

Book review

William R. Murry

Faber, M. D. *The Psychological Roots of Religious Belief: Searching for Angels and the Parent-God*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2004.

Drawing on recent brain research as well as current child psychology, Faber elaborates on Freud's view that belief in God stems from the adult's projection onto the supernatural the dependency needs of the infant that are met by the infant's caregiver. In other words, God takes the place of the mother. It works this way:

The child comes into the world without a fully developed brain. The interactions the child has with the world, especially with her caregiver (usually the mother), help to form the mind/brain. Specifically the caregiver is taken inside the emerging mind and becomes an internalized presence inseparable from the developing self. "The early interaction becomes imprinted on the brain" (19), not in a metaphorical sense but literally as actual neural pathways are created. The infant has learned that when she cries for help, she can depend on her caregiver to do whatever is needed—change her diaper, feed her, burp her, hold her, comfort her, etc. The mind/brain has been formed to believe that there will always be someone "there" to take care of her, and that expectation does not cease when we grow up because it has been internalized synaptically.

However, brain research has also shown that our minds have not developed the ability to remember events or interactions during the first two to three years of life. Imaging studies have shown that the structures necessary to form memories are not functioning in infants' minds. Therefore we do not explicitly remember the early dependence on and interactions with our caregiver. We do not remember the thousands of times we cried for help and our cries were answered by our all-powerful parent provider. What we do "remember" is that our needs were met by another, and we "remember" the feelings of satisfaction and contentment that resulted from the caregiver's attentions. But this memory is now lodged in our unconscious. Freud referred to this failure of memory as "infantile amnesia," and neurobiology has since corroborated its reality.

We remember our early experience *implicitly* when we experience a physical or emotional crisis and feel the need for help or when we desire something special. Our experience as an infant has taught us that by asking for help we can get it, but since we can no longer receive that help from an all-powerful parent, we must seek that help from another source, a higher power. By this time we have been taught to believe in the existence of a supernatural caregiver ("God loves you and protects you"), and so we transfer our cry for help to Him. Faber writes, "We turn to God as a child in distress turns to its mother." Another way of stating this is to say that when we experience a crisis our mind/brain revisits and reuses the neural pathways it developed when we were infants in our parent's care. However, since we have separated from the parent and since we now believe in a supernatural Parent, we cry out to that parent replacement. Because of infantile amnesia we do not make the connection between our two experiences or our two caregivers.

All of this happens at the level of the unconscious and belongs not to the realm of rational thinking but of affect, but it is nevertheless real to the individual because of the mental fusion of the original objective caregiver with the new subjective Caregiver. In a word, God exists because the mother existed, and the mother's presence and response to cries for help continue to be stamped on the mind/brain.

I found Faber's arguments persuasive but his thesis is not without flaws. For example, what effect does poor parenting or bad mothering have on a person's later religious view? If Faber is right, why are there non-theistic religions such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism or religions with multiple gods? Since Faber does not address these questions, is his thesis applicable only to Western religion?

Despite these questions and despite the overuse of quotations, this book is very much worth reading to anyone who is interested in the psychology of religion. I strongly recommend it.