



Wilson's 15-year-old cathedral

Richard Sosis, Uffe Schjoedt, Joseph Bulbulia & Wesley J. Wildman

To cite this article: Richard Sosis, Uffe Schjoedt, Joseph Bulbulia & Wesley J. Wildman (2017) Wilson's 15-year-old cathedral, Religion, Brain & Behavior, 7:2, 95-97, DOI: 10.1080/2153599X.2017.1314409

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2017.1314409>



Published online: 26 May 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Wilson's 15-year-old cathedral

The origins and history of the evolutionary study of religion are at best ambiguous. Though philosophers, such as David Hume, Auguste Comte, and Giambattista Vico, had written about how religions develop and change over time – that is, evolve – the evolutionary study of religion rightly begins with Charles Darwin. Darwin, after all, offered us mechanisms to explain evolutionary change.

Despite its illustrious founder, however, the beginnings of the evolutionary study of religion were not auspicious. In *Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871/2005), Darwin accurately described the psychology of religion as intricate: “the feeling of religious devotion is a highly complex one, consisting of love, complete submission to an exalted and mysterious superior, a strong sense of dependence, fear, reverence, gratitude, hope for the future, and perhaps other elements” (p. 679). Many of Darwin's successors have struggled to match his keen awareness that the psychology of religion is knotty, multi-dimensional, and heterogeneous. However, Darwin failed to appreciate that religion presents evolutionary problems; rather, Darwin claimed that religion is virtually inevitable in an intelligent, imaginative, and questioning species such as ours:

As soon as the important faculties of the imagination, wonder, and curiosity, together with some power of reasoning, had become partially developed, man would naturally crave to understand what was passing around him, and would have vaguely speculated on his own existence. (p. 678)

In other words, Darwin supposed that once the human mind evolved, the human need for answers to existential problems would inevitably lead to the complexity of religious beliefs.

Reading some of Darwin's comments on religion is a mildly disturbing experience for those of us who hold Darwin as one of our intellectual heroes, because we see the evolutionary problems in evolving, maintaining, and transmitting religious beliefs and practices. How could Darwin, who was so careful in his analyses of the hundreds of species he discussed throughout his writings, completely miss that the structure and form of religion cry out for explanation? Simply contemplating one's existence does not lead one to build ornate cathedrals, undergo circumcision, forgo sex, or turn one's dinner into charcoal for beings that have never been seen before. And as anthropologists have long noted, unlike typical explanations, which seek to clarify and simplify, religious explanations make things more complicated. As anthropologist Dan Sperber observes, religions create “relevant mysteries” (1985, p. 85). Darwin was correct that humans do gravitate toward religious explanations, but he does not seem to have appreciated how puzzling this was. As Hume famously commented, “explanation is where the mind rests”; but Darwin got us no further in understanding why the human mind so often rests on religious explanations.

Following Darwin, how did the evolutionary study of religion proceed? Well, very slowly with some notable wrong turns, such as the work of Social Darwinists, would be the fairest assessment. Nonetheless, Darwin did have an early positive impact on the study of religion, including the work of William James. In 1909, Jane Ellen Harrison, British scholar of Greek religion and founder of the modern academic study of Greek mythology, published a book chapter entitled “The Influence of Darwinism on the Study of Religion.” Evidently, she had wished to entitle her chapter “The Creation by Darwinism of the Scientific Study of Religion,” but she was hesitant to overstate her case.

Harrison was a brilliant scholar, but nearly a full century passed after Darwin's initial thoughts on religion before another biologist would seriously engage with the study of religion. That biologist was

a marine biologist, Oxford Professor Sir Alister Hardy. Hardy is most famous, or more accurately, infamous, for his aquatic ape hypothesis, but he also had a deep interest in religion. He was invited to give the Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen University in 1963–4 and 1964–5 and he devoted these lectures to an evolutionary understanding of religion. Hardy was impressed by the universality of religious experience and proposed that religion evolved because it was favored by natural selection. Hardy's lectures were published in two volumes, regrettably entitled *The Living Stream* (1965) and *The Divine Flame* (1966). With such titles, these works were probably shelved next to books on new age spirituality and, not surprisingly, largely forgotten. Although Hardy founded the Religious Experience Research Centre, for which he was awarded the Templeton Prize in 1985, his work did not jumpstart the still embryonic evolutionary study of religion.

A decade later, the evolutionary study of religion began to show some signs of life. The eminent Harvard entomologist, E.O. Wilson, devoted a chapter to religion in his award-winning volume *On Human Nature* (1978). Wilson proposed that successful religions are those that enhanced the survivorship and reproduction of populations. Motivated by Wilson's writings, biological anthropologist Vernon Reynolds and sociologist Ralph Tanner collaborated on an innovative study entitled *The Biology of Religion* (1983). Reynolds and Tanner argued that religion was a "handbook of parental investment." They showed that in economically poor environments, where populations experienced high mortality rates, religions were generally pro-natalist, whereas in areas of greater health and wealth, religions were anti-natalist. Their findings were important because they suggested that religion was not irrational or impervious to external forces such as economics and the environment; rather, religions seem to fit well with their local ecologies. Indeed, Reynolds and Tanner retitled the revised version of their book *The Social Ecology of Religion* (1995).

The rest of the 1980s and most of the 1990s remained notably stagnant for the evolutionary study of religion. But by the mid to late 1990s the avalanche began and suddenly a spate of books and articles from well-known academics employed evolutionary thinking to understand religion. For example, in 1993 anthropologist Stewart Guthrie published his landmark volume *Faces in the Clouds*. Renowned scholar of Greek religion and myth, Walter Burkert, examined Greek religion through a Darwinian lens in *The Creation of the Sacred* (1996), and another prominent scholar, Cambridge zoologist Robert Hinde, published *Why Gods Persist* (1999).

The early 2000s saw the publication of seminal works in the cognitive science of religion by two cognitive anthropologists: *Religion Explained* (2001) by Pascal Boyer and *In Gods We Trust* (2002) by Scott Atran. Both of these works engaged evolutionary thinking, primarily evolutionary psychology, by dissolving religion into several smaller units that could be individually explained as evolutionary by-products of specific cognitive architectures. The impact of these works on the cognitive science of religion can hardly be overstated, but the concept of religion somehow lost its analytical value in the process.

It is not until biologist David Sloan Wilson published *Darwin's Cathedral* (2002) that the evolutionary study of religion appears to have passed a Rubicon. Wilson argued that religion evolved because it benefits groups; in other words, religion is a group-level adaptation. Despite his reliance on group selection as an explanatory mechanism, an approach that elicited great skepticism by evolutionary researchers studying human behavior at that time, the book did catalyze the evolutionary study of religion. It would probably be overstating the impact of *Darwin's Cathedral* to describe Wilson as the founder of the contemporary evolutionary study of religion, but his work is surely one of the major influences in the field. Although evolutionary anthropologists like Lee Cronk and William Irons had pursued pioneering adaptationist analyses of religion in the 1990s, it was Wilson's work and subsequent collaborations that gave the adaptationist approach to religion considerable visibility, introducing the evolutionary study of religion to religious studies and other humanities scholars.

Fifteen years after the publication of *Darwin's Cathedral*, Wilson continues to make substantial contributions to the evolutionary study of religion. In this issue, Wilson and co-authors argue that the study of religious diversity would benefit from following the path already well worn by

field ecologists who study biological diversity. The cultural ecosystem approach that they advocate requires the establishment of anthropological field sites throughout world. Invited commentators respond to Wilson et al.'s ambitious proposal with mixed critique and admiration, and collectively they offer a lively discussion. In response, Wilson et al. do not waiver from their position that cultural diversity is similar to biological diversity and accordingly, they argue, it demands similar methods of investigation. By way of example, they highlight the extensive work done at Wilson's own field site in the city of Binghamton, New York.

We appreciate and celebrate the 15-year anniversary of Wilson's seminal theoretical contributions in *Darwin's Cathedral*, which propelled the contemporary evolutionary study of religion forward. We hope that his current work has a parallel impact, encouraging collaborative fieldwork, which will ultimately advance the empirical study of religion.

References

- Atran, S. (2002). *In gods we trust: The evolutionary landscape of religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boyer, P. (2001). *Religion explained: The evolutionary origins of religious thought*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Burkert, W. (1996). *Creation of the sacred: Tracks of biology in early religions*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Darwin, C. (1871/2005). The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex. In J. D. Watson (Ed.), *Darwin: The indelible stamp* (pp. 607–1059). Philadelphia, PA: Running Press Book Publishers.
- Guthrie, S. E. (1993). *Faces in the clouds: A new theory of religion*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hardy, A. C. (1965). *The living stream: Evolution and man*. London: Harper & Row.
- Hardy, A. C. (1966). *The divine flame: An essay towards a natural history of religion: The second of two series of Gifford lectures on science, natural history and religion delivered in the University of Aberdeen, during the session 1964-5*. London: Collins.
- Harrison, J. E. (1909). The influence of Darwinism on the study of religions. In A. C. Seward (Ed.), *Darwin and modern science: Essays in commemoration of the centenary of the birth of Charles Darwin and of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the origin of the species* (pp. 494–511). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hinde, R. A. (1999). *Why gods persist: A scientific approach to religion*. London: Routledge.
- Reynolds, V., & Tanner, R. E. (1983). *The biology of religion*. London: Longman.
- Reynolds, V., & Tanner, R. E. (1995). *The social ecology of religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sperber, D. (1985). Anthropology and psychology: Towards an epidemiology of representations. *Man*, 25, 73–89.
- Wilson, D. S. (2002). *Darwin's cathedral: Evolution, religion, and the nature of society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, E. O. (1978). *On human nature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Richard Sosis
 Uffe Schjoedt
 Joseph Bulbulia
 Wesley J. Wildman