

BOOK REVIEW

The Attraction of Religion: A New Evolutionary Psychology of Religion, edited by Jason D. Slone and James A. Van Slyke. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. xvi, 252 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1350005280

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In the science fiction film *Ex Machina*, a programmer is invited by his multi-millionaire boss to be the jury of a Turing Test, and determine if a new artificial intelligence machine can emulate the human mind. As is well-known, the Turing Test consists of a blind interrogation, a rational and intellectual process of assessment. *Ex Machina* adds one more variable to the test. The male programmer does not face a cold hardwired machine, but an attractive female robot, with a tender and sensitive personality. *Ex Machina* adds sexuality to the Turing Test, something usually underplayed in cognitive science.

Since the beginning of the cognitive revolution, the computer has been considered the model *par excellence* of the human mind. The metaphor of mind as computer implied the exclusion of warm and contextual aspects, such as emotions and culture. This reduction was a necessary first step to start a new approach to the study of the mind, without getting lost in the vast complexity that it involves. In recent decades, however, cognitive science has expanded the initially cold and intellectual computer model to include warm and contextual factors: emotions, cultural narratives, embodiment, distributed cognition, social cognition, and sexuality. The Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) is part of this change. The CSR is concerned with different innovative topics, but what is usually missing is sexuality. Jason Slone and James Van Slyke's book, *The Attraction of Religion: A New Evolutionary Psychology of Religion*, is a kind of *Ex Machina* moment for the CSR. It collects articles from scholars (mostly) interested in sexual selection theory.

A main concern in the CSR is the relation between natural, cognitive dispositions and culturally learned beliefs and behaviors. In short, what is the relation between culture and cognition? Are there natural aspects of the mind that underlie the universality of religion? Or is religion only a learned behavior, and the mind a kind of *tabula rasa* absorbing cultural data? The foundational models of the CSR confronted the *tabula rasa* model of mainstream social sciences, identifying cognitive mechanisms that may play an important role in the emergence and propagation of religion: our cognitive bias in agency detection, the memorability of minimal counterintuitiveness aspects of religious ideas, ritual as an action-representation system, and others.

The same problems between nature and culture can be identified in the case of sexuality, and the natural predispositions it involves. In Chapter 1, “Why Don’t Abstinence Education Programs Work?”, Van Slyke analyses mating strategies as a cognitive natural domain that influences religion. Using the example of Abstinence-only programs in the U.S., the author describes how individuals get involved in religious institutions in accordance with certain mating strategies. So maybe it is not the influence of religion that usually promotes long-term mating strategies, but the other way around. In a similar way, using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth of 1997 in the U.S., Jason Weeden (Chapter 4, “Losing My Religion”) proposes a reproductive religiosity model, where individuals get involved in religious practice if it serves certain reproductive strategies related to high-commitment and high-fertility lifestyles.

Another influential approach in the CSR considers religion as a set of costly signaling behaviors used to display social commitment and cooperation. In sexual selection theory, the problem is reframed in terms of religion as signals used for different reproductive problems, such as attracting mates, ensuring paternity certainty, and encouraging parental investment. Such a take on signaling makes perfect sense since signaling theory has been partly developed by evolutionary biologists in the framework of the study of sexual selection. In Chapter 2, “Religion and Parental Cooperation,” Bulbulia and collaborators test Slone’s sexual signaling model, where sexual behavior is considered to be a special case of a cooperation dilemma, and religion is considered to be a device to attract new mates. The authors use the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study, and find supportive evidence for two traits: prayer as a signal of fidelity in women, and church attendance as a signal of social reputation in men. In Chapter 5, “Costly Signalling Theory, Sexual Selection, and the Influence of Ancestors on Religious Behaviour,” Palmer and Begley criticize some core aspects of costly signaling theory, mainly the idea that religious practice does not benefit the participants in the short term, but does so in the long term. The authors describe how in some cases, religious behavior never pays off, if we consider the lifetime of the altruist. As an alternative solution, they propose a descendant-leaving hypothesis, considering the benefits in terms of cultural tradition and its influence in the many generations after the individual’s lifetime. Chapter 7, “The Dividends of Discounting Pain,” analyzes self-harm as a public display. Using the Human Relation Area Files Database, Matthew Martinez and Pierre Lienard propose that this kind of practice appears often in weakly centralized socio-political systems. In this context, low-status young males participate in self-harming rituals to show fearlessness, fierceness, and resoluteness, and to gain reputation, economic opportunities, and reproductive fitness.

Other chapters of the book address the role of sexual selection in the origins of religion. In Chapter 3, “How Is’t With Thy Religion, Pray?” Michael Blume analyzes the connections between religion, reproductive strategies, and social cooperation. Using different sociological, psychological, historical, and archaeological evidence, the author proposes that females played an important role in the origins of religion and cooperation. David Bell (Chapter 9, “Fathering, Rituals, and Mating”) analyzes the role of paternal care in *Homo sapiens*, and how it could be connected to religion. The author describes religious rituals as a male’s conspicuous plumage composed by “cognitive plumes” (e.g., mnemonic abilities) and “social plumes” (e.g., social reputation). He also considers ritual as a cultural construction that supports structures for paternal bonding.

Chapter 6, “When Religion Makes It Worse: Religiously Motivated Violence as a Sexual Selection Weapon,” addresses the relationship between human violence and religiosity. Sela, Shackelford, and Liddle, analyze religious violence as the behavioral output of evolved psychological mechanisms designed to solve particular adaptive problems. For example, male sexual jealousy and violence against women can be associated with the evolutionary problem of the fitness cost of being victimized by cuckoldry. This natural disposition influences religious practices and norms that support gender violence (e.g., honor killing, wife-beating).

Two chapters of the book do not specifically address the relationship between sexuality and religion, but other topics of importance to the CSR. In chapter 10, “The Evolutionary Psychology of Theology,” Andrew Mahoney proposes that theological knowledge is a sign of commitment and cooperation. Chapter 8, “False Advertising: The Attractiveness of Religion as a Moral Brand,” offers a harsh criticism of the theories of religion and prosociality. Panagiotis Mitkidis and Gabriel Levy describe the prosociality hypothesis as being based on anecdotal evidence and self-report studies, and explain how religions brand themselves as moral centers, monopolizing morality.

In summary, Jason Slone and James Van Slyke’s book is an excellent introduction to a novel approach to religion. The inclusion of sexuality in the CSR and religious studies is an important contribution. It allows us to better understand different phenomena related to religion and sexuality, ranging from behaviors widely accepted as normal, such as mate selection, parental investment, and the search for reputation, to problematic ones, such as sexual violence, homophobia, and child abuse.