Religious Concepts are Probably Epiphenomena: A Reply to Pyysiäinen, Boyer, and Barrett

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It is to the commentators’ great credit that they have managed to cull the conceptual imperfections of my article “The Natural Foundations of Afterlife Beliefs” (Bering 2002a) into a fairly coherent discussion of the “innateness” of representations of dead agents’ minds. In response to their insightful remarks, I will do my best to clarify my position on precisely this topic of the etiology of religious concepts.¹ Unlike Barrett, who stated that “the chicken-and-egg problem of whether intuitive ideas fill in explicit ones or the other way around may be moot” (p. *), I cannot think of a more important, central question for researchers to be concerned with.

Still, because experimental research on the cognitive bases of religion has only recently begun in earnest (e.g., Barrett 1998; Barrett & Keil 1996; Barrett, Richert & Driesenga 2001; Bering 2002; Bering & Bjorklund 2003; Barrett & Nyhof 2001; Boyer & Ramble 2001; Evans 2001; Kelemen 1999; Norenzayan & Atran, in press; Walker 1992; Woolley & Phelps 2001), to some extent I feel it premature to forcibly argue the position

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¹Although my response will focus on theoretical implications, it is important to point out an interpretive error in Pyysiäinen’s commentary. Pyysiäinen comments that, “The subjects were only asked whether the dead person of the stimulus story ‘still’ was angry, etc., or whether (s)he was ‘now’ happy. Answering these questions does not imply any stance on the question of a complete cessation of emotions...” In fact, the methodological design (which included critical follow-up questions) was especially sensitive to just this issue, and the discontinuity measure reflected cessation of ability to experience such states, not the transient absence of particular states after death, e.g., see “Coding of Interview Sessions” (pp. 279-280).
to which I am most inclined, which is that the human mind possesses architectural constraints (cf. Elman et al. 1996) that act as probabilistic tributaries toward implicit forms of causal reasoning that are functionally indistinguishable from explicit, declarative religious beliefs. Furthermore, although I view human cognitive systems as being highly receptive to the same types of salient, counterintuitive concepts that Pyysiäinen (2001), Boyer (1994, 2001), and, to a lesser extent, Barrett (2000; Barrett & Nyhof 2001), claim underlay all categories of religion, I remain unconvinced that the ontogenetic expression of implicit religious beliefs turns on children’s conceptual slots being filled by such counterintuitive representations.

On the origins of ghosts and gods

Rather, it seems equally, if not more (based on recent data, Barrett et al. 2001; Bering 2002a; Bering & Bjorklund 2003; Kelemen 1999), plausible that the generativity of religious concepts is nothing more than an epiphenomenal process that maps descriptive, memorable ontological properties onto already existing causal inferences that are spontaneously generated by individual minds (for related discussion, see Kelemen, in press). In other words, default inferences that are typically associated with religious thinking (e.g., belief in the continuity of personal consciousness after death; belief in an abstract intentional agency as the arbiter of life events, and the creator of species and natural inanimates) are not activated by culturally transmitted religious concepts, but instead give rise to religious concepts themselves. In turn, these concepts, which are highly variable in nature but which possess characteristics that likely conform to the socioecological demands of the cultures harboring them (see Reynolds & Tanner 1995), do not play any causal role in generating general patterns of belief, but only allow declarative access to intuitive patterns of reasoning about typically religious matters. That is, it is unclear how culturally acquired religious concepts can actually endow individuals with the cognitive incentive to, for instance, envision personal consciousness as surviving death, or to envision life events (which are the “actions” of the gods), as being purposeful or meaningful.

Specific cultural concepts, made salient by their minimal ontological deviance from mundane concepts, might indeed trip-wire default notions of psychological, biological, or physical properties of agents, as cultural