



Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality

Barbara Bradley Hagerty

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From the award-winning NPR religion correspondent comes a fascinating investigation of how science is seeking to answer the question that has puzzled humanity for generations: Can science explain God?

Is spiritual experience real or a delusion? Are there realities that we can experience but not easily measure? Does your consciousness depend entirely on your brain, or does it extend beyond? In *Fingerprints of God*, award-winning journalist Barbara Bradley Hagerty delves into the discoveries science is making about how faith and spirituality affect us physically and emotionally as it attempts to understand whether the ineffable place beyond this world can be rationally -even scientifically-explained.

Hagerty interviews some of the world's top scientists to describe what their groundbreaking research reveals about our human spiritual experience. From analyses of the brain functions of Buddhist monks and Carmelite nuns, to the possibilities of healing the sick through directed prayer, to what near-death experiences illuminate about the afterlife, Hagerty reaches beyond what we think we know to understand what happens to us when we believe in a higher power.

Paralleling the discoveries of science is Hagerty's own account of her spiritual evolution. Raised a Christian Scientist, she was a scrupulous adherent until a small moment as an adult triggered a revaluation of her beliefs, which in turn led her to a new way of thinking about God and faith.

An insightful examination of what science is learning about how and why we believe, *Fingerprints of God* is also a moving story of one person's search for a communion with a higher power and what she discovered on that journey.

Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality Details

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From Reader Review Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality for online ebook

Jennifer Willis says

It's been nearly a week since I finished reading this book by NPR correspondent Barbara Bradley Hagerty, on "the search for the science of spirituality."

When I was only about a quarter of the way into the book, I sat down with two fellow writers to talk shop, and mentioned what I was reading. I surprised myself by admitting to these two ladies — whom I like and respect, but whom I don't know very well — that I had cried my way through roughly half of what I'd already read of Hagerty's book. In those pages, I found a kinship with Hagerty — a professional reporter on the religion beat — in her deep interest in other people's spirituality and her personal conflict over possibly allowing her own beliefs to color her work. Hagerty's willingness to include her own thoughts and experiences in "Fingerprints," alongside the findings of and her conversations with a plethora of researchers honestly moved me.

While raving about "Fingerprints" on Facebook, I wrote to another writer friend that I'd wished I'd been the one to write this book. I've been on a bit of an internal hike of late, reawakening interests that have been ignored or on the back-burner for a few years now. Noetic sciences. Quantum physics. Metaphysical sciences.

You know — the stuff that makes my heart sing and my mind reach, but makes other people look at me funny.

I've always been spiritually inclined, and it's been both a blessing and a challenge these past two years to be in a relationship with a self-proclaimed atheist. (That dynamic will have to be left for another discussion.) I'll admit that I'm sometimes intimidated by Mike's rapid-fire questions about my beliefs, with no room between queries for me to attempt much of an answer. For a good while, I stopped engaging him on religious topics, shying away from the subjects that matter to me most.

But now, Mike's questions and Hagerty's book have me taking a harder, more intimate and more critical look at what I believe, and I'm asking myself, "Why?" Why do I believe what I do? What are the experiences I've had — now somewhat hazy in memory, or lost in the shadows — that have led me to where I am?

Hagerty's approach of speaking with believers and non-believers alike — inside and outside the scientific community — has me wanting to put my own spirituality under the microscope, not so much to be able to answer Mike's skeptical questions, but to have a better understanding of my own center and perspective.

Hagerty's conclusion — not surprising, giving the title of the book — is that the "fingerprints of God" are all around us, even within us in our very makeup. I don't disagree, but I think it's time I launched my own investigation. I'm a "go see for yourself" kind of gal — which has drawn me over the years to sweat lodges, Reiki attunements, psychic surgery, shamanic soul retrieval, crystal and singing bowl healing ceremonies, interfaith seminary, wiccan rituals, transcendental meditation, burning bowls, metaphysics university and hypnotherapy training, in addition to cathedrals, temples, synagogues, mosques and more.

But I've also been a math and science geek, and even began university as an engineering student. The

scientific study of spirituality definitely appeals to me.

I'm seeker, but somehow this has gotten stuck on auto-pilot as my life got more caught up with the mundane details of the world. This current push back into myself that I'm feeling may very well be part of the larger "mid-life re-examination" that I can't seem to escape, in these weeks and months following my 40th birthday, but I do feel that — for me — Hagerty's "Fingerprints of God" was absolutely the right book at the right time.

Brynnna says

An interesting read, but ultimately disappointing. This would be a good introduction into the interaction of science and spirituality for a non-scientist. As a scientist who has read some on this topic, I found it a little shallow, not in terms of research (obviously extensive and with an honest attempt at balance), but in thinking. In the end, it didn't really tell me anything I didn't know already.

Don says

When I first heard of Fingerprints of God I was filled with anticipation that this might be the book I've been looking for on the search for physical evidence of spirituality in the world.

But, wow, was I disappointed!! Written by a journalist, Barbara Hagerty, this book lets you down on all fronts. Firstly, the book's title is a HUGE disservice to the core topic she was writing about. The book should have been titled 'Religion and the Brain - the Search for Physical Influences on Perceptions of Spirituality'. This book has nothing to do with the Fingerprints of God or the Science of Spirituality. I was actually angry she gave this book that title because it misleads the reader and feels like a marketing ploy.

Next, her writing style is horrible - she spends a significant amount of words describing the look of the scientist - his or her hair, clothing, demeanor, voice inflection - do I really care????? NO.

Finally, the book reveals nothing but common sense regarding brain research on spiritual centers in our gray matter. If I were to ask you what five physical influences could affect the brain's perception of religion, I bet you could have come up with most of these:

1. Genetics
2. External Electromagnetic Fields
3. Drugs
4. Meditation and Prayer
5. Brain Injury

Sorry, but that's the core of the book. Hardly fingerprints. Throughout she continually asks 'what if', 'what if it really is spiritual and not just the brain? - well, what if you didn't read this? No loss.

I don't want to take away from the hard work that she put into researching this topic - I'm sure it was years of effort. But, sadly, from a reader's perspective, I felt hoodwinked.

Rebecca says

This was a beautiful nonfiction book, one of the best I've read. I usually like to just read nonfiction one chapter at a time, but Fingerprints of God is so conversational and engaging; it's easy to get caught up in it like a good novel. Barbara Bradley Hagerty is the religious correspondent for NPR, and she took a year off to research this work. Hagerty is scrupulously honest about how this book is as much about her personal journey (and admits her lack of objectivity to a certain degree) as it is about the research and scientists she meets during her investigation. I can't hope to exactly capture all the wonderful moments in the book, but I will share two that deeply impressed me:

(1) Hagerty met an AIDS researcher, Gail Ironson, who studied the effect of a person's spirituality on his/her battle with HIV. Ironson conducted a study controlling for age, education, gender, race, optimism, life stress, depression, coping, and even church attendance, but found that a person's reliance on and turning to God to cope with HIV appeared to boost his/her immune system and stave off the disease more effectively than any of the other psychological constructs. The effects of such spirituality were over and above the effects of medication, meaning that whether or not the person took medication, spirituality was still related to slower disease progression. (This study was published in the Journal of General Internal Medicine in 2006.)

(2) Hagerty interviewed several different scientists about the neurological effects of prayer. Richard Davidson scanned the brains of Buddhist monks and noticed that during meditation the left sides of their brains were much more active. Even in a resting state, their brain activity still resided in the left side. (Earlier studies have shown that people with higher brain-wave activity in the left side of the brain report feeling more alert, energized, enthusiastic, and joyous. People with higher brain-wave activity on the right side of the brain reported feeling more worry, anxiety or sadness.) Even more fascinating was a two month study with everyday people participating in meditation for 45 minutes a day and a control group. The meditation groups' EEGs after the two months showed their brain-wave activity had shifted significantly leftward, to the "happy" part of the brain. (This study was published in Psychosomatic Medicine in 2003.)

Of course we have all heard stories that our attitudes affect our body, but it is deeply moving to read about these specific scientific documented affects of spirituality on our brains and our bodies. And there are many more in this book. It certainly encourages me to try to build a better spiritual practice into my everyday life. One final word about this book. The last chapter is entitled "Paradigm Shifts," and Hagerty quotes extensively from Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, which I just read over Thanksgiving for, yes, my Financial Accounting Seminar. Hagerty's point is that we are in the midst of a scientific paradigm shift in the arena of materialistic science versus the concept of a spirit, a mind outside the restrictions of flesh. It amazes me to have my personal reading and accounting studies come together in such a direct way and makes me appreciate my doctoral studies in a whole new light.

Robert says

Hagerty states at the beginning of her book that science cannot prove or disprove the existence of God. I agree with this. She then goes on to try to prove God through science.

She misses the fundamental principle that how much we "know" about and understand God is not a function of our knowledge or intelligence, but how closely our life is in conformance with what we know of God's will and how much we're willing to let that knowledge change us.

I enjoyed learning about the Christian Science religion about one person's perspective on what this world means.

I disagree with one of the main assumptions that all "spiritual experiences", from meditation to prayer to drugs-induced, are equal.

And I certainly don't agree that all religions are simply different roads to the same God. I believe there is good in all religions and that all good comes from God. But that's not the same thing.

Page Turner: 6/10

Honest: 7/10

Intelligent: 6/10

Uplifting: 5/10

Important: 4/10

Kit says

This book can't answer the Big Question: is God really communicating with people who have spiritual experiences during prayer, in spontaneous healing, or in near-death experiences? What it can do is describe some new science that studies the brains of people who have had life-changing spiritual events. Brain activity, brain chemistry, and in some cases genetics are different for people who have had what they consider encounters with the spiritual than they are from people who haven't. What's more, there is some actual scientific evidence that near-death experiences might be real and that prayer might have measurable effects (and not those debunked hospital studies, either).

Hagerty, an NPR correspondent and former Christian Science Monitor reporter, has the journalistic credentials to tell the story, although even in her case some scientists insisted on anonymity because they didn't want their colleagues thinking they were nuts. That was the most interesting part of the story for me - the idea that scientific studies of spirituality, historically done in scientists' free time with data scavenged from other experiments - might have gathered the critical mass to be taken seriously for the first time.

Kathryn says

The questions that this book poses are not so much along the line of, Is there a God?, but exploring whether Science can attest that spiritual experience and experiences are something separate than just brain synapses and physiological changes. I found this book to be quite fascinating, and one that confirmed my own gut feeling (so to speak) that there is Someone Out There Watching Over Us.

The author grew up in a very strong Christian Science tradition and grew up to become a journalist covering religion issues. In this book she probes the research of scientists to see what science has to say about intercessory prayer, about near-death experiences, and about all things spiritual. Along the way she finds

plenty of scientists who tell her that anything that cannot be measured or quantified is fantasy, and that all so-called spiritual experiences are only things happening in the brain that can be explained in a purely material manner.

She finds that long-time meditation, such as that practiced by Carmelite nuns and Buddhist monks, causes changes in the brain, so that the brains of the nuns and monks are soft-wired to be more receptive to meditative experience, and that these same changes in the brain are seen in the brains of those who have had near-death experiences and “seen the light”. She finds scientists willing to study intercessory prayer, which seems to have some measurable effect, but notes that it is difficult to account for all variables. She finds scientists who are mystics and scientists who are atheists, and learns about studies of linked people who can minutely affect each other’s physiology at a distance. The author also finds that among those who have “seen the light” may still be Christian or Buddhist or whatever, but that they are less apt to try to fit what they have experienced into a Jesus or Buddha or Jobu category, and more likely to accept what they have seen as all-encompassing love beyond sectarian definitions.

So, can Science prove that God exists? No more than it could before, because Science is not well equipped to deal with the inexplicable and unmeasurable. However, Scientific Method seems to give a very qualified Yes as an answer to the question, is there more out there than is met in our material philosophies, if only because some things can be picked up by the scientific method that do not seem to be self-created by our brains.

Mike says

Hagerty sets out to explore the link between science and faith through a series of interviews and self reflection. What she finds is that ultimately you can read the data to support either a theistic or atheistic worldview and that a theistic reading of the data points to a god spoken of by apologists and loved by no one.

What I liked about the book is that Hagerty presents a bunch of scientific (and pseudo-scientific) studies through the eyes of her own personal quest for the truth about god. She mentions the semi recent wave of atheistic writings but maintains her focus on recent avenues of scientific study into religious experience.

She deals with topics fairly. She is honest about her incredulity toward certain avenues of approach to studying religious experience and when others beliefs don't line up with her own.

Her conclusion is sound. You choose to view the world through the lens of belief in God or belief in nothing. But not long after a keen observation, Hagerty Drops the ball.

Tied in with Hagerty's conclusion is a misplaced belief that science will eventually point toward a god. Hagerty briefly outlines this god she has found and it reads like the "unmoved mover" from St. Aquinas. Not a personal god at all, but the culmination of the divine attributes that is no more endearing than the pythagorean theorem.

The spiritual experience becomes independent of any particular faith. God is stripped of God's story and is reduced to purely individual experience devoid of context.

Hagerty's faith starts to sound eerily familiar. God becomes the creator/law giver and Jesus the moral exemplar. Hagerty undoes a hundred years of theological critique to the Enlightenment Project and falls right in line with Liberal Christianity.

She makes these claims based on the evidence given to her during her search and then seeks to recapture her personal belief in Christianity before it slips through her fingers. She is right, nothing she found in her search pointed to a specific faith, so she simply believes in Jesus. My question for her is "Why would a God without a story, be 'the God who loves math [and:] also loves stories?'"

If god's only interaction with humanity is to make us feel better while we die, who cares about tradition?

Whatever clout Hagerty lost with me in her final pages, it isn't enough to detract from the fact that this is a well written and worth while book. The incredulous will hate it, the credulous will eat it up. What is of value is her honest grappling with her faith, her openness to new data and her conclusion that we choose to believe or not.

drowningmermaid says

A very good "intro" book to the junction of faith and science. I particularly enjoyed the studies on the meditative and psychedelic-tripped brain... which did make me want to try LSD at some later date in life. Also really loved the study on "paired" couples and their ability to effect the other over distance and with no known material connection.

The chapters on near-death experiences I found tedious. While I understand that they are life-changing for many people who have them, I really fail to see them as scientifically meaningful, or as proof of anything.

(RANT FOLLOWS)

So what if a person's heart stops and then starts? Complete brain death takes time-- a longer time than near-death experiences allow for. Near-deathers were not 'really' dead, because they came back to life. My argument is: even if these experiences DID somehow 'prove' that the individual soul continues past death, it would prove ONLY that it continues for a few minutes afterward, wherein you see light and God and loved ones and whatever religious personage you subscribe to. (This last I find a tad suspicious.) ALSO, why do the people who study these things ignore the fact that MANY, perhaps even the majority, of people DO NOT HAVE THEM when they 'die.' They just die, and are unaware of anything.

If you are going to use near-death experiences as 'proof,' you would be obligated to say that only some, randomly blessed, people get to experience life after death. The rest simply cease to exist.

Joey says

How does the brain function when a Buddhist monk is in deep meditation or a charismatic Christian speaks in tongues? What do scientists know about out of body experiences? Can the mind function apart from the brain? These are some of the interesting questions that Hagerty tackles. However, she does so in a way that gives both highly educated mystics and skeptics a fair treatment in voicing their interpretations of such paranormal events.

Hagerty also speaks of a new generation of scientists who are undertaking experiments and research to find if there is any evidence that points beyond a strict materialism.

I thoroughly enjoyed this read.

Tori says

I really wanted to like this book. Books dealing with spirituality and quantum physics - how could you go wrong? I am still fascinated by the idea of quantum physics, and the insights it would seem to provide on life. But - this book just couldn't hold my interest. the author appeared to be trying too hard to quantify spirituality, and I just don't believe it's possible. I DO believe that a lot of people are asking themselves, "Is this it?" "Is this all there is to life?" and the more you delve into that topic, the more difficult it is to "waste" your time on shallow gossipy topics. I've picked this book up three times now, but have not gotten past 100 pages. I expect there is more good stuff farther on, but seeing as I have so many books that I would prefer reading, I will just leave this one unread.

Frank Jude says

Well, Barbara Bradley Hagerty set out to find the evidence of God, and the Transcendent reality she hoped to find and -- guess what? She found it! She asserts she's a "journalist" and "reporter," but her awards as a "religion correspondent" tell me more that what she is is a believer looking for any evidence -- or lacking that, any justification to lower the bar for what counts as evidence -- for grounding her belief.

She often asserts her feeling that "There has to be more" than this, and her final crowning realization is: "Earth is not our home." The problem with most religionists is right there, in that five-word negation! They look at what they see and, not happy with it because it changes, seek something that is eternal. The imagined reality is, for them, more real and more valuable than 'just this.' There is no lack of awe in the fact that sub-atomic particles, come together to form molecules that assemble to form bacteria, monkeys, you and me!

She leans heavily on William James and his defense of faith and non-evidential belief basically because it makes her feel good! The ethics of such a 'will to believe' leaves much to be desired, and yet, credulous folk still seek solace in such pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking!

I had hoped for more from this book based upon the title.

Ben Lee says

I added this book to my wishlist after hearing the story about the book on NPR. Almost two years later, I finally read it. It's very interesting. You get to read about all sorts of spiritual experiences people had, like encounters with God, near death experiences, spiritual conversions... and then an explanation of what's going on from the neurological perspective. There were quite a few interesting stories. The writer shares her own spiritual experience, which wasn't quite as interesting, but relevant. The book comes down to the idea that there's a part of the brain that seems to be involved in pretty much everyone's spiritual experiences, which

Hagerty likens to piece audio hardware, and poses the question is it more like a radio, receiving real signals from a real God (some people's radios work better than others) or is it more like a CD player, where everything is just in our heads?

here's a link to the story from NPR: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/st...>

Kelsey says

This book just wasn't what I was looking for or expected. I'm fascinated by faith and those who have it, people who can believe with such certainty in something they don't see. I think it would be very comforting to believe like that and I want that. I was hoping this book would give me some sort of proof, or at least something that could be proof. The author set out to write this book, not really wanting to objectively examine a question, but to validate her own belief. So the book focused on things that she felt proved her ideas true. It was well researched and interesting, although at times it felt very repetitive, but it had a strong agenda and nothing was going to deviate from that path. Despite this, none of the science or studies actually proved anything- the results just didn't eliminate the possibility of faith or a higher power/being/energy playing a role.

Lanny Carlson says

I found this book on a Pamida clearance shelf,
and it is one of the best books I've ever read on the subject.

I've read most of Lee Strobel's books,
in which a skeptical journalist investigates Christianity
through a series of interviews.
Hagerty is also a journalist,
but while Strobel has an obvious bias
and is rather selective in his interviewees,
seemingly handpicking those who will support his point of view,
Hagerty's research is much more far ranging,
her discussion much more objective,
and her conclusions much more open-minded.

She doesn't set out to "prove" the existence of God -
something she readily admits science cannot do
(any more than it can disprove the existence of God),
nor does she set out to prove any particular theological point of view.
While she is very open about her own theological roots
and her place in her spiritual journey,
she ultimately rejects some of her religious presuppositions,
including the nature of God
and the exclusivity of any one tradition.

In the course of her research and her writing,

she explores such things as studies of brainwave activity in those who have had life-changing spiritual experiences, including those who are experienced meditators, those who have had spiritual experiences through hallucinogens, and those who have had near-death experiences.

In the process, we learn a great deal about the nature of the brain and how experiences from quite different sources effect various parts of the brain in similar ways.

At the same time, she rejects the reductionist presuppositions that everything can necessarily be reduced to the brain or that consciousness can necessarily be reduced to the physical gray matter in our heads.

(If, for example, there really is a Creator, and the Creator wants to communicate with His/Her/It's creatures, wouldn't it make sense for the brain to have receptors for that purpose?

Science really can't "prove" it one way or the other.)

And she even suggests that there is an emerging paradigm shift in the scientific community which is much less reductionist in its point of view.

Her conclusions won't satisfy full blown materialists on the one hand or Christian exclusivists on the other, and certainly not religious fundamentalists of any stripe.

But anyone who is open-minded enough to explore modern science and to consider spirituality will find this extremely well-written book fascinating and thought provoking.

One of the few books I give Five Stars!
