

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 21 April 2018



## Why Do We Believe? Evolution, Primates and the Human Niche

Podcast with **Agustin Fuentes** (23 April 2018).

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/why-do-we-believe-evolution-primates-and-the-human-niche/>

**Christopher Cotter (CC):** *“Humans can see the world around them, imagine how it might be different, and translate those imaginings into reality – or at least try to. Humans believe. Meaning, imagination and hope are as central to the human story as our bones, genes and ecologies. Neither selfish aggression nor peaceful altruism dominates human behaviour as a whole. We are a species distinguished by our extraordinary capacity for creative co-operation, our ability to imagine possibilities and to make them material, and our powerful aptitudes for belief, hope and cruelty.”* So begins the abstract of the [2018 Gifford Lecture Series](#), at the University of Edinburgh, on the topic: *“Why We Believe: Evolution, Meaning-Making and the Development of Human Natures”*. And I’m joined today by the deliverer of those lectures, Professor [Agustin Fuentes](#), who is the Edmund P Joyce, CSC, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame. His research delves into the how-and-why of being human, ranging from chasing monkeys in jungles and cities to exploring the lives of our evolutionary ancestors, to examining what people actually do across the globe. Professor Fuentes is interested in both the big questions and the small details of what makes humans, and our closest relatives, tick. And his recent books include: [Evolution of Human Behaviour](#); [Race, Monogamy and Other Lies They Told You: Busting Myths about Human Nature](#); and [The Creative Spark: How Imagination Made Humans Exceptional](#). So first off: Professor Fuentes, welcome to the Religious Studies Project.

**Agustin Fuentes (AF):** I’m very glad to be here.

**CC:** *And you’ve been getting all of the weather in Edinburgh. It’s sunny at the moment, but when we recorded last week we were snowed in. So you’ve had all of that. In fact one of the lectures was*

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*cancelled and then rescheduled, so I missed it! So if you can fill me in on that one . . . .***AF:** It'll be on-line soon I think, with the video. So . . . .**CC:** *Exactly. And we'll link in this podcast to that page when it goes out. So all the lectures – everyone who's listening – you can hear and watch the full six lectures of the series. When I pitched this interview to you, I said, “The combination of your expertise in human evolution, ethno-primateology and human nature, and the interaction between that and the study of religion more generally, would make for an excellent and important interview.”***AF:** (Laughs).**CC:** *So, now we're going to have to live up to that!***AF:** Ah. Well, humans love a challenge!**CC:** *Exactly. But, first of all, if you just tell me a little bit about who you are. I mean, I've done your academic, sort-of CV there. But, who you are; how did you get interested in these questions of belief; and, as an ethno-primateologist, what do you do all day?!***AF:** So this is a great opportunity to plug Anthropology. In North America, unlike here in Europe, Anthropology is a rubric – a label that covers a much broader area of expertise. So, for example, my two undergraduate degrees are in Zoology and Anthropology. And while that may sound strange to many, it's quite a logical trajectory for a kind of North American Anthropology that seeks to think through the behaviour, the culture and the history of humanity, and combine that with an understanding of the physiology of the body that embodies an ecology. And so connecting those two things together is sort-of the underlying . . . my *joie de vivre*, in an academic sense. And because I'm interested in the human, I'm also interested in other primates. Humans are primates, or part of the world in that way. And so, to really contextualise what is distinctive and fascinating about humanity, I need to understand where humans sit in relation to not just their closest cousins but to the broader landscapes. And so that training . . . this is what I bring to bear on understanding human distinctiveness, in context, and by comparison with others.**CC:** *And I'm imagining a situation like, I don't know, [James Franco](#) in [Rise of the Planet of the Apes](#), sitting around your resident ape!***Citation Info:** Fuentes, Agustin and Christopher Cotter. 2018. “Why Do We Believe? Evolution, Primates and the Human Niche”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 23 April 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 21 April 2018. Available at: <http://www.religioustudiesproject.com/podcast/why-do-we-believe-evolution-primates-and-the-human-niche/>

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**AF:** (Laughs). Yes. I think it's really important to point out, first of all, that the [original Planet of the Apes](#) movies are fantastic because they have subtext, and they are situated in the political moment. These recent remakes are just not very good.

**CC:** *But that's by the by!*

**AF:** But what does one do when doing primate studies? One watches the primates. One tries to get inside into their day to day interactions, their relationships, and the massive social complexity of their day to day lives. And that, actually, informs us a lot about what we, as humans, have as our base. If we understand what primates are, we don't need to understand why humans are so social, why relationships are so central to our being. That's because we're primates. However, we are particularly distinctive. We are the strangest of all the primates. And therein lies the really interesting question about humanity: how do we differ from everything else? **(5:00)** So, watching primates is a very good training for, I think, scholarly endeavours. Because it usually means spending hours, after hours, after hours, piling on more hours of sitting watching other organisms. And most organisms, unlike humans, actually relax most of the time. So, a lot of the time they're really not doing that much. So, it takes a lot of perseverance to do fieldwork.

**CC:** *Yes. And I guess you get a lot of thinking time in there as well.*

**AF:** Yes.

**CC:** So you said, there, about primates and humans being distinctive. Maybe that's a nice way to weave in . . . ?

**AF:** Yes. So I think there's something really important here, and this is critical. I'm an evolutionary scientist and I'm interested in the broad . . . the long durée of human history, and that's millions and millions of years. When thinking about evolutionary processes, people tend to take one of two sides. Either the “continuity” emphasis, which is very hip right now. Everyone wants to place humans as connected to everything else, which we are, absolutely. That is a fact. However, interesting stories in evolution are not just about connectedness but also about *discontinuities*. Because evolution is about branching and changing. So we have common ancestors, but then we diverge. And each lineage changes unto itself in particular, distinctive and important ways. And so when I ask questions about the human, I'm very interested in knowing what our baseline line is – by looking at other primates – but much more interested in those distinctive changes that occur across our specific lineage and how

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that influences what we can know, and think, about the human. And so that's the distinctive aspect. But you have to understand the continuities to be able to really talk about the distinctions.

**CC:** *And, well, you call that in your lecture series, “the human niche – this element of the human niche. And then that's connected to this broader question of why we believe. Perhaps that's a good way for us to go? If you could tell us, what is this human niche, and how has it developed, and maybe some its key characteristics?”*

**AF:** So, what's really incredible is to think in an evolutionary way, to also think in an ecological way, and also a deeply philosophical way. So [Jakob von Uexküll](#), the philosopher and biologist, provided us with the conceptualisation the *umwelt*: the lifeworld of an organism. Each organism is distinctive in the way in which they are in the world. And so understanding us, humans, in our *umwelt* – in our contemporary context – is to think through our niche. Niches are these complex ecological, behavioural, historical ways in which we are in the world. So the human niche – the one I'm most interested in – has developed over the last two million years, over the evolution of our genus: the genus Homo. We are, today, Homo sapiens. So the evolutionary trajectory, over the last two million years of our particular lineage, involves changes in bodies, behaviour, genes, neurobiologies and ecologies. And observing the material remains in the physical, in the bones and the materials left behind over time, allows us to attempt to reconstruct the patterns and processes of the development of the human niche. Today, our niche is this unbelievably complicated reality that is challenging and enticing to study. But to really think about contemporary humanity, from my perspective, one should examine the ways in which the niche has changed over time – the bits and pieces. So, for example, the critical extension of the human childhood. The fact that we are born with less than 40% of our brain developed. That is absolutely unique for all mammals. So our brain growth is very, very extended and very plastic and thus the teaching, the social, the nurturing, the inculcating in becoming human is a central part of our niche – much more so than any other animal. So from the very first breath we take, the social, the interaction, the communal is central in the physical, and the experiential, and the perceptual.

**CC:** *Exactly. And in maybe your third lecture you were talking about even things like storage – the development of storage, and how that has affected things. I would never have thought of that in terms of being a major evolutionary . . .*

**AF:** I think people underplay what evolutionary processes are. Everyone tends to think of: there's a large thing trying to eat you, and if you're not eaten and you successfully produce offspring, then you

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win. It's actually a lot more complicated than that. Evolutionary process is all of the dynamics that go into long-term change across bodies, behaviours, genomes and ecologies. And so understanding those dynamics is critical. And in humans it's not just about the localised ecologies or behaviours, it's also about the ways in which we've reshaped our world. Humans are the only species . . . well, not the only species, but a species that has a major hand in creating its own ecologies that then feed back and create us. (10:00) And so we bring up storage, or things of domestication: storage, the alteration of environments. Here we are sitting in a beautiful room, surrounded by history, and a bunch of wood and cement and metal and electrical light. All of those things are part and parcel of the construction of the human niche. And so by looking backward we can identify storage, particular patterns of stone tool use, early technologies, the move to bronze and metals. All of these things have had huge influences on how humans interface in the world, which then feeds back on how we perceive and experience the world.

**CC:** *Wonderful. So that brings us, I think . . . we're already getting on in time, so we need to get to this notion of belief, and then how this relates to everything. So belief, in Religious Studies – well, in everything – is a contested term. How are you understanding belief, first of all?*

**AF:** So this is really important, because I want to be absolutely clear. I believe . . .

**CC:** Right.

**AF:** . . . that belief, in the way I'm structuring it and deploying it here, is the human capacity to imagine, to be creative, to hope and dream, to infuse the world with meanings, and to cast our aspirations far and wide. It's a commitment, an investment, a devotion to possibilities. So belief is a human capacity that has emerged over our evolutionary histories to take our cognitive, social, communal, historical and logical processes; to include what we can call “detached representation” or off-line thinking – the imaginary; to combine those, such that the imaginary – even the transcendent – can become part of the physical, the perceptual, the material in our niche. Using belief that way, it is not only about religious engagement. It is a capacity of the human. And I use the argument that belief is not some emerging thing in the mind, floating above our heads. Belief is like the fingers on our hand. It is a part and parcel of the human system that has been modified over evolutionary history and that it is critical in our interface with the world and with each other.

**CC:** *OK. I'll want to push on that towards the end, but that will be a final question that our listeners would not forgive me for not asking. So with that in mind, then: how did we develop this? Where did*

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*this come from, and why?*

**AF:** So early on . . . We can talk about many other – let's just use other primates, or cetaceans – very complex social mammals, have this incredible deep social reality. And part of their making it their world, their *umwelt*, their niche, is about social engagement and the social relationship. So that's a baseline for humans. Humans take that one step further by invoking the capacity for a particular kind of imaginary. That is, we can see in items the possibilities of other items: we can take a stone and see inside that stone is a stone tool. We can see relationships and imagine how they could be, even though they're not that way at the moment. So this perceptual capacity enables us to do what we call “cognitive and behavioural prospecting”: to imagine into the future the way the world could be, the way that we might want it to be, and attempt to make that a material reality. And that, over evolutionary history, we see in the material remains: ramping up more and more – not just making tools that are functional so that we can live, but creating items of meaning and using those items of meaning to feedback, to create and ramp up the complex cumulative cultural changes that have happened over our histories. So meaning-making is a central outcome of the capacity for belief.

**CC:** *Yes. You were commenting on the structures that have clearly taken generations upon generations to be built, and don't seem to serve any obvious function, and things like that . . .*

**AF:** I think that's really important, because we say they don't seem . . . That's the sort-of functional talk: this reductive notion of, “Everything must . . . if it doesn't serve a function, it must be magic or ritual.” And what I'd like to do is sort-of push against that, very directly, by saying, “No, this is part of the human experience.” These things that we see are not for making food, or for housing humans or some clear obvious function. We don't need to be reductive about the human experience. Because the human experience denies a total reduction; it's always more than the sum of its parts. And so if we acknowledge that that capacity – these multigenerational building projects that mean something to those populations, that have impact not just on the perception but on their bodies, and their lives, and how they see and experience the world – that is important. It just is not reduced to the material elements or some specific function.

**CC:** *Exactly. And we've got . . . “We” – in quotation marks – have an awful tendency, if we're looking at other cultures or things in the past, to go, “Oh there's a symbol. That must be their religion, it must be ritual.” (15:00) Whereas here, you know, outside there'll be the Scottish Flag, the Saltire, the St Andrews Cross: no-one goes, “Oh, that's a religious symbol!” But we have a tendency, when looking at the past . . .*

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**AF:** And here it's very, very important. And I make a very explicit argument differentiating belief – the capacity to be religious – and religion. I think, for me, it's very important. There's many, many scholarly intellectual arguments that could push against this in valid ways, but in an evolutionary sense you must make this distinction. So I invoke [Clifford Geertz](#), when I talk about the capacity to be religious, defining religious as: “the use of one's capacity for belief in the context of becoming, with particular perceptual, experiential and agential practices involving the transcendent, that act to establish powerful, persuasive and long lasting moods and motivations that may be, but are not necessarily tied to specific formal doctrines, practices, texts and institutions.” And in that way it is inherent, as a part of the process of our capacity for belief, that humans have a capacity to be religious. And I think anyone worth their salt, looking at our history, says humans have been and are religious. Religions, however, I have to separate off in my engagement with the long durée of human evolutionary history, because contemporary religion is defined as follows: “the formal coalition of religious beliefs and practices and materials, symbols and structural institutions that unite them into a single community via specific theological doctrine and ritual.” And that's borrowing from [Durkheim](#). The reason I do that is because our contemporary religions as institutions have histories, have texts, have theologies – but those do not have very deep roots, from my perspective.

**CC:** *Exactly.*

**AF:** That is, they don't go back . . . we can't find anything that really connects them clearly, materially, more than 6-8000 years ago. That means, what do I do with the other two million years? And so, for me, there is clear evidence of meaning-making and absolute commitment to an importance of the transcendent experience in the human, well before 6-8000 years ago. For me, I see this as the capacity to be religious; as an openness to possibilities that has, in our current times, formalised in particular institutional and theological practices.

**CC:** *Exactly. And there're, I can jump in and go: “Well, Whoah!” You asked the question, why we believe. You could also ask the question: why do we not believe? There are plenty around who would probably bristle at you saying “I'm a believer.” (Laughs).*

**AF:** So I think that's great. People should bristle because they're ignorant. When I say belief – and here I don't mean to be insulting – but I think it's very important to point out that what I'm talking about is not the human association with particular institution, or history, or even a particular theology, or philosophy. What I'm talking about is the human capacity to be with, to experience awe, to have the transcendent perceptions influence the way in which we are in life. All humans have that capacity.

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How we choose to engage with it, how we choose to deploy it, and what histories and structures we enable to come forth from that I think that's a very good question. The problem today is we're in this mode, this contemporary moment, where the politics of aggression between different patterns and traditions of faith and practice have incredible salience. So the New Atheists, for example, would argue that all religion is delusion. To that I respond, "So, 83% – let's say 6.2 billion human beings are idiots?" No. 6.2 billion human beings are doing what humans do, and participating in an incredible opportunity to deploy their capacity to be religious alongside particular institutions, theologies and faith traditions. Other humans who do not belong to those faith traditions are actually believing in different ways.

**CC:** *Exactly.*

**AF:** Everyone has this capacity. And so I think the argument, stemming from ignorance, that we should be envisioning the human as without access to the transcendent – or to that broader experience – is dangerous, because it cuts us off from what we know has been one of the keys to our success in the past.

**CC:** *Exactly. And the danger, then, with this sort of talk, can be that we lose that we're talking about a capacity. We're not saying whether there is a transcendent. But sometimes people . . . I imagine lot of people, even listening to your lectures, will be sitting there going, "This proves that God is real!" And things like that.*

**AF:** Well this is the wonderful thing that, again, stems from this really interesting jumping to conclusions and not thinking things through. **(20:00)** You cannot prove faith. That is the point of it. Faith is felt and is real. That's the entire reason it works. It is real. And so whatever the faith practices that you engage in, if they're not real for you, if you have to find some sort of mathematical equation, then I have to ask, what is it that you're seeking? And it might be something else. So I think these are great debates to have. I think they're very important. And I think we have to distinguish institutional religion from the capacity to be religious or from what most people do day in and day out. Because religious institutions – like political institutions and economical institutions – have histories, and histories that are often fraught with really complex and problematic realities. But that doesn't mean they're static and they don't change. And we know today, making a difference in the world without participating with religions is going to be impossible.

**CC:** *Absolutely. And yes, it belies this myth of the division between the religious and the secular, that*

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*there is . . . You mention the New Atheists. So, they talk as if they're completely 100% empirical and rational all of the time, and they have no – quote – "faith commitments" – unquote. And they don't do anything based on tradition or intuition or emotion.*

**AF:** And to be honest with you, that's an extreme version and only a few are like that. The vast majority of people are not, and they recognise that if you make such a dogmatic assertion, you are in fact demonstrating faith. That's exactly the point. You are demonstrating a belief system. And I think that's something that just needs to be recognised. And let's go back to what you said about that religious versus secular realities. Most of the world, even today, does not have that division. And until very recently that division did not exist. People are in the world and the experience of awe, the potential for transcendence are part of their daily lives. We now divide it politically: this notion that there's faith traditions and then there's the rest of your life. And that's just a very strange way to be human – and quite atypical, even today.

**CC:** *Exactly. So I mentioned earlier I was going to push you on the notion of belief. So you've got this very nuanced, non-theological definition that you use, but I imagine that many people coming to your work bring with them a sort-of folk understanding of the term belief, which is quite – quote – "protestant" – unquote.*

**AF:** (Laughs).

**CC:** *So why use that word? Is there a danger that the work that you're doing is sort-of tainted by association with the word?*

**AF:** Yes. I mean there is that danger, but I think it's a risk that's worth taking. Because I think belief is powerful. You could say, "Why don't you just stick with imagination?" Well, imagination isn't the whole picture, it's a component of belief. "Well, why don't you just stick with humans' capacity to have detached mental representation?" Like, well that's one tool, one process, within this larger system of belief. And I think it's actually very important that we recognise that belief is a human capacity, as I've outlined here, that is deployed in many different instances. Now, I think it resonates particularly well with many theological and philosophical engagements, because philosophers and particularly theologians have been asking about belief; that's their forte, they're interested in that area. Whereas other people, say economists, pretend they're not talking about belief.

**CC:** *Exactly.*

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**AF:** And I think that's the danger: the idea that economic systems or political systems reflect reality, not belief systems, is a threat to the potential for humans to navigate those.

**CC:** *And you've just hit on . . . in my postdoctoral project I've used the word "unbelief" in the title. So I'm interested in all those people who want to distance themselves from, I'll say, "religion". But the word unbelief – it's nicely slippery, in that it covers so much. Whereas I'd previously used "non-religion" – but then you're into a binary, and it's "versus" all the time.*

**AF:** I love unbelief. I think that's fantastic. And I'm going to place it with my – with acknowledgement to use this – and place it with another one of my favourite phrases which is "incurious". **(25:00)** So I think using unbelief is critical, because that's a political act, right, to say "I am not participating in belief; I am doing this; mine is realty, yours is not"? That's a political statement. Anyone who tells you humans are rational and reasonable, when they get rid of the capacity for this perceptual experience of the more-than-the-material, is wrong. And they're trying to sell you something. They know, as human beings, what they can experience and have experienced. And so when they argue that, "No this is the rational reality, versus your reality", they're trying to sell you their goods.

**CC:** *Exactly. So we're coming up on time. Your final lecture is tonight, so I haven't heard that yet. So what's your big conclusion going to be . . . your big admonition? Give us a taste!*

**AF:** Well, I facetiously titled it, "Can Belief Matter?" And everyone knows the answer is, "Yes!" But what I really mean – and I will go into more detail – is: can we make belief truly matter in the 21st century, when we are on the precipice of so many catastrophic issues for not just humans, but the whole planet? How do we, then, engage the scientific, the religious, the political, the economic, in dialogue so that we can do what so many of us want – and that is to move forward on the planet in ways that are sustainable, as equitable as possible, compassionate and caring in spite of all the problems? We're not going to get rid of inequality, and warfare, and horrors, but we can probably manage them more effectively than we are now. And I would like to suggest – and I think many philosophers and theologians have been saying this for quite some time – that it is through belief, through the patterns and processes of diverse belief systems and the individual ability to believe, to commit, to hope, to imagine, that we have a better chance. And if we ignore that, and we try to trust in just particular political or economic systems to push forward, or our creativity and our ingenuity – and it's gotten us out of problems before it'll work in the future – I cannot see that is turning out well.

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**CC:** *Fantastic. And one of the pervasive and problematic discourses that one hears in the UK context, and I'm sure in the States and elsewhere, is that it's not polite to talk about . . . well it's sex, religion and politics.*

**AF:** If we don't talk about sex, religion, politics *and race*, we are doomed!

**CC:** *Exactly! And that is how ideologies get stuck.*

**AF:** Absolutely! The power of ideologies are when they go truly unchallenged.

**CC:** *Exactly! And hopefully this interview has helped spark some conversations and some ideas. As I've said, Listeners, you can check out the full series, and there's a link in the podcast page, or just by searching for Adam Gifford Lectures 2018, or for Agustin Fuentes. It's been a pleasure speaking to you.*

**AF:** Oh, this has been a great discussion! Thank you so much for having me.

**CC:** *Thank you.*

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