

THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGION

STUDIES,
THEORIES,
& CRITIQUES

Edited By

Joseph Bulbulia, Richard Sosis, Erica Harris,
Russell Genet, Cheryl Genet, and Karen Wyman

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The Evolution of Religion: Studies, Theories, and Critiques

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Introduction

Religion in Eden

Richard Sosis and Joseph Bulbulia

In early January 2007, scholars from around the world gathered in Makaha Valley, Hawaii to attend the first *International Conference on the Evolution of Religion*. Scientific research on the origin and evolution of religion has made rapid advances in the past two decades.¹ The conference assessed how far the biological and social sciences have come toward explaining religiosity and religious culture, and looked for ways of improving and integrating distinctive naturalistic approaches. The conference also provided venues for those with philosophical and theological interests to raise questions about the relevance of this new research to questions internal to religious faith and practice.

Scholars came from Canada, Israel, Mexico, New Zealand, United States, and throughout Europe. They represented an array of religious backgrounds (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism) and beliefs (secularists, humanists, atheists, agnostics, theists, and even a self-proclaimed “creatheist”). More importantly, the spectrum of disciplines represented was extraordinarily wide, including cognitive psychologists and anthropologists, evolutionary psychologists, behavioral ecologists, anthropologists, evolutionary biologists, religious studies scholars, philosophers of science, historians, physicists, astrophysicists, neuroscientists, ecologists, archaeologists, and theologians.

One of the most successful aspects of the conference was that it brought together three scholarly groups who have otherwise had little sustained contact: religious studies scholars, cognitive scientists of religion, and evolutionary scientists interested in studying religion. While there have been fruitful collaborations between religious scholars and cognitive scientists, and evolutionary and cognitive scientists have also lately begun a productive dialogue, scholars from all three areas rarely find themselves under the same roof. This is unfortunate for many reasons. While evolutionary scientists have garnered considerable media attention from their recent forays into the study of religion, this work has often been pursued independently of, and often uninformed by, current religious scholarship. At this January 2007

1 For recent reviews of anthropological research on the evolution of religion, see Dow (2006) and Sosis & Alcorta (2003); and for reviews of evolutionary cognitive studies of religion, see Atran (2006); Barrett (2000); Bering (2006); Boyer (2003); and Bulbulia (2004, 2007).

conference, evolutionary scholars were pleasantly surprised at the depth of empirical research that already exists within the field of religious studies, and encouraged by the openness of some religious scholars to evolutionary ideas, but were somewhat dismayed by the recurrent misunderstandings of how selectionist theories are applied to human behavior. For their part, many religious studies scholars were skeptical about the potential of evolutionary approaches in explaining diverse religious patterns and trends. Most were curious about the possibilities of integrating evolutionary perspectives into their work, but many were cautious, and others were openly antagonistic. As would be expected in an emerging field such as the evolutionary study of religion, calls for more empirical and theory driven research were heard almost daily. Also heard were claims that religious scholarship has already produced an abundance of descriptive materials ready for evolutionary analyses and available to test rival theories. However that debate is decided, all would agree that the number of exciting studies and promising theories presented each day of the conference was impressive.

A fourth group of participants contributed to our understanding of the implications of evolutionary research to practical, political, and spiritual life. These individuals were interested in the future of religion, including its impact on sustainable development, the role that evolutionary science can play in the spiritual transformations of contemporary religions, and the dynamic relationship between humanism and religion. For those of us with our heads buried in research, it was refreshing to see how those outside the academy are interpreting, grappling with, and employing our findings.

As all participants will attest, the conference was physically and intellectually exhausting. There were more than 50 talks over five and half days, and no sessions were run in parallel. Sessions and workshops ran all morning and afternoon, and the daytime activities were capped off every evening with a distinguished plenary address.

Harvey Whitehouse (Oxford University) opened the conference on January 3, with a detailed overview of cognitive and evolutionary studies of religion. He carefully laid out the major issues confronting evolutionary studies of religion, summarizing the leading hypotheses, assessing the current state of understanding, and presenting critical methodological and empirical questions future research must address. The next morning we began the first full day of the conference. By lunchtime we had considered several scenarios for the evolution of religion and initiated discussions about whether religion is adaptive. That evening, noted historian and religious studies scholar, Luther Martin (University of Vermont and ICC, Queens University Belfast), delivered an impassioned and illuminating attack on evolutionary analyses of religion. He thoroughly outlined the concerns that evolutionary scientists

must deal with and resolve if evolutionary studies of religion are to successfully impact traditional historical scholarship. His talk stimulated equally impassioned discussion and debate.

The second full day of the conference focused on the adaptive benefits of supernatural beliefs, commitments, and practices. We also considered the application of signaling and sexual selection theories for understanding the evolution of religion. In the evening, Anne Taves (UC Santa Barbara) directed our attention to under-examined questions about cognition and the body, the construction of the self through narratives, and the role of “religious experience” in religious life. Taves urged that the “*sui generis*” model of this category impairs scientific progress. In its place, Taves motivated an “attributive model of religious experience.” Successful re-introduction of “religious experience” to naturalistic approaches appears to provide one of the more promising horizons for scientific exploration.

The third full day of the conference focused on cognitive research in the evolutionary study of religion, including new experimental and observational studies. Renowned philosopher Daniel Dennett (Tufts University) was the evening speaker. Dennett reinforced an important theme of the conference, namely that the intergenerational flow of information is not restricted to lineages of genes. He also presented an account for the taming of wild religion, urging that substantive transformations in the nature of religious information occurred during the major transition from foraging to agrarian and urban lifeways. Dennett’s talk generated a spirited discussion on many fronts, about the utility of memetics for understanding the evolution of religion, the relationship between evolutionary research on religion and the lay public, as well the relationship between evolutionary researchers and their (religious) study populations.

On the penultimate day of the conference, we focused on the transmission of religious concepts and the narratives through which religion is understood. We also looked at the function of supernatural concepts and practices through the study of religious brains. That evening, North America’s ‘evolutionary evangelist’, the Rev. Michael Dowd, shared his experience of teaching and preaching a sacred, meaningful view of cosmic, biological, and human evolution. He offered a possible solution to the dead-end debates between theists and atheists, and argued that evolutionary theory may be essential for a deeply inspired life. It was a rare meeting between academic and religious worlds, for both audience and speaker. Despite having delivered hundreds of talks to secular and religious audiences across the theological spectrum, this was Dowd’s first presentation to an academic audience.

We closed the conference by addressing foundational questions about the naturalistic study of religion, as well as questions about the economic,

spiritual, and political benefits and costs of religious belief and practice. Biologist and religious scholar, Jeffrey Schloss (Westmont College), closed the conference by detailing the various threads of argumentation linking naturalistic (generally functionalist) inquiry about religion to wider theological questions. Schloss also used the example of laughter—which he skillfully induced frequently in his audience—to illustrate an important theme of the conference: the role of commitment signals in authenticating genuine religious commitments. The talk stimulated much discussion over the relationship of religious commitment to science and morality, the reliability of religious signaling, and the role of religious feeling in its evolutionary history.

In addition to the research sessions and evening talks, there were three scheduled afternoon workshops aimed at assessing recent advances in the evolutionary study of religion, and setting an agenda for areas of progress and integration. The three sessions were distinguished by their focus on anthropology, psychology, and overall reactions to the evolutionary study of religion. Popular demand initiated a fourth workshop on group selection and cultural evolution, which was gratefully organized by David Sloan Wilson (SUNY Binghamton) and Peter Richerson (UC Davis). This workshop afforded an opportunity for conference participants to ask questions about selectionist theories and their application to the study of religion.

There were numerous healthy debates that permeated discussions throughout the conference. One of the most constructive debates concerned whether or not religion should be considered an adaptation or a by-product. While no consensus was reached in this debate, various positions were clearly articulated, and future research that will be necessary to resolve this issue was discussed. There were also sustained discussions on the applicability of various evolutionary models to religious phenomena, including sexual selection and signaling models, cultural group selection, and meme theory. One of the livelier debates centered on defining religion, and the claim that if we cannot define it, then it is incoherent to claim we can develop its evolutionary study, for there is no stable “it” to study.

This volume offers many of the excellent talks that were presented in Hawaii. Chapters are intentionally short, at least shorter than the authors would have wished. Our task was to keep the volume affordable, while capturing the full range of conference presentations. Nevertheless, we are impressed by the clarity, scope, and precision consistently displayed throughout this volume. During the conference there were significant theoretical and methodological disagreements among scholars, but we think that all would agree that the new interdisciplinary study of evolution and religion is off to an outstanding start, and its future looks very promising. We hope this volume attests to that.

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