



DIALOGUES

The evolutionary origins of religious behavior

JAMES W. DOW

Professor Emeritus of Anthropology
Oakland University (USA)
Email: dow@oakland.edu

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The questions asked by Saier and Trevors (2010) are being asked over and over again in a burgeoning body of literature (e.g. McNamara, 2006; Bulbulia et al., 2008; Feierman, 2009). It is a sign that the social sciences are striking out on a road that may eventually lead them to join the other sciences in a truly comprehensive understanding of human behavior. A significant step will be taken when the social sciences explain religion as product of natural selection. However, the journey has just begun, and there is a stumbling block on this road to knowledge. I shall concentrate my commentary on it, because it is fundamental.

The stumbling block is that human psychology cannot explain how religious behavior was selected. Human psychology is the result of the evolution of the human brain not the cause of that evolution. Human psychology did not cause religion to evolve. For example, the authors state that religion “provides answers to questions that many people ask,” but the kind of answers that religion provides seem to have little value for individual survival except for the comfort they provide, and that comfort comes from a brain that evolution provided. Humans value religion for a number of reasons, but they do so because their brains tell them to do it. The value of religion that they feel now has little to do with the way that religious behavior was selected in the past.

In other cases, teleological or Adaptationist arguments may provide direct insight into how natural selection worked in the past. Some peo-

ple have inherited a fear of snakes. Most people are fearful of heights. We can imagine situations in which these reactions were advantageous for the reproduction of those genes. However, religion seems to be in another category outside of Adaptationist reasoning. Although the authors stretch their Adaptationist arguments to the limit, their arguments and other psychological ones (e.g. Boyer, 1994; Atran, 2002; Kirkpatrick, 2005) leave us still at the doorstep of the solution to this conundrum.

Religious behavior is selected by means of social selection. Genes act on each other outside of a single individual. The genes in one individual select genes in another individual by promoting or restricting their fitness. For example, the genes that make people believe god exists when put together with genes that say that god commands goodness toward one another promotes group cooperation that can be beneficial. If the social order raises the overall fitness of a group, then whatever genes promote that social order will find greater reproduction. The authors suggest that “happiness” is a fitness benefit, but the real fitness benefit is the increased economic efficiency of group life that resulted in a greater reproduction of the genes. People feel happy because they are doing something that had reproductive benefits for genes in the past. Their brains are simply telling them that what they are doing now helped genes to reproduce in the past.

This new direction is somewhat anti-Darwinian, because Darwin saw natural selection as a competition between individual phenotypes, the survival of the fittest. From the point of view of social selection, evolution is more of an extragenomic system of cooperation than a competition between phenotypes. In social selection, genes in separate individuals cooperate in ways that they could not cooperate in a single individual. Thus, solving the mystery of religion will require theories that are more sophisticated than those that Darwin proposed.

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