



Farewell, old syllabus!

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Farewell, old syllabus!

The title of this editorial was the subject line of an email one of us, Sosis, recently received from Benjamin Purzycki, a former graduate student, and now associate professor of religion at Aarhus University. The message contained a photo scan of a syllabus that Sosis had used for a graduate course entitled “Evolution of Religion.” The syllabus was from 2008.

After many years without teaching responsibilities—the blessing of scholarly life at the Max Planck Institute—Purzycki is returning to a regular teaching routine. Evidently, however, he won’t need the guidance of syllabi from his graduate school coursework. He is right of course; evolutionary religious studies is a progressive science and an 11-year old syllabus is hopelessly dated. But before tossing the syllabus into the dustbin, we thought it might be worthwhile to use this relic as a touchstone for reflection. What were we, as teachers in an emerging academic field, teaching our students in 2008? What were we debating and discovering? How have these debates progressed?

Before addressing these questions, a little context seems appropriate. After all, in 2008 Gmail was still in its testing phase and the iPhone was celebrating its first birthday; in other words, the world has changed quite a bit since then. For the evolutionary study of religion, 2008 was a heady time. The previous year Armin Geertz, Joseph Bulbulia, and Richard Sosis co-organized a week-long conference in Hawaii that brought together many of the leading scholars engaged in researching the origins and evolution of religion. This conference, the *International Conference on the Evolution of Religion (ICER)*, did not inaugurate the evolutionary science of religion, but it did mark the field’s arrival as a serious area of inquiry (Sosis & Bulbulia, 2008). The number of prominent scientists and religious studies scholars who attended the conference suggested to all observers that this young area of study had a very promising future and the following year—the year of the syllabus—the conference proceedings were published as *The Evolution of Religion: Studies, Theories, and Critiques* (Bulbulia et al., 2008). Following *ICER*, Patrick McNamara, Wesley Wildman, and Sosis began to discuss the need to develop a new journal for our fledgling field. For the three of us, the cofounders of what eventually became *Religion, Brain & Behavior*, 2008 might best be described as “the year of rejection letters.” It was in that year that we received the first of many rejection letters as we tried to convince publisher after publisher to take a chance on this curious topic—the biocultural study of religion—and the equally curious collection of diverse scholars that constituted our field.

This was the setting. So, what were we talking about in 2008 that has since dropped off our radar? What was the long-forgotten rage of that time? The syllabus points to two topics. First, we evidently used to spend a lot of time pointlessly debating about whether religion is an adaptation or a byproduct. For those who were with us in 2008, we can feel your smirks. For those who were not with us, a brief and simplified refresher is in order. In the 2000s, cognitive scientists of religion had argued that religion was a byproduct of cognitive mechanisms that had evolved for functions other than religion (e.g., Barrett, 2004; Boyer, 2001); most evolutionary scholars, on the other hand, argued that religion likely had significant adaptive consequences (e.g., Bulbulia, 2004; Irons, 2001; Sosis, 2003; Wilson, 2002). This debate had the characteristics of many academic debates: poorly defined terms (religion, adaptation, byproduct, exaptation, etc.), lack of clarity about the object of study (cognitive mechanisms, behavioral patterns, religious systems, etc.), a paucity of data on both sides of the debate, and differing theoretical and methodological orientations with a history of talking past each other (cognitive science/evolutionary psychology versus evolutionary biology/behavioral ecology; see Sosis, 2009).

This debate did not end in 2008, but commonsense ultimately prevailed. The debate was not stimulating valuable research—just page after page of animated hand-waving—and researchers eventually turned their attention toward what we should have been spending energy on all along: data collection. Debates about the selective processes operating on religious phenotypes have continued, but these conversations are more informed, interesting, and nuanced. For example, in this issue we offer a book symposium (commentaries and author response) on Turner, Maryanski, Petersen, and Geertz's *The Emergence and Evolution of Religion* (2018). This book explores a variety of selective mechanisms (Darwinian, Spencerian, Durkheimian, and Marxian selection) that, the authors argue, have shaped the evolution of religion. Relatedly, and also in this issue, in “The Cultural Evolution of Institutional Religions” Michael Vlerick proposes a cultural group selection model to explain the intragroup dynamics that influence the evolution of religion.

The other 2008 “hot” debate now rarely discussed concerned how to position the biocultural study of religion in relation to two books that had been recently published by academic superstars: Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006) and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2006). The mimetic theories advocated by both of these authors, where minds are infected by self-protecting religious ideas, have not garnered much interest from the field. Cognitivists (Atran, 2001; Sperber, 2000) as well as cultural evolutionists (Henrich, Boyd, & Richerson, 2008) are skeptical of such theories and there has been little active research that distinguishes mimetic predictions from hypotheses derived from other evolutionary and cognitive theories of religion. Most of the attention these books received concerned their anti-religious stance and the biocultural study of religion actively debated how our work was contributing to the public discourse on religion.

These books, especially *Breaking the Spell*, also sought to stimulate scientific research on religion. Of course decades of quantitative sociological and psychological research on religion preceded the publication of these books—much of it ignored by Dawkins and Dennett—but there is no doubt that the pace of scientific research on religion grew exponentially following their publication. We are not claiming that Dennett and Dawkins caused this growth, but their books were certainly one of the many contributing factors in the development of our field, even if they are rarely discussed as such these days. Moreover, we can still see traces of their arguments in research today. For example, Dawkins and Dennett were quite critical of what they saw as hypocrisy in religion; inconsistencies between professed beliefs and actual behavior. In this issue, philosopher Neil Levy explores precisely this topic in “Belie the Belief? Prompts and Default States,” although the moral overtones of *The God Delusion* and *Breaking the Spell* are absent. Levy, focusing on the interesting question of why we observe inconsistencies between professed beliefs and religious behaviors, argues that they are not regulated by the same underlying mechanisms, hence the common mismatch.

The syllabus can also help us reflect on the directions that different research areas in the biocultural study of religion have taken. HADD and MCI Theory were significant topics in 2008, but their importance in the field is waning. This is not to say that these research areas have completely died out, but these theories have not sustained enduring research programs. The attention these theories have received in recent literature has been primarily critical (e.g., Andersen, 2019; Purzycki & Willard, 2016; Van Leeuwen & van Elk, 2019). Other topics, such as afterlife beliefs and theological correctness, originally bolstered by the pioneering work of Bering (2006) and Barrett (1999), have also been less prominent in the literature.

Other topics from the syllabus, however, are flourishing. For example, supernatural punishment theory has continued to inspire research over the intervening years (e.g., Johnson, 2016), including impressive phylogenetic analyses (Watts et al., 2015). Another example is signaling theory, which continues to evoke debate and produce compelling research (Barker, Power, Heap, Puurtinen, & Sosis, 2019), such as Elly Power's exceptional studies in South India (Power, 2017a, 2017b). Cultural evolutionary extensions of signaling theory that explain the social learning mechanisms involved in the transmission of religious signals have particularly garnered attention. For example, in this issue Langston et al. employ the CREDs model in order to predict age of atheism in a worldwide sample.

Related to both signaling and supernatural punishment theories is the topic that has unequivocally stimulated the most research attention since 2008: religious prosociality. In 2008, Ara Norenzayan and his student Azim Shariff were leading the way on this topic (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), and they continue to do so. Over the past decade, teaming up with Ted Slingerland and Joseph Henrich, these scholars and their collaborators on the CERC project have repeatedly produced high-profile research (e.g., Norenzayan et al., 2016; Purzycki et al., 2016; also see *RBB* issue 2 of 2018). As with most high-profile research, this work has incited considerable debate, but at least these days we are debating about analyses and the interpretation of *bodies* of data—rather than one or two studies. In our estimation, these are productive scientific debates that will be resolved with evidence, and their liveliness and public nature is testament to the strength of the field.

Looking ahead, how do we envisage our syllabi ten years from now? In the 2008 syllabus, Sosis devoted a week to demographic questions, but back then evolutionary demography was also in its early stages, and studies about the evolutionary demography of religious populations were years away. Demographic questions, however, are fundamental to understanding the adaptive consequences of religion. In a decade, if not sooner, we hope to have more demographic data on the reproductive decisions of religious families, as well as data on how large families are supported and sustained in religious communities. Several recent publications suggest that interest in this area is increasing (Shaver, 2017; Shaver, Sibley, Sosis, Galbraith, & Bulbulia, 2019), so we look forward incorporating such studies into our future syllabi.

We also hope to see better integration with humanities approaches within the academic study of religion (Lang & Kundt, 2020; McNamara, Sosis, & Wildman, 2011; Sosis, 2019). Our relations with what some would consider our parent field have not been easy. The traditional subdisciplines of religious studies and the biocultural study of religion continue to miss opportunities to learn from each other. Outside of Denmark, New Zealand, and a few other programs, most religious studies departments do not teach evolutionary approaches to religion. We hope that our future syllabi have many more articles and books exemplifying fruitful collaborations between scientists and traditional scholars of religion.

The biocultural study of religion is also missing opportunities to work with public health and medical researchers. The 2008 syllabus included a week that explored the relationship between religion and health, as evolutionary scholars recognized that religion's purported impact on health had adaptive consequences (Bulbulia, 2006). Health research on religion and spirituality, however, is rarely informed by evolutionary theories of religion and only a few scholars from the biocultural study of religion have sought to bridge these fields (e.g., Cohen & Johnson, 2017).

Methodologically, we hope for more studies like Holbrook et al.'s clever experiment published in this issue of *RBB*. In "Perceived Supernatural Support Heightens Battle Confidence: A Knife Combat Field Study," Holbrook et al. report on an experiment where participants were initially primed with a guided visualization aimed at eliciting supernatural aid. Participants then realistically simulated a knife battle. (We strongly encourage you to read the article, but if nothing else, check out the pictures!) Beyond novel psychological lab experiments, we hope our syllabi are filled with studies by computer modelers, archaeologists, and ethnographers, all of which were absent from the 2008 syllabus. The former seems the most likely as recent forays into simulating religion have thus far offered unexpected and insightful results (e.g., Diallo, Wildman, Shults, & Tolk, 2019). The biocultural study of religion has made fewer inroads into archaeology (but see Whitehouse & Hodder, 2010) and traditional ethnography, but we are not alone in pointing out these deficiencies in the field (e.g., Purzycki & Watts, 2018).

Whatever our syllabi look like a decade from now, we are confident that the biocultural study of religion will continue to progress at the rapid pace we have witnessed since 2008. We would like to think that *RBB* will continue to contribute to this progress.

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