

Parallel Thinking Part 37: The Emergence of Faith I

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Many scientists, such as American neurologist Professor Jordan Grafman, believe that spiritual convictions, superstitions and faith in a Divine being provide humans with an evolutionary advantage.

People can use their religious convictions to survive emotional hardships which may have defeated other humans who lack religious faith.

Yet the emergence of faith and belief in the supernatural may be more complex. Children typically have a pure and untainted curiosity, which is a product of their unfettered minds striving to make sense of the world around them. While other creatures are occupied with building dens, searching for food and caring for their young, humans are endowed with a unique type of curiosity. From an early age, our inquisitive minds begin to search for deeper meaning, questioning the purpose of life, our place in the cosmos and the meaning of our existence.

This was noted by American theologian James W. Fowler (d. 2015) in his book *Stages of Faith*, which described the emergence of faith in children in a much broader sense, as part of their natural development. He writes, “Our first experiences of faith and faithfulness begin with birth. We are received and welcomed with some degree of fidelity by those who care for us. By their consistency in providing for our needs, by their making a valued place for us in their lives, those who welcome us provide an initial experience of loyalty and dependability. Notice that even in this rudimentary form, faith exhibits what we may call a covenantal pattern of relationship. In the interaction of parent and child not only does a bond of mutual trust and loyalty begin to develop, but already the child, albeit on a very basic level, senses the strange new environment as one that is either dependable and provident, or arbitrary and neglectful”.

Fowler explains that this ‘covenantal pattern of relationship’ has three elements: the child, the parents and the shared centres of values and power which hold the relationship together. These include what Fowler calls the family’s ‘story’; the shared principles, memories and ambitions which bond the family members together.

This covenantal pattern of relationship resonates with the fact that our relationship with God is often described in similar parent-child terms. Moshe expresses this on behalf of God Himself, when he says: “You are children of the Lord, your God” (Devarim 14:1). Idolatry, therefore, is not just about the mere worship of statues or foreign gods. It is the abandonment of one’s Divine parent and spiritual home, with the aim of committing to finite centres of value that fall outside of the family’s shared story.

The ritual aspect of organised religion therefore has two elements relevant to this area. Services, festivals and daily laws build our relationship with God through reminding us of our part in the story of the Jewish people. But they also provide opportunities for our own families to share experiences together and build a personal family story.

