

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Can brain studies really challenge religious belief?

**Kelly James Clark** Senior Research Fellow, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

As a first-year university student, I had a humanities professor who dismissed the whole of Christianity, which he claimed was totally invented by St. Paul, in a single, sneering, unsubstantiated and unprofessional medical diagnosis.

Before his conversion, St. Paul, then known as Saul of Tarsus, actively and officially persecuted Christians. On his way to Damascus, Saul, "still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples," was surrounded by a sudden and brilliant flash of light that knocked him to the ground. Then he heard a majestic voice say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" When Saul asked the divine voice to identify himself, he heard this reply, "I am Jesus." In a single ecstatic vision, Saul "sees" God and reorients his life around following Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 12:4, perhaps reflecting on this vision, Paul reports that he "was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things."

One explanation of Paul's ecstatic experiences is that God himself overwhelmed him in spirit and truth. Another explanation, the one offered by my humanities professor, was that Paul, who admitted to having a painful thorn in the flesh, was suffering from temporal lobe epilepsy; St. Paul's "visions" were nothing but neural misfirings, commonly experienced during an epileptic seizure.

My professor is not alone in his attempt to undermine religious belief by attributing it to a psychological or neurological disorder.

Sigmund Freud, for example, argued that religion is a psychologically infantile form of wish-fulfillment: In the face of an uncaring cosmos, we feel helpless and guilty and so invent a father-like God who grants us security and forgiveness. Freud, in paraphrase: "You just believe in God because you have not grown up and faced reality without your psychological God-crutch."

Biologist Richard Dawkins, in "The God Delusion," argues that "the irrationality of religion is a byproduct of a particular built-in irrationality mechanism in the brain." According to Dawkins, religious believers are, in the blunt terms of his book's title, deluded.

In 2004, Harvard-educated molecular biologist Dean Hamer published his sensationally titled, "The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes." The book was featured on the Nov. 29, 2004, cover of Time magazine with the provocative sub-heading, "Does our DNA compel us to seek a higher power? Believe it or not, some scientists say yes." According to Hamer, God is all in our genes.

And what about the so-called "God Helmet" developed by neuroscientist Michael Persinger? The God Helmet, so Persinger claims, artificially induces an experience of God by electromagnetically stimulating the brain (with no involvement on the part of the Almighty). Persinger contends that the God Helmet shows that all claims to have experienced God are nothing but the effects of electromagnetic stimulations in the brain. "God" is nothing but transient electrical massages of the brain. Attempts to replicate Persinger's experiment failed to give similar results and many not receiving the electromagnetic stimulation still report religious experiences. Yet, Persinger concludes, "Instead of God creating our brains, our brains created God."

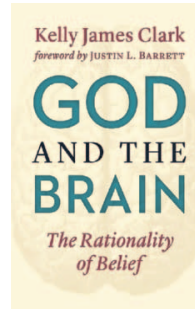
Is God a delusion or a collective illusion? Is God all in our genes or just in our brains? Is God just in our head?

In short, has science shown that God is just a figment of our imagination?

In my new book, "God and the Brain" (Eerdmans), I argue that these reports of God's death are greatly exaggerated and then explore the new sciences of the mind, especially those that bear upon belief



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"God and the Brain" was written by Kelly James Clark. Submitted by Eerdmans

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Book group discussion on "God and the Brain"

**When:** 7 p.m. alternate Thursdays beginning Sept. 19

**Where:** GVSU Center for Health Sciences, 301 Michigan St. NE, Grand Rapids

**For more information:** [InterfaithUnderstanding.org](http://InterfaithUnderstanding.org)

in God.

There is no God gene, there is no God Helmet. And yet ... the cognitive science of religion, the science of the relationship between the mind and religious beliefs and practices, holds that our mind/brain naturally disposes us to God-beliefs.

Cognitive science is a relatively new discipline that unites psychology, neuroscience, computer science and philosophy into the study of the operations of the mind/brain. It is concerned with how the mind processes information — how it is acquired, stored, retrieved, ordered and used. The scientific study of the thinking mind has studied perception, attention, memory, pattern recognition, concept formation, consciousness, reasoning, problem-solving, language-processing and forgetting.

Cognitive science also has studied the ways in which we acquire and sustain religious beliefs. Every culture seems to have deeply entrenched beliefs in spiritual beings, and most have beliefs in an afterlife. And just as the universal human trait of language is explained by a mind/brain disposed to language, so too universally occurring spiritual beliefs indicate that humans are naturally disposed or inclined to belief in spiritual beings. Like language, these cognitive dispositions find culturally specific expression, but common to every culture is the firm belief in both the spiritual world and the material world.

As you might expect, finding out that religious belief is a natural and normal product of our minds has generated a lot of concern.

Is religious belief simply the product of the human mind/brain (a delusion, one might think)? Alternately, if belief in God is natural and normal, are atheists unnatural and abnormal?

In "God and the Brain," I seek to separate the scientific wheat from the sensational chaff. I show how religious believers could be rational, and atheists perfectly normal. This fall, I invite you to join others and me as we explore this fascinating topic in the science and religion discussion group. Are religious beliefs merely creations of a physical brain, or do they represent a reality beyond what science can detect?

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