

Our DNA makes us want to believe

A hunt for the "God gene" that underpins our ability to believe is under way by scientists. And, despite his views on religion, even Francis Crick argues that belief must have a biological explanation because it is almost universal in humans.

The idea of genes linked with beliefs does not look far-fetched, given the influence of genetics on the developing brain. For example, Prof Thomas Bouchard of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, has conducted a study of twins who had been reared apart and concluded that there was "a modest degree of genetic influence" in two measures of religiousness.

There are many suggestions as to why the "God gene" – or a constellation of genes linked with belief – might thrive.

Prof John Burn, medical director of the Institute of Human Genetics at the University of Newcastle, said: "Survival of our species has demanded a capacity to work together, to form societies. A willingness to live, and if necessary die, for a belief is a powerful selective advantage. I think there is a genetic propensity for us to believe."

The sociobiologist Prof Edward Wilson of Harvard University points out that religions often help perpetuate their followers' genes by encouraging them to have big families and including prohibitions against incest and other risky activities.

Those who are more inclined to believe might also have survived better than those who did not have such beliefs. A wide-ranging survey of scientific evidence of the "faith factor" in disease has been conducted by Mayo Clinic researchers. They

concluded that a majority of 350 studies of physical health and 850 studies of mental health have found that religious involvement and spirituality are associated with better health.

Belief can help people to cope with stress and religious people might be more compliant and less likely to over-indulge, or they might be able to draw on a bigger support network (such as a congregation). If belief really does boost an individual's chances of survival, any genes linked with a propensity to believe would survive in future generations.

Dr Michel Raymond of the Institute of Evolutionary Science in Montpellier, France, and Dutch researcher Frans Roes have published research in the journal *Evolution and Human Behaviour* that purports to show it is possible to predict how religious a society is, and what kind of religion it subscribes to, by the evolutionary benefits.

For example, the survival of social groups in a desert would be promoted by a supreme deity's legitimisation of moral codes that protect natural resources. When cultures around the world are compared, there is indeed a strong association between belief in gods strong on such moral codes and societies where water is scarce.

They conclude that since larger societies tend to have more conflicts, they are more likely to have a "god" to provide "moral glue" and social cohesiveness. When there are recurring threats, moral rules should be imposed with authority. They conclude: "How better than by a moralising god?" **RH**