frequently affected by natural disasters (Bentzen, 2013).

Bear

When a child experiences injury or pain, they typically call for their parents, as they believe their parents can provide comfort and alleviate their suffering. Children feel secure in the presence of their parents. However, as they grow up and their parents are no longer physically present to care for them, they develop an imaginary concept in their minds, known as God. Studies conducted on chronically lonely individuals and those induced to feel lonely have shown that people are highly motivated to maintain social connections (Epley et al., 2008). Those who lack human social connections may attempt to compensate by establishing a sense of connection with nonhuman agents, such as God, in an effort to fulfil their need for social interaction.

Some researchers believe that religion does not originate from speculation or contemplation, but rather stems from the genuine challenges and hardships experienced in human life, as well as the conflicts between human aspirations and realities (Malinowski, 1931). These scholars also argue that religious rituals serve as a means to alleviate or manage anxiety when confronting difficult circumstances in life (Malinowski, 1955). The practice of using rituals to mitigate anxiety is not exclusive to religious contexts; for example, baseball players engage in rituals related to their eating habits, attire, and transportation to the ballpark, which they believe contribute to their success (Gmelch, 1971).

Prominent philosopher Karl Marx considered religion as an ideology, a mode of thought that endeavours to rationalize disparities in power and social standing. In his perspective, religion fostered an illusion of happiness, which assisted people in coping with the challenges of life (Marx, 1970). A comprehensive analysis has revealed that individuals with a strong desire for positive self-perception exhibit higher levels of intrinsic religiosity, particularly in societies where religion holds greater significance (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010). Furthermore, researchers argue that religious aspects, such as the connection with God, contribute to a sense of positive self-regard, motivating individuals with a high need for self-enhancement to embrace more robust religious beliefs.

Discussion

The reasons behind why people believe in God and how this belief evolves through socialization can be categorized into three main factors.

The first reason is Begging. From the moment a child is born, they are surrounded by family members and society, who provide essential resources for survival. This social environment leads the child to become dependent on others for their well-being. In this context, children learn the social values associated with begging rather than resorting to theft or violence. This behavior can be classified as Wert Rational Social Action, as defined by Max Weber (Weber, 2013).

The second reason is Blame. Humans have an intellectual need to comprehend their environment and the unpredictability of natural disasters by attributing specific causes to them. This goal-oriented action falls under the category of Zweck Rational Social Action (Weber, 2013).

The third reason is Bear. This emotional response occurs when children experience feelings of loneliness, depression, or anxiety. In such moments, they may find solace in their belief in God, which provides them with positive energy and motivation. This behavior is classified as Affectual Social Action, according to Weber (Weber, 2013).

When these three forms of action are transmitted from generation to generation, they become traditional actions. This tradition contributes to the widespread religious beliefs observed today, as people tend to mimic the practices of their parents and grandparents. Due to the sacred nature of these practices, few individuals question them, leading to a continued adherence to tradition. Research indicates that belief in God and religion can delay the onset of stress-related disorders and obesity-related issues (Whitehead & Bergeman, 2020), demonstrating that religion can have beneficial effects on human health. However, the rise of modern education and advanced technology has encouraged a more scientific and rational perspective, resulting in a decline in religious beliefs. Some studies have shown a negative correlation between intelligence and religious belief, suggesting that higher IQ levels are associated with a decrease in belief in God (Lynn, Harvey, & Nyborg, 2009).

While religion and the concept of God are closely intertwined, their functions differ significantly. The idea of God primarily emerged from socialization processes, particularly how children are raised within families and humanity's intellectual need to explain natural disasters. In contrast, religion developed to reduce conflict among individuals and foster solidarity and cohesion within society. It serves a more functional role for the collective rather than the individual. Religion represents a collective effort to cultivate social cohesion and integration (Durkheim, 1965). It creates a moral community comprised of people who share common norms, values, and morals, contributing to a sense of shared identity and interests. On the other hand, the concept of God serves more individual needs, addressing emotional, intellectual, and psychological aspects. God provides motivation, social support, and a sense of purpose in life for individuals (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008).

Conclusion

The discussion reveals that belief in God arises from psycho-social needs shaped by socialization patterns. Three primary sociological needs—beg, blame, and bear—drive humans to conceptualize God. When these practices are passed down through generations, they become traditions. The functions of religion and God are not synonymous; religion promotes social solidarity and cohesion, whereas the belief in God offers motivation, social support, and life purpose. As the saying goes, "God cannot be

everywhere, so He created parents," but in reality, "parents cannot always be present, which is why they created God."

Disclosure statement

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

Data availability statement

No data is directly used for this research article. The data that support our arguments are given in the various research papers which we have provided in the reference list. As this paper is review paper, where findings of various research article are compiled and systematically arranged to generate a new theory.

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