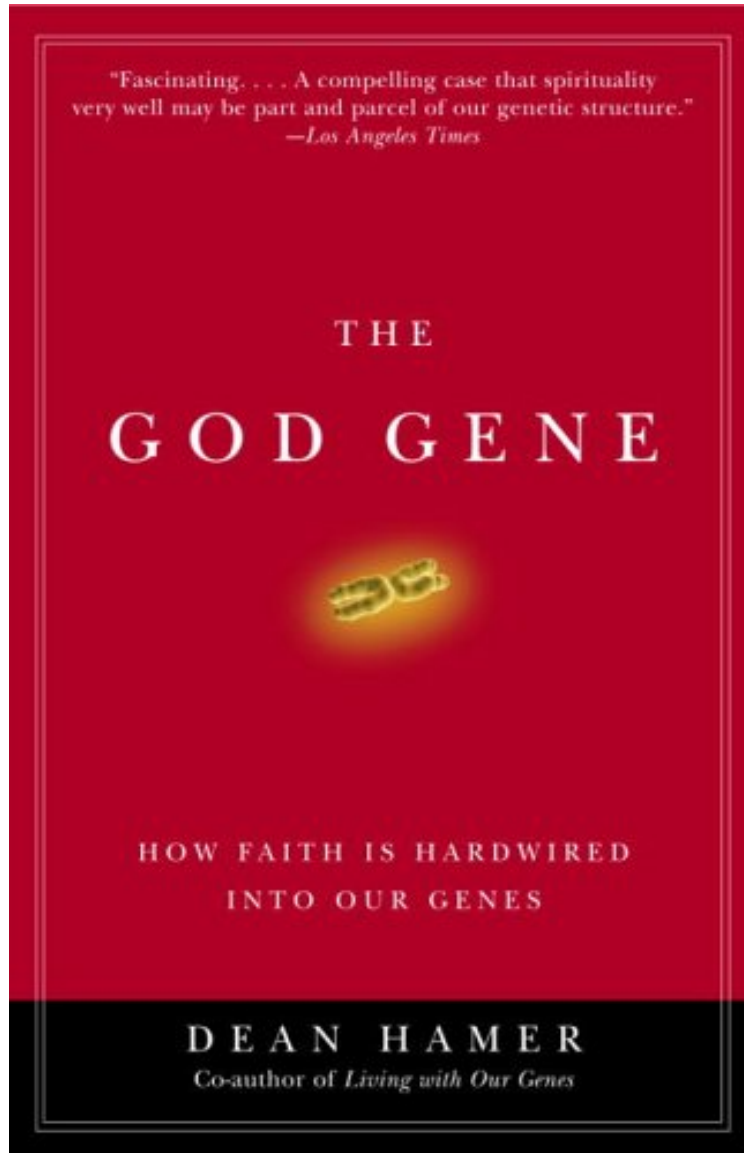


The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes

Dean H. Hamer

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Dean H. Hamer : The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Leave the Agenda BehindBy In Search of Lost TimeIf you read this book carefully, you will not fall into the abyss of some of the negative reviewers who misquoted, and more importantly, misunderstood the hypotheses presented. These previous negative reviewers who accused this author of rewriting earlier texts, particularly citing Persinger, did not understand this author's point. Persinger's theory (and yes,

his name IS mentioned in THE GOD GENE) was very broad and unrelenting. His book definitely had an agenda beyond presenting scientific results; and I find him today to be obnoxiously certain about the correctness of his view. (Many so-called "hard" scientists and MDs can fall prey to thinking in these "black and white" terms, when in fact, most intelligent scientists leave room for a little grey area that might be provided by later research.) Clearly, the author of THE GOD GENE is more the modern social scientist, and I, as a reader, appreciated having ideas suggested rather than being hammered by a self-righteous pedant. (Persinger's book is very old in scientific-literature years, the 1980s, and perhaps his approach to writing is also dated. He cited one area of the brain as the source of "irrational" human belief in "supernatural beings" or spiritual optimism which he also, incidentally, clearly sees as a temporary aberration wholly caused by changes in brain chemicals). This may have been ground-breaking research in the 1980's and earlier, but research since then has clearly outrun this first basic step. And gene research has a long way to go. If you are interested in this topic and have a mind that enjoys pondering interesting hypotheses, I highly recommend THE GOD GENE. Don't let the title dissuade you. The author has since admitted that it may not have been the best description of his project.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Evolution of the mindBy Michael L DetzlerThe author is on the right track but has more research to do before the hypothesis is proven. To me it is obvious that we humans have a proclivity toward belief in a higher power so prevalent that it must be in our DNA. However, it likely is an evolved trait of which the author leaves out of the discussion. The book is only touches a fraction of what might be taking place in the biology of the mind. Nice start in the right direction, and I can not wait for the sequel whom ever authors it. It might be a subject for our scientific mind observer Machio Kaku. He undoubtedly has some insight into this line of thought.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy jim vaughanHighly technical....read it twice to fully understand.....graduate level reading material!

The overwhelming majority of Americans believe in God; this conviction has existed since the beginning of recorded time and is shared by billions around the world. In *The God Gene*, Dr. Dean Hamer reveals that this inclination towards religious faith is in good measure due to our genes and may even offer an evolutionary advantage by helping us get through difficulties, reducing stress, preventing disease, and extending life. Popular science at its best, *The God Gene* is an in-depth, fully accessible inquiry into cutting-edge research that can change the way we see ourselves and the world around us. Written with balance, integrity, and admirable scientific objectivity, this is a book for readers of science and religion alike.

From *Scientific American*By page 77 of *The God Gene*, Dean H. Hamer has already disowned the title of his own book. He recalls describing to a colleague his discovery of a link between spirituality and a specific gene he calls "the God gene." His colleague raised her eyebrows. "Do you mean there's just one?" she asked. "I deserved her skepticism," Hamer writes. "What I meant to say, of course, was 'a' God gene, not 'the' God gene." Of course. Why, the reader wonders, didn't Hamer call his book *A God Gene*? That might not have been as catchy, but at least it wouldn't have left him contradicting himself. Whatever you want to call it, this is a frustrating book. The role that genes play in religion is a fascinating question that's ripe for the asking. Psychologists, neurologists and even evolutionary biologists have offered insights about how spiritual behaviors and beliefs emerge from the brain. It is reasonable to ask, as Hamer does, whether certain genes play a significant role in faith. But he is a long way from providing an answer. Hamer, a geneticist at the National Cancer Institute, wound up on his quest for the God gene by a roundabout route. Initially he and his colleagues set out to find genes that may make people prone to cigarette addiction. They studied hundreds of pairs of siblings, comparing how strongly their shared heredity influenced different aspects of their personality. In addition to having their subjects fill out psychological questionnaires, the researchers also took samples of DNA from some of them. Hamer then realized that this database might let him investigate the genetics of spirituality. He embarked on this new search by looking at the results of certain survey questions that measured a personality trait known as self-transcendence, originally identified by Washington University psychiatrist Robert Cloninger. Cloninger found that spiritual people tend to share a set of characteristics, such as feeling connected to the world and a willingness to accept things that cannot be objectively demonstrated. Analyzing the cigarette study, Hamer confirmed what earlier studies had found: heredity is partly responsible for whether a person is self-transcendent or not. He then looked at the DNA samples of some of his subjects, hoping to find variants of genes that tended to turn up in self-transcendent people. His search led him to a gene known as VMAT2. Two different versions of this gene exist, differing only at a single position. People with one version of the gene tend to score a little higher on self-transcendence tests. Although the influence is small, it is, Hamer claims, consistent. About half the people in the study had at least one copy of the self-transcendence-boosting version of VMAT2, which Hamer dubs the God gene. Is the God gene real? The only evidence we have to go on at the moment is what Hamer presents in his book. He and his colleagues are still preparing to submit their results to a scientific journal. It would be nice to know whether these results can withstand the rigors of peer review. It would be nicer still to know whether any other scientists can replicate them. The field of behavioral genetics is littered with failed links between particular genes and personality traits. These alleged associations at first seemed very strong. But as other

researchers tried to replicate them, they faded away into statistical noise. In 1993, for example, a scientist reported a genetic link to male homosexuality in a region of the X chromosome. The report brought a huge media fanfare, but other scientists who tried to replicate the study failed. The scientist's name was Dean Hamer. To be fair, it should be pointed out that Hamer offers a lot of details about his study in *The God Gene*, along with many caveats about how hard it is to establish an association between genes and behavior. But given the fate of Hamer's so-called gay gene, it is strange to see him so impatient to trumpet the discovery of his God gene. He is even eager to present an intricate hypothesis about how the God gene produces self-transcendence. The gene, it is well known, makes membrane-covered containers that neurons use to deliver neurotransmitters to one another. Hamer proposes that the God gene changes the level of these neurotransmitters so as to alter a person's mood, consciousness and, ultimately, self-transcendence. He goes so far as to say that the God gene is, along with other faith-boosting genes, a product of natural selection. Self-transcendence makes people more optimistic, which makes them healthier and likely to have more kids. These speculations take up the bulk of *The God Gene*, but in support Hamer only offers up bits and pieces of research done by other scientists, along with little sketches of spiritual people he has met. It appears that he has not bothered to think of a way to test these ideas himself. He did not, for example, try to rule out the possibility that natural selection has not favored self-transcendence, but some other function of VMAT2. (Among other things, the gene protects the brain from neurotoxins.) Nor does Hamer rule out the possibility that the God gene offers no evolutionary benefit at all. Sometimes genes that seem to be common thanks to natural selection turn out to have been spread merely by random genetic drift. Rather than address these important questions, Hamer simply declares that any hypothesis about the evolution of human behavior must be purely speculative. But this is simply not true. If Hamer wanted, he could have measured the strength of natural selection that has acted on VMAT2 in the past. And if he did find signs of selection, he could have estimated how long ago it took place. Other scientists have been measuring natural selection this way for several years now and publishing their results in major journals. *The God Gene* might have been a fascinating, enlightening book if Hamer had written it 10 years from now--after his link between VMAT2 and self-transcendence had been confirmed by others and after he had seriously tested its importance to our species. Instead the book we have today would be better titled: *A Gene That Accounts for Less Than One Percent of the Variance Found in Scores on Psychological Questionnaires Designed to Measure a Factor Called Self-Transcendence, Which Can Signify Everything from Belonging to the Green Party to Believing in ESP, According to One Unpublished, Unreplicated Study*. Carl Zimmer's books include *Soul Made Flesh* and *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea*. From Booklist Like his and Peter Copeland's *Living with Our Genes* (1998), geneticist Hamer's provocative new book begins with the caveat that a single gene rarely accounts for a complex behavior, such as homosexuality, which was instanced in *Living*, or spirituality, the focus here. Still, Hamer has done sufficient research to argue that a single gene is implicated in spirituality, and his highly accessible exposition of how he arrived at that point is pretty impressive, if occasionally a bit Mr. Rogers-like in tone. Later, he adopts antireligious geneticist Richard Dawkins' concept of the meme, or transmissible unit of cultural information, to expand upon how culture and genetics interact to prompt expressing spirituality through religion and thereby to sustain faith traditions, such as in the demonstration case here, Judaism. (Hamer thinks Dawkins' attitudes toward religion less than rational, by the way, and poses those of sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson as a healthy alternative.) He ends with another caveat: distinguish between beliefs and the act of believing--and the war between science and religion just might be resolved. Ray Olson Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved Fascinating. . . . A compelling case that spirituality very well may be part and parcel of our genetic structure. Los Angeles Times Hamer ably narrates his quest to identify a gene that strongly correlates with self-transcendence. . . . Persuasive. The Washington Post Book World Hamer weaves a fascinating fabric of mysticism, culture, consciousness, and biochemistry . . . rife with history and multidisciplinary tidbits. . . . Enlightening. Seed Challenges some basic assumptions we may have and certainly goads us into reflection about human nature. The News Observer