



# Inside the mind of God

Punitive Big Brother; cosmic petty-thief-catcher; vigilant landlord. Why is God so interested in bad behaviour?

**Benjamin Grant Purzycki**

Of all humanity's eccentricities, religion could very well be the most baffling. Even though no one has produced a fleck of evidence for the existence of the gods, people will engage in repetitive, often taxing behaviours, under the impression that some ethereal being out there knows and cares. And regardless of whether or not they believe, many thoughtful people have burned considerable numbers of calories trying to unravel the mystery that is God's mind and the implications it has for, quite literally, everything.

The anthropologist Pascal Boyer of Washington University in St Louis has observed that people primarily fixate on what gods know and care about. Those following the Abrahamic traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – focus on God’s mind. They rationalise their behaviour whenever they claim that God wants them to do something. They invoke God to influence others, as in: ‘God sees through your cheap tricks.’ From Moses on Sinai to ecstatic, modern-day Evangelicals, many claim to have gone directly to The Man Himself for a chat, even reporting their conversations in bestselling books.

Ask a random stranger what God knows, and chances are he’ll say: ‘Everything.’ But ask what God *cares* about, and he’ll say murder, theft and deceit; generosity, kindness and love. Amid God’s infinite knowledge, His concerns are quite narrow: He knows everything but cares only about the moral stuff. Where do these beliefs come from, and what impacts do they have on our lives?

Across cultures, even children seem to think that gods know more than normal humans. This is borne out by experiments using what psychologists call the ‘false-belief task’, which tests whether individuals can detect that others have false beliefs. In one version of the test, researchers put a bag of rocks into a box of crackers, showed children what’s inside, and then asked what various entities would think was in the box. If the children said: ‘Mom thinks rocks are in there’, then they haven’t passed the false-belief task. If they said: ‘Mom thinks crackers are in there, but there are really rocks’, they have a handle on the incorrect mental states of others.

What’s curious is that, with age, children come to know that Mom, dogs, and even trees will have incorrect thoughts, but they never extend that vulnerability to God. In fact, the quality of omniscience attributed to God appears to extend to any disembodied entity. In a 2013 paper in the *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, Louisville Seminary researchers found that children think imaginary friends know more than flesh-and-blood humans. There appears to be a rule, then, deep in our mental programming that tells us: *minds without bodies know more than those with bodies*.

**T**his early, intuitive rule is much easier to follow than the tricky effort of wrapping our own limited minds around omniscient, *unlimited* ones. Indeed, theologians and philosophers continue to argue over the implications of omniscience. It might be intuitive for us to assume that gods know more than humans, but to consciously and consistently think that gods know *everything* isn’t quite as easy. In a 2013 article in *Cognition*, I reported that Christian students from the University of Connecticut who claim that God knows everything will nonetheless rate His knowledge of moral information (*Does God know that Sebastian robs grocery stores?*) as better than His knowledge of non-moral information (*Does God know that Rita likes chilies?*). This bias is especially clear under time pressure.

As reported in a 2012 article in *Cognitive Science*, our lab at the University of Connecticut examined what might be called this ‘moralisation bias’ of omniscient beings. To examine this bias, our lab asked students a host of randomised questions about what God knows and told them to answer as quickly as possible by computer. If their answer was ‘Yes’, they pressed one key; if ‘No’, another. Unbeknownst to the participants, the software we used also recorded response speed. The quicker the response, the more intuitive the question. We found that even though people say: ‘God knows everything’, they are quicker to answer questions about God’s knowledge of moral information (*Does God know that Leon hurts the elderly?*) than non-moral information (*Does God know that David has black gloves?*). Even though people might say ‘Yes’ to every question, it’s easier to process God’s knowledge in the moral domain.

## Having a cosmic Wyatt Earp on the beat aids survival and reproduction by curbing others’ banditry

To assess which aspects of all-knowing agents produce this effect, we asked the same questions about a Big Brother-type government we called NewLand. Even though NewLand knew everything down to the tiniest of details, volunteers were quicker to respond to questions about NewLand’s knowledge of people’s misconduct than proper conduct. And these questions about moral issues were answered more quickly than non-moral questions. The results were virtually identical to those of the sample answering questions about God. Yet another batch of students answered questions about Santa Claus; the response times reflected the same moral bias, but without any difference between the ‘naughty’ and the ‘nice’. A final group of students answered questions about an omniscient alien species that never interferes in human affairs; there, no speed distinction occurred across any of the question types.

What these studies suggest is that we intuitively attach moral information to disembodied minds. And this subtle association can alter our behaviour in significant ways. In one study, in the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* in 2011, the psychologist Jared Piazza of Lancaster University and colleagues told children a story about a ghostly princess living in their lab. Though these children never heard a peep from the ghost, they cheated less on a difficult game than a control group of children who were not told the story. This suggests that gods, ghosts and other incorporeal minds might just get us to behave – particularly if we assume that the gods *know* about our behaviour, and especially if we think they can interfere in our affairs.

From an evolutionary perspective, the gods facilitate social bonds required for survival by raising the stakes of misconduct. Having a cosmic Wyatt Earp on the beat aids survival and reproduction by curbing others’ banditry. If you’re tempted to steal from someone, but

know that God cares and has the power to do something about it, you might think twice. If God knows your thoughts, perhaps you wouldn't even *think* twice. The Abrahamic God appears to be a punitive, paranoia-inducing Big Brother always watching and concerned with our crimes.

Globally, belief in moralistic gods appears to be more common in complex societies. The evolutionary ecologist Carlos Botero at the North Carolina State University and colleagues found that 'moralistic' gods crop up in societies facing similar ecological stresses. That group and another from the University of Oxford found that social complexity in general meant that belief in a moralistic god was likely to be high. It pays to have an all-knowing, morally concerned Big Brother God in places with greater anonymity and less accountability. Gods evolve.

**O**f course, not all gods are as moralistic as the God of Abraham. Not all gods care about how we treat each other. Not all gods know everything, not all gods beat you down for violating norms, not all gods care that you believe in them, and not all gods are thought of as human-like. If we proudly toot our little social-science horn without acknowledging that we're playing in the key of Abraham, we won't hear if we're in harmony with the orchestra playing around the world. What do other gods care about? Unfortunately, until recently, no one had ever collected systematic data to find out for sure.

So I decided to address this in the Republic of Tyva, popularly spelled 'Tuva', a small region in southern Siberia, home to yurt-dwelling herders, reindeer-riders, and polyphonic 'throat' singing. Rural Tuvans herd various livestock including sheep, goats, yaks, reindeer and cattle, while urban Tuvans engage in wage labour, education and business. Geographically, Tuva is remarkably diverse with rugged steppe, majestic taiga (forested mountains), desert, craggy mountain ranges, and massive undulating hills.





A cairn on Dögee Mountain, Kyzyl, Tyva Republic. Photo courtesy the author

Tuvan religion is a complex mixture of Tibetan Buddhism and shamanism. Contemporary urban shamanism includes clinics that offer the oracular and ritual services of spiritual experts who act as intermediaries between clients and the spirits of nature. While things are rapidly changing, Tuvans, like many other herders throughout Inner Asia, mark herding territories, natural resources and other sacred places with cairns – piles of stones or tree branches used as altars or shrines (as shown in photo above) devoted to local spirits. These spirits can take either human or animal form and are literally called ‘masters’ of the place. Unlike the God-as-Big-Brother model of the Abrahamic faiths, spirit-masters follow more of a God-as-shy-but-watchful-landlord model.

The spirit-masters aren’t as vindictive or punishing as the God of Abraham. However, if you disrespect them or forget to make an offering, your luck can quickly change. They also aren’t omniscient. ‘Does the spirit-master of this area know what happens in another area?’ I would ask when in the field. Responses often consisted of: ‘No, but *those* spirits know what happens in *that* area.’

The local gods in Tuva aren’t concerned with morality in the Abrahamic or Western sense; instead, they care about rituals and protecting resources such as natural springs, lakes and hunted animals in their area of governance. In a survey similar to the one I used at the University of Connecticut, I found that, instead of saying: ‘No, these gods don’t know or care about moral stuff’, there was a positive spike in Tuvans’ ratings of their gods’

knowledge of and concern for social behaviour locally. In other words, through conversations, interviews and a variety of other questioning techniques, Tuvans communicated that their gods care about rituals and practices associated with resource conservation. But when asked, for example: 'Does this God care about theft?' they're more inclined to give affirmative responses than to non-moral questions – though still not as divergent in their answers as the University of Connecticut Christians.

It looks as if gods can tap into our mental moral systems regardless of what our explicit beliefs tell us. Even though Tuvans might think that their spirit-masters are unconcerned with how they treat each other (or simply do not talk about their gods in this way), these gods might still contribute to co-operation. If they trigger Tuvans' moral cognition, the gods might curb 'immoral' behaviour especially when associated with territory.

And territory is something directly linked to Tuvan gods. Throughout Inner Asia, territorial borders and natural resources are often marked by ritual cairns. Many Tuvans have annual rites at the end of a harsh winter (when livestock are struggling and when grass begins to grow). In a 2013 paper in *Current Anthropology*, Tayana Arakchaa, an anthropologist at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and I found that Tuvans invest significantly more trust in those who always pay their respects to the local spirits than to those who don't. Ritual cairns devoted to gods might be effective triggers of moral cognition, and collective rituals can reinforce respect for others' territory.

Territory requires maintenance. Herders' livelihoods depend on access to grazing land and access to herds dependent upon that grazing land. If someone ventures into your territory with their sheep, that might be a problem if it means less grass for your own livestock. Additionally, people might be tempted to increase the size of their own herds by stealing from yours. So, relatively peaceful relations require reliable and trustworthy neighbours. Knowing everything else we have learned, religious ritual on borders seems sensible, especially if your psychological systems responsible for moral reasoning get triggered whenever you see indicators of religious piety. Placing an effective trigger for moral cognition on your border makes sense if it reduces the chances that someone passing through acts on any malicious intent. So, perhaps the shy landlord God is also appropriately characterised as a shy border-patrol God. And guess what? We see sacred cairn and other border rituals like this all over the world among other herding and hunting populations.

Gods appear to care about the things that, on average, curb locally specific risks and costly engagements. Religious systems predictably conform to local problems, and the gods steer our attention toward ways that address those problems. More poignantly, appeals to gods' minds steer *other people's* attention toward ways of minimising the effects of those problems.

## The minds of gods are but single points within complex systems of human co-ordination and co-operation

Local spirits in Tuva don't like it when Tuvans do things like hunt too much, sully natural springs and take too many berries. The ecological rationale seems clear enough: gods can curb over-exploitation. So, the border-patrol God might also function as a supernatural park ranger. Indeed, other cases suggest that the gods can function in this manner. You can see one of the best examples in Bali, where water rituals dedicated to gods help irrigate rice paddies at the bottom of a mountain system. As documented by the anthropologist J Stephen Lansing of the Complexity Institute in Singapore, the Balinese route water into holding pools, use them for sacred rites, and then redistribute the water. The water in turn has more nutrients, fewer pests, and provides a more reliable yield. In a 2013 paper in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, the Stanford anthropologist Rebecca Bliege Bird and colleagues found that the Aboriginal Martu of Western Australia carefully burn patches of land and in doing so increase the populations of the local monitor lizards they hunt. According to the Martu, the practice follows the wills of ancestral beings and the sacred law, 'The Dreaming'. Burning patches increases plant diversity, which in turn increases animal diversity on which monitor lizards feed.

From the moral imperatives of the Abrahamic religions to the patch-burning of the Martu, the knowledge and concerns of gods point to behaviours that can yield benefits for individuals. The minds of gods are but single points within complex systems of human co-ordination and co-operation. And, as the hip-hop artist Baba Brinkman recognises: religion evolves. It evolves in accordance with what Carl Sagan calls its 'perfectly pragmatic purposes' or what Émile Durkheim calls its 'secular utility'. The gods appear to be the workings of an organism trying to influence other people *also* negotiating the costs and benefits of being alive at a specific place and time. They are important forces in human mobilisation and organisation.

Viewing gods as kinds of organisational strategies helps to explain the relatively benign aspects of the traditions I've focused on in this essay, but it also helps us explain the ludicrous racist, sexist, homophobic and war-mongering appeals that get shrouded in religious rhetoric: find a vulnerable or outsider group, demonise them by declaring that the gods hate them, cite authoritative sources, appeal to vague and mysterious concepts (immortality, freedom, martyrdom, jihad) and the bonds between your constituents will strengthen.

Because social and natural environments are always shifting in form and intensity, the concerns of gods ought to shift accordingly. And we can see it happening right now. If you do an internet search for the burgeoning field of 'eco-theology', for instance, you might see

the re-branding of the Abrahamic God into an eco-deity as a predictable outcome of the increasingly pressing concern for environmental collapse. This January, Pope Francis officially associated the Vatican with action against climate change. If we think of religions as organisational strategies, the effectiveness of gods as tactics to regulate and justify behaviour is utterly impressive. Perhaps that's why we're so obsessed with the minds of gods – even when we recognise them as figments of our evolved imaginations: they work. So-called 'religious' conflicts are conflicts of competing strategies.

Gods stick around in part because they engage deep-seated and intuitive psychological systems that subtly alter our thoughts and behaviours. And our fascination with gods' minds also stems from their contributions to our survival. When social and ecological threats to survival change, the gods often do too. Anthropologists have long characterised religions as reflections of society; more recent observations suggest that societies might be reflections of religion. But both views are far too simplistic. Instead, a tangle of two-way arrows and feedback loops connect our religions, our societies and our minds. Science has yet to come to terms with what it is about us – mere points on this messy continuum – that keep the gods around.

Gods also remain important because of their functions. We can turn to places with relatively less religiosity to see why gods are so important everywhere else. In *Sacred and Secular* (2004), the political scientists Pippa Norris of Harvard and Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan show that, in prosperous regions where secular forms of social services and justice become really effective, religiosity dwindles. This inverse relationship between secular justice and economic equality and religious adherence suggests that the social functions of religion can be co-opted by secular institutions, thus rendering our obsession with what God knows and cares about more or less irrelevant.

Considering how effective gods are, can we do away with them? In one sense, the answer is quite clear: *of course we can do without them. We always have.* Our challenge in the days ahead is to create a more sustainable and equitable world where more have the luxury of not only admitting that, but also – and more importantly – coming to terms with how to go about living together responsibly and harmoniously with that admission.