

## Is God a human instinct?

The atheist author Jesse Bering says yes. His book, *The God Instinct*, is a good study of the question.

He thinks the instinct or illusion of God is down to evolutionary and social causes. It is used by nature to stop us tearing each other apart so that we can evolve and form communities. It is programmed into us for it is useful in terms of evolution. Bering argues that God is more than just wish-fulfilment.

The main trigger for the programming was the destructive power of gossip. People began to believe in prosocial gods or a prosocial God. Prosocial divinities serve the purpose of enforcing our social rules by threatening punishment on gossips and other destructive people. Clearly religion and God and prayer condition the victim to become a danger to people perceived as a threat to the community. Instead of following God to celebrate the goodness of human nature, the believer uses God to manipulate the community and tacitly threaten it.

Evidence for the instinct is how even unbelievers tend to treat corpses as somehow alive or think of them as hearing them. We are programmed to impose a cognitive illusion on ourselves though we know the dead are dead and that is that.

Other evidence is that we think our minds are not material things but like spirits. The first and main thing you will ever experience is your own mind. You cannot measure it or weigh it so it is like a ghost living in your skin. This causes the intuition that there are other immaterial or spiritual minds. But this intuition is caused by an error. If a primitive brain was made in a lab and had an eye it would think there was nothing to it but sight. It would experience existence as if there was sight but no eyes. It would feel like a ghost just because it cannot know or sense that it is a material being.

Further evidence comes from the 2003 cross-cultural study referred to by Bering that shows bigger communities are more likely to accept and promote moralising Gods - whether they are polytheistic or monotheistic. Weaker communities or individualistic societies tend to have gods who are not very worried about right and wrong. Read page 193.

