

EDITORIAL

Evolutionary roots of religion?

The science and religion debate is one of the most vibrant in the field of Theology and despite criticism that it shows little progress, the dialogue is broadening and deepening. A new polemical dimension is emerging in the works of authors who advocate scepticism and see the sole merit of the debate as putting an end to religion and superstition (e.g. Dawkins and Dennett [1, 2]). There are also numerous related debates, centring on fundamentalism, opposition to evolutionism (e.g. in the USA), the Intelligent Design controversy, and renewed reflection on epistemological issues. All these discussions call for attention. I focus briefly on one aspect, namely the implications of the evolutionary roots of religion.

The notion that religion has evolutionary roots is not new. What is new is that recent research and developments, for instance in cognitive, brain and linguistic sciences, are deepening the dialogue by probing the nature of those evolutionary roots. Before one can consider the validity of the arguments, one needs to ask some meta-questions: why should we consider it important to prove that religion has evolutionary roots? Being difficult to falsify, it is not readily provable. And even if religion can be proved to have evolutionary roots, it does not disprove the existence of God (he may have planned it like that), nor does it guarantee that people – religious and superstitious – of different faiths and cultural backgrounds will promptly shake off their religiosity.

The evolutionary roots of religion can in fact be harnessed (as the anthropic principle is commonly harnessed) to substantiate a case for God's existence. A great deal has been written about the biological/evolutionary roots of rationality, language, emotion and human behaviour. That does not render rationality, language or human behaviour illegitimate or false – it actually affirms their naturalness. Are language and rationality part of two 'essences' of human identity and is religion purely accidental? Not if one accepts the apparently inextricable intertwinement of firm beliefs and values with language and rationality (to use a reductive example).

Religion is biologically natural in the sense that it is corporeally based. Without our biological identity (and its evolutionary development) religion would not have existed; neither would human beings as we know them. God (from a religious point of view) would have had to make humans evolve so that they are able to accommodate the idea of Himself, divine revelation, transcendent experiences and the like. Part of the equipment to accommodate God would be precisely those aspects that are currently being highlighted by brain research, Cognitive science, genetic mapping, the operation of the lymphatic system and human emotion.

Another reason for looking into the evolutionary roots of religion would be simply to understand the phenomenon of religion: its universal incidence, correspondences between different religions such as the origin and destiny of humankind, human happiness, health, blessings, faith, hope, love, et cetera. It will also help us to understand superstition and fundamentalism, quasi sciences, credulity and many of the irrational features of, for instance, the secular New Age movement.

A useful method for studying the evolutionary biological roots of religion would be phenomenology of religion (with due regard to criticism of the phenomenological method). Apart from the fact that religion is at the core of most cultures and is responsible for unique cultural treasures (Architecture, literature, music, cultural revolutions, social behaviour, etc), we must consider in how far the possibility of a-religious human beings would destroy our anthropological identity. To take the example of Christianity: can the effect on humans of the Christian gifts of faith, hope and love be replaced by radically immanent, secular alternatives? Can the experience that many people have of the Holy Spirit be satisfied by induced enthusiasm? I fully accept that atheists may well be the most critically reflective, honest and morally sensitive people. But can they engender the hope that Victor Frankl propounded, the love of mother Teresa, the faith of Nelson Mandela (to mention but a few)? Maybe, but that will only emerge in the eventual outcome of cultural evolution – were it to proceed in that direction.

Can we determine phenomenologically (or through quantitative research) whether features of popular culture like images of angels, UFOs, aliens, all sorts of alternative medicines, irrational forms of interaction with nature (see the Celestine prophecy) and faith in Science function at the same level as religious experience? Appleyard has pointed out that Science is the religion of our time [3]. The fairly widespread belief that genetic manipulation will not only prolong life but will also help us conquer disease is another example of surrogate security – but is it at the same level as religious experience? The point is that faith in Science, like religious faith, may have irrational expectations but without the ‘depth’ that believers find in their experiences.

I am not denying that our capacity for religion is the outcome of evolutionary development. The challenge is to grasp why people *want to* (William James) believe [4]. Many believers no longer accept the literal view of biblical miracles, the virgin birth, the resurrection, life after death. Yet they do not want to forego their belief in transcendence. It is impossible to verify or falsify God. Our task is to assess critically what the evolutionarily rooted phenomenon of religion means for human beings, and to what extent it is good or bad.

The evolutionarily rooted phenomenon of religion may become a common denominator that provides a hermeneutic key to fathom diverse religions, cultures and human behaviour.

Recent literature offers excellent examples of why religion ‘had to’ happen. Wolpert and Dennett are cases in point. For Dennett three favourite purposes of religion are to comfort us in our suffering and allay our fear of death; to explain things we can’t otherwise explain; to encourage cooperation in the face of trials and enemies. He is critical of these reasons and believes Science has a better explanation [2, p. 102]. He refers to Boyer who lists some distinct cognitive systems that feed effects into what he calls the recipe for religion. They are: an agent–detector, a memory-manager, a cheater-detector, a moral-intuition-generator, a sweet tooth for stories and storytelling, various alarm systems, and the intentional stance [5]. Dennett [2, p. 108] considers any mind with these tools and biases as bound to harbour religion. Wolpert [6] suggests that all religions had their origin in the evolution of causal beliefs, which in turn had its origins in tool use. Given causal beliefs, it was natural for people to ask ‘Why’ questions about life and death. Religious beliefs as adaptive because they provided explanations for important events, and offered prayer as a way of dealing with difficulties. He says our brain has a natural tendency to find consistent and reasonable explanations for important events, and so religious beliefs are most likely partly genetically determined. They are linked to our need to seek causal beliefs, and our minds are largely fashioned by genes specifying how our brains work. Genes also influence our cultural history and gene-culture evolution has created many human societies with religious beliefs Wolpert [6, p. 137].

If certain fundamental aspects of human behaviour in fact have evolutionary roots and may even be genetically determined, they cannot be changed/ terminated by a decision of the human will or scientific insight. That would imply that for the foreseeable future religion or religious derivatives are given. Obviously that is not a licence for superstition and other naivety in any formal thought or religion. One could even identify instances where some of these tenacious irrationalities are detrimental to survival (e.g. the hazards of fundamentalism, religious wars, a laissez-faire attitude towards ecological issues because in the Christian framework there is a belief that God will in any event destroy the earth and create it anew). People must realise their defencelessness against the harmful side-effects of religion, because many religions exploit believers’ credulity and weakness in times of pestilence.

What can be said about the notion of the evolutionary roots of religion is that it establishes an agenda for vital research to be done in the field of Science and religion.

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