

# WIRED FOR GOD

## Amanda Porterfield

In his book, "Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief," Herbert Benson, M.D., president of Harvard University's Mind/Body Medical Institute, argues that religion comes naturally to human beings. As one of the growing number of researchers looking at religion from a biological perspective, Benson sees the human capacity for religion as a survival instinct that has taken root in human beings throughout their course of evolutionary history.

Benson and his scientific colleagues do not argue for the actual, objective existence of God. Instead, they claim that religion is a means of adapting to life that human beings created to make themselves feel better.

Numerous studies show that people who believe in God and who pray or worship on a regular basis tend to feel better than those who do not. People who are religious also have better and faster rates of recovery from illness than those who are not. Benson postulates that a belief in a caring, healing, and powerful God can reduce the stress that people feel as a result of illness, other life problems or from thinking about the inevitability of death.

Stress is not only a mental or psychological state but also a physical state affecting heart rate, blood pressure and the immune system. By reducing stress, both religious belief and religious worship can stimulate the immune system and decrease heart rate and blood pressure. Like others seeking a biological explanation for these things, Benson believes that human beings rely on religion to generate a relaxation response that is a natural antidote to stress. Because this capacity for religion has evolved as part of our biological makeup, Benson says that we are "wired for God."

Many religious people will welcome this news as confirmation of the healthful benefits that they have always associated with religious life. But others will think twice about whether this recent biological thinking about religion is all good news. From Benson's biological perspective, the persistence of religion in human history can be explained in terms of its benefit to human health. And from his perspective, religion can be understood as a benign and therapeutic form of self-deception.

RELIGION TODAY COLUMN FOR WEEK OF JAN. 15-21, 1999

*(Religion Today is contributed by the University of Wyoming's Religious Studies Program to examine and to promote discussion of religious issues.)*