

Editorial

Evolutionary Theories of Religion

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Welcome to this issue on evolutionary theories of religion. There is probably no theme that is more fundamental and salient for our readers than the emergence and evolution of religion. And, yet, it is one of the most contested and controversial topics. On the one hand, we receive new data and new insights every day in sciences ranging from evolutionary biology, paleontology and genetics to primatology, ethology, anthropology and history. On the other hand, the more data we compile, the more knowledge we gain, the harder it is to make sense of it all. Perhaps one of the most important lessons to be learned from working with this vast topic is that no one discipline can deal with it satisfactorily on its own. No one hypothesis, no magic bullet will bring us closer to the emergence and evolution not only of religion but also of cognition, society and culture.

As indicated by Figure 1, there is an exponential increase in the conceptual association between “religion” and “evolution” over the past 40 years. Since 1990, cognitive scientists of religion have joined the ranks of scholars developing hypotheses about the emergence and evolution of religion. What is it about religious ideas and behaviors that has ensured the vitality and endurance of religion?

We will not repeat the main CSR hypotheses here. Others have done so elsewhere (cf. Geertz 2013, 2015). Nor is there space for a systematic review of the literature. Just a few recent titles will be mentioned as illustrations of the dynamics of the field. CSR scholars have made significant contributions to this field, such as Ara Norenzayan’s *Big Gods* (2013) and Joseph Henrich’s *The Secret of Our Success* (2016). CSR scholar Radek Kundt published a sustained critique of various evolutionary approaches to religion in his book *Contemporary Evolutionary Theories of Culture and the Study of Religion* (2015). A number of anthologies have appeared

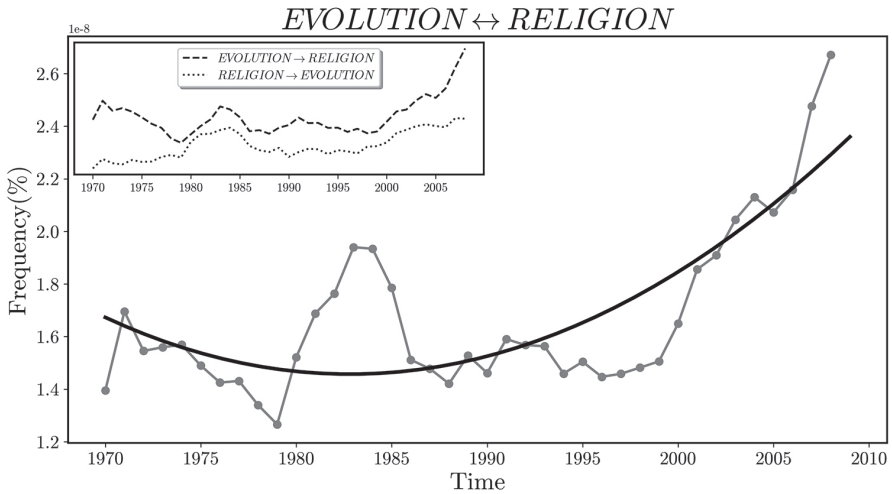


Figure 1 Empirical probability of the association between “evolution” and “religion” in the Google Books database from 1970–2010. In the embedded plot (upper left) the dashed line represents the probability that ‘religion’ will occur in a text once “evolution” has occurred, that is $P(\text{religion}|\text{evolution})$, and the dotted line represents the probability that “evolution” will occur when “religion” has occurred, that is $P(\text{evolution}|\text{religion})$. The main plot summarizes the development of the terms’ collocation with their joined probability (gray) and quadratic fit (black) to illustrate the exponential trend.

by CSR scholars such as D. Jason Slone and James A. Van Slyke’s volume *The Attraction of Religion* (2015) and Armin W. Geertz’s *Origins of Religion, Cognition and Culture* (2013).

Scholars from other disciplines have emphasized the need for interdisciplinary approaches to this theme. Biologist Jay R. Feierman’s anthology *The Biology of Religious Behavior* (2009) and biologist Jeffery Schloss and philosopher Michael Murray’s anthology *The Believing Primate* (2009) come to mind. German philosopher Ulrich Frey’s anthology *The Nature of God* (2010) also attempts to bring philosophers together with psychologists and biologists. It should be noted that CSR scholars figure prominently in all of these volumes.

Many others have made important contributions to the discussion. Archaeologists such as David Lewis-Williams’ *Conceiving God* (2010) and Ian Hodder’s anthology *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization* (2010), scholars of religion such as Ina Wunn and Davina Grojnowski’s *Ancestors, Territoriality, and*

Gods (2016), philosophers of religion Loyl Rue's *Religion Is Not about God* (2005) and Robert Wright's *The Evolution of God* (2009), biologist and psychologist Robert A. Hinde's *Why Gods Persist* (2010), CSR scholar Todd Tremlin's *Minds and Gods* (2006) and theologians Fraser Watts and Léon Turner's anthology *Evolution, Religion, and Cognitive Science* (2014) are just a few examples. There are many other studies on cognition and culture that are highly relevant, and indeed crucial, to our understanding of the emergence and evolution of religion. We have only mentioned those book publications that directly address the evolution of religion.

A discipline that is too often ignored in discussions on the emergence and evolution of religion is sociology. In spite of the fact that sociologists have been consistently preoccupied with social evolution ever since the end of the nineteenth century, much of the above-mentioned literature ignores sociology. This is somewhat peculiar since religion is a social institution that has evolved hand in hand with other social institutions. Our focus in the CSR has directly or indirectly been determined by psychology with the result that we too often see scholars drawing far-reaching conclusions based on individual psychology to explain the evolution of complex religions and societies. Recently sociologists have attempted to draw attention to this gap and encourage biologists, psychologists, historians and scholars of religion to examine the wide range of sociological theories that are highly relevant to any discussion of the emergence and evolution of religion. Sociologists Rodney Stark's *Discovering God* (2007) and Robert Bellah's *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011) were two such attempts. A recent book, *The Emergence and Evolution of Religion* (2018), co-authored by sociologist Robert H. Turner, anthropologist Alexandra Maryanski, historian of religion Anders Klostergaard Petersen and CSR scholar Armin W. Geertz attempted to redress this lacuna in research on the evolution of religion.

This volume presents a target article by Robert H. Turner in which he describes how sociological theories can contribute to an explanation of the emergence and evolution of religion, from the first simian proclivities to the fully developed, institutionalized religions of today. We have invited a number of CSR scholars to respond to the article and reflect on how sociological theory can enrich and enlighten CSR theories as well as the other way around. We hope that our readers will agree that this is an exciting and much-needed discussion.

This volume concludes with an empirical article pre-published on our website by Tyler S. Greenway titled "Mentalizing Domains and Belief in God," a topic highly relevant to the on-going debate on domains, belief and evolution.

We hope that you will enjoy the articles.

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