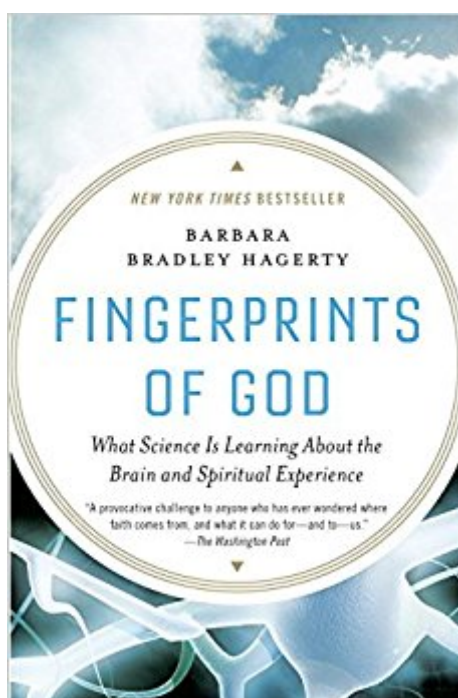


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# Fingerprints Of God: What Science Is Learning About The Brain And Spiritual Experience



## Synopsis

The New York Times bestseller that explores the startling discoveries that science is making about faith. Barbara Bradley Hagerty's new book, *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife*, is out now from Riverhead Books. Is spiritual experience real? Or is it a delusion? When we pray, what happens? Can science explain God? In *Fingerprints of God*, National Public Radio religion correspondent Barbara Bradley Hagerty attempts to answer these and other vexing questions about the science of spiritual experience. Along the way she tells the story of her own intriguing spiritual evolution, delves into the discoveries science is making about how faith affects our brains and explores what near-death experiences reveal about the afterlife. The result is a rich and insightful examination of what science is learning about how and why we believe.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Exclusive: Barbara Bradley Hagerty on *Fingerprints of God* It took me more than a decade to muster the courage to write *Fingerprints of God*. The seed was planted on June 10, 1995, when I was reporting a story for the Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine about evangelical churches. Kathy Younge and I were sitting on a bench outside Saddleback Church. She told me that her melanoma had returned after a remission, and she believed that the disease was not meant to kill her, but to give her a transcendent purpose. As we talked, the night darkened to indigo. The streetlamp next to our bench cast a perfect circle around us, creating the eerie sense that we were actors on a stage. The temperature had dropped into the 50's. I was shivering but pinned to the

spot, riveted by Kathy and her serene faith. My body responded before my brain, alerting me to some unseen change. My skin began to tingle and my heart started beating a little faster. Imperceptibly at first, the air around us thickened; it grew warmer and heavier, as if someone had moved into the circle and was breathing on us. I glanced at Kathy. She had fallen silent mid-sentence. Neither of us spoke. Gradually, and ever so gently, I felt engulfed by a presence I could feel but could not touch. After a minute, although it seemed longer, the presence melted away. We sat quietly, while I waited for the earth to steady itself. I was too spooked to continue with the interview, and a few minutes later I was driving back to my hotel room. But I could not shake the questions. Was that experience a delusion, or was it real? Is there a spiritual reality that exists beyond our everyday physical world? Is there evidence of God? Not just people's beliefs, but hard, scientific evidence? And most basic of all: Is there more than this? For a decade, I looked for books that would answer these questions. Finding none, I decided to investigate the only way I knew how – as a journalist. In 2006, I took a year-long leave of absence from National Public Radio to research the emerging science of spirituality. I spoke with dozens of prominent scientists who are bushwhacking through this controversial territory, often drawing the ire or ridicule of their colleagues who believe that everything can be explained by material means. In the meantime, I took a journey peppered with surprises and ridiculous situations. I traveled to Canada and donned the "God helmet" to see if activating my temporal lobes would unleash an encounter with the "divine." I attended to a peyote ceremony (although, like our former president, I barely ingested) and visited Johns Hopkins University in search of a chemical that would manufacture a mystical experience. I arranged for a minister to have his brain scanned while he prayed at the University of Pennsylvania, and tried to see if I could physically change my own brain through two weeks of meditation at the University of Wisconsin. And I spent endless hours with people who had enjoyed dramatic spiritual experiences. Some had had spontaneous mystical experiences, right out of the blue. Some transcendent moments were triggered by a trauma, others by drugs, or epilepsy, or near-death experiences. Some people spent hundreds of hours in prayer and meditation to cultivate the ability to connect with the divine. I confess that my exploration was not an entirely clinical. I was raised a Christian Scientist, and while I now consider myself a serious mainstream Christian, I have always believed in the presence and power of God. At the beginning I nursed a nagging concern that perhaps this God business is just a ruse, self medication in the face of certain death. I fretted that science would prove that all mystery, all transcendent experience, can be boiled down to brain chemistry and genetics. What I found – well, you'll have to see. But I can say this: By the end of my research, I had redefined God and my view of reality. And perhaps at

the end of the book, you will too. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Starred Review. In her first book, National Public Radio correspondent Hagerty acts as a tour guide through the rocky terrain of scientists who study religious experience. Is there a so-called God gene? Why do some people have mystical experiences while others never see the so-called light? Right up front, Hagerty reveals that this is not an entirely objective exercise. As a Christian, she wants to understand her own mystical encounter with the divine and why she believes when others do not. Yet to each interview, whether with a world-renowned neuroscientist or a back-road mystic, she brings a suitably skeptical eye. Along the way, she manages to explain some pretty cutting-edge science—psychoneuroimmunology, anyone?—and unravel some people's pretty hard-to-comprehend religious experiences without sacrificing depth or complexity. Then, with equal aplomb, she dances off to peyote ceremonies, church services and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. The real beauty of this book lies in watching Hagerty gracefully balance her own trust in faith and science and, in the end, come down with one foot planted firmly in both. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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Thought provoking, insightful, factual.

I loved hearing her personal experiences mixed with her research. It made for a great read and I tore through the book in about a day. As someone who has also had spiritual experiences but lives in a scientific world (aerospace engineering), I sometimes struggle to reconcile the two, and this book came as a great comfort to me: 1) because I'm not crazy and 2) science and spirituality are not mutually exclusive as many would have us believe. There are still many questions to be answered, but I love that this book begins to bridge the gap between two seemingly opposite worlds. I hope to see more writing like this as society learns to use science as a tool to explore our spirituality rather than destroy it.

This was a brave little book about the author's trek into spirituality, undertaken somewhat unconventionally. Personally, I think the drug induced states cannot be the practical equivalent of mind states achieved by guided meditation, prayer, godly service, or combined natural methods of pointing the mind toward God. That's all we need is a bunch of stoned spiritual gurus telling us (or our children) they have an "easier way to get there, man." But this book honestly looks into the use

of drugs by some to achieve these mind altered states, and considers some other methods as well. In the end, I would use the book as a reference tool for the offered perspectives, but would compare other sources and real life experiences reported by others in making life choices. I have had known individuals using cannabis and peyote, for example, with very mixed results, to say the least. The blogs also reveal mixed reports, both positive and negative. Although I understand there are times when psychic relief is vitally needed (including drugs administered professionally), my inner voice and common sense tells me that the correct path for getting on with life is more than floating in ecstasy or achieving a mind state from a chemical, and that avoidance of potentially harmful drugs and safeguarding the mind is how we honor the body we have. Studies are ongoing, in any event, and I am interested to follow their progress.

Barbara Bradley Hagerty was raised as a Christian Scientist, a view she disavowed as a twenty-something. Now a religion correspondent for NPR, this book chronicles her year long quest to answer a question: is there any real scientific evidence for God? In *Fingerprints of God*, we witness Hagerty's numerous interviews with those who claim to have had mystical, out-of-body, and near death experiences. We also interview the many scientists who have studied "neurotheology" - the biological and neurological underpinnings of religion and religious experience. During all of this, Hagerty lets us hear her own thoughts as she encounters these religious believers and scientists. Hagerty writes very conversationally and honestly about her beliefs, doubts, and misgivings. But in all honesty, the thing I liked least about the book was that Hagerty was simply not very balanced. She struck me as someone who very much wanted to find evidence for God in science and set out to find it regardless of what the evidence actually is. (To her credit, she admits that she is biased in favor of belief in a deity, but it does take the investigativeness out of the investigation.) At least twenty times in the book, she writes paragraph upon paragraph about a scientist who sees evidence of god in biology/neurology, only to dismiss in a paragraph the skeptical scientist by saying something like: "...but there HAS to be more to it than just biology/neurology." The book was an interesting read, and Hagerty is a very good writer, capable of expressing very deep thoughts in simple terms. My only objection about her writing is that it is a tad formulaic in organization; each chapter is organized very much the same as the others. (Starts with a non-scientist anecdote, goes to another, forays into a discussion of the science behind the anecdotes, discusses the skeptic's viewpoint, dismisses it, concludes.) Still, as formulaic as her chapters could sometimes be, I kept reading; Hagerty had a way of making it all quite interesting. Despite its flaws, this is a good book about an interesting and timely subject.

I've gotten through the first three chapters of "The Fingerprints of God" and find it fascinating and enlightening. I am a retired pastor with a Ph.D. in Historical Theology and two master's degrees covering ministry, New Testament and Old Testament studies. I've taught college courses in Introduction to Philosophy, Ethics and World Religions. My college degree was in Mathematics with a minor in Physics and a second minor in Philosophy. I have a continuing interest in books and articles on subatomic physics and have written a journal article on the possible relationship between spiritual experiences and the energy of the Planck layer of cosmic reality. I used articles and books written by top astrophysicists, both religious and atheist, to explore that relationship in my article. Hagerty's book is right up my alley, although instead of just reading books and articles by top physicists and astrophysicists, she interviewed them personally and gained a lot more insights than I ever could just by reading what they've written. Her book is excellent, covers a very significant part of human reality, and I really enjoy reading it.

Interesting read - very thought provoking. Seems well researched with a good balance of view points.

Wonderful book. Inspired to read more as neurosciences move forward.

Like her mix of information through interviews and personal stories. Nicely done research.

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