
Religion Evolving is a superb volume for anyone interested in evolution and religion, whether they are new to the field or a seasoned scholar wanting to keep up to date with the most current research. Though intended for an academic audience, the prose is not over-burdened with terms of art, making it accessible to even high-level undergraduates. I will recapitulate two specific arguments the authors make, illustrate how they are emblematic of the book’s wider aims, and end with some critical reflection.

Purzycki and Sosis’s intervention targets two theories of religion: by-product theories and minimally counterintuitive idea (MCI) theories. The first argues that religion per se is not fitness enhancing. Rather, religious phenomena piggy-back off other fitness-enhancing traits. Justin Barrett’s (2004) analysis of agency detection is representative of such approaches. On this theory, hyperactive agency detection (HAAD) is fitness-enhancing since it makes us more alert to environmental threats. This predisposes humans to religious beliefs in invisible, supernatural agents. But these beliefs themselves are not adaptive; they are just a by-product. MCI theories (Boyer 2001) also argue religious concepts are by-products of human saliency networks. Because religious ideas are minimally counterintuitive, they grab our attention while remaining comprehensible. They are, thus, more likely to proliferate.

Purzycki and Sosis take both these theories to task for failing to account for the particularity of religious phenomena. True, HAAD may explain the human tendency to believe in invisible agents. But religious supernatural agents are not just invisible. Purzycki and Sosis demonstrate that such agents are also concerned with societal structures that ensure its smooth functioning, such as moral compulsion and strategic use of resources. Shared belief in these agents thus coerce prosocial behavior, for fear of their retribution. Purzycki and Sosis, therefore, argue religious beliefs are fitness-enhancing, since they are instrumental in group cohesion (pp. 70—81).

Likewise, Purzycki and Sosis note that MCI theories lack specificity. MCI predicts that ideas are counterintuitive relative to hardwired, evolved cognitive mechanisms. These intuitive mechanisms are distinct from learned schemas, which can be culturally specific and are not pan-human. But Purzycki and Sosis point out that studies claiming to substantiate MCI fail to adequately differentiate between what is counterintuitive and what is merely counterschematic. Purzycki and Sosis thus argue that being counterschematic is more likely responsible for the saliency
of religious ideas (pp. 96—101). Furthermore, counterschematic ideas contribute to fitness-enhancing sociability, since expressing such ideas signal belonging and group membership (pp. 115).

In tandem, these two interventions represent the larger goal of Religion Evolving. Both (contra by-product approaches) theorize religion as a ‘Complex Adaptive System’ in Chapter 9. Some theorists have argued religion is not adaptive (Atran 2004). Others argue that it is downright maladaptive (Dawkins and Dennett 2016). But in light of continued evidence demonstrating religion’s role in strengthening group identity—e.g., American political identity (Nortey 2021a; 2021b; G. A. Smith 2021b; G. A. Smith 2021a)—as well as the direct effect of group cohesion on fitness (Wilson 2007), it appears difficult to deny religion’s adaptivity to group selection pressures. Religion Evolving offers an additional body of evidence to this effect.

But Purzycki and Sosis (pp. 15—19) are expansive in their understanding of adaptation, resisting (contra both HADD and MCI theories) a certain ‘biologization’ of evolution. HADD and MCI both ground adaptive traits in innate biological structures—specifically, hardwired cognitive mechanisms. Purzycki and Sosis counter that religious phenomena are adaptive relative to different cultural environments and that each environment results from a local ‘ontogenetic process’. This means that shared human biology is not the sole determinate of fitness. Evolution is therefore not simply a biological response to selective pressures. It also creates various ecologies that engender their own unique selective pressures guiding evolution. The Dialectical Biologist (Levins and Lewontin 2009: 45—46) made this insight almost 40 years ago and still has yet to hold its due sway. Religion Evolving is a much-needed corrective in this regard.

In rare instances, however, Purzycki and Sosis fail to appreciate the full ramifications of their own insight. For example, they discuss the fitness of marital institutions, arguing they stabilize societies against the threat of partner inequity by preventing the hoarding of sexual resources (pp. 40—41). Purzycki and Sosis proceed to offer ‘ample evidence for the relationship between religion and monogamous sexual behavior’, citing that religious adherents are more likely to get married, have fewer partners, lower rates of premarital sex, higher marital satisfaction, and fewer affairs (p. 41). In sum, Purzycki and Sosis contend these findings give preliminary evidence that religion facilitates ‘positive mating outcomes’ (p. 41).

Implicitly, the argument appears to be that the factors that made marriage adaptive—the need for societal stability—are also responsible for partner satisfaction. Religion incentivizes monogamous marriage, which stabilizes society, which makes people happier. This argument is consistent with Purzycki and Sosis’s functionalist-favoring approach. However, following the insight that culture is not just the result of environmental selective pressures, but creative of selective pressures, functionalist explanations are necessarily contextual. When we speak about adaptations, we need to be specific about the environments within which such features are adaptive.

In the case of marriage, therefore, I question if increased monogamous partner satisfaction is necessarily an extension of increased societal stability. Instead, this satisfaction may derive from the cultural environment that already assumes monogamy as a norm. In other words, married couples are happier because their chosen partnership modality is more socially accepted and grants more social privileges (Hori and Kamo 2018; Vanassche, Swicegood, and Matthijs 2013; Lee and
Ono 2012). Thus, although one context—the economic reality of limited sexual resources—guarantees that monogamy promotes stability, another—the cultural context that normalizes marriage—increases the probability that monogamy is hedonically advantageous.

It may appear as if I am carping, but nuancing functionalist explanations for contextual sensitivity has important ramifications. Namely, it prevents such explanations from succumbing to a naturalist fallacy. If we forget context, we might think that some feature, like marriage, is a natural good, that its hedonic benefit is a result of its adaptation to inextricable, economic realities. This prematurely conflates functionalism with normativity. It confuses an explanation of cultural norms—its stabilizing effect—for a normative account of a utilitarian ilk, insinuating that marital happiness is a sign of marriage’s ability to combat the inherent inequities and ‘brutishness’ of the state of nature. Given current political trends—as well as the historic pervasion of the theory of evolution into Social Darwinism—scholars have a responsibility to preemptively resist normativizing leaps. They must make sure their arguments are not easily coopted toward the naturalization of culturally circumscribed values, which is often weaponized toward an intolerance of non-traditional lifestyles.

My criticism here is minor, even if, as I contend, it has larger stakes. Overall, it is a small blight on what is an important contribution to both the study of religion as well as to evolutionary psychology. I do have a final organizational point. Early in their book, Purzycki and Sosis suggest religion is an extended phenotype, much like beaver dams. ‘While lakes and dams are made of water and wood respectively, religions are made of concepts, propositions, rules, narratives, artifacts, and behaviors’ (p. 10). However, I can point to water and wood to identify lakes and dams. But where do we point to identify religion? The term covers a large swathe of family resemblances, so much so that some religious studies scholars question if it refers to any clearly identifiable phenomenon at all (J. Z. Smith 1982: xi—xiii). Without this specificity, the argument for religion’s adaptivity becomes spurious, since any fitness-enhancing cultural trait could be deemed ‘religious’ arbitrarily. Purzycki and Sosis, however, do come to a detailed analysis of religion, but not until chapter 9. The reader would have benefited from this discussion earlier. I would recommend that future readers begin with that chapter before proceeding through the rest of the work.

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References


