

4 ways to naturalise religion

John Wilkins 4 June 2013, Existentialist Society

What is religion?

Historically we have taken Christianity as the exemplar

But Christianity is the outlier

Attempts to define religion founder on exceptions

For example, supernatural beings founder on Theravada Buddhism and Confucianism

Social hierarchies founder on animism and shamanism

Community support founders on religious violence

And so on

Traditional explanations

Buber, Freud and Kierkegaard

Existential questions: fear of death, need for certainty, interpersonal relations

Durkheim: social aspect of religion

Hume: Intention in the world

What are we explaining?

Cognitive and psychological experiences and dispositions

Social institutions and the role of religion in society

The adaptability or not of religious behaviour

Naturalisation

Giving natural - that is, scientific - explanations of religion

General movement in psychology, philosophy, and science generally

Opposed by many religious thinkers

The four targets

Explain religious psychology

Explain religious cognition

Explain religious behaviour

Explain religious institutions

Cognitive science of religion

Last 30 years or so

Combines sociological, psychological, neurobiological, anthropological and biological explanations

Mostly evolutionary and psychological approaches

Often ties into game theory and adaptation by selection

The four ways

Religion or elements of religion are fitness enhancing for believers

Religions enhance group fitness

Religion etc. are byproducts of fitness enhancing traits

Religion etc. are idea complexes that "parasitise" the mind, and undergo a cultural evolution, not a biological evolution

Fitness enhancing

Increases the individual return by reciprocal altruism

Group fitness

Prosocial adaptation

Byproduct

Selection for intentionality and cheater detection leads to religion

Ideas (memes)

Ideas are passed on by people and these evolve independently of biology, implementing psychology

Tends to be dismissive of religion as a pathogen, a "mind virus"

Requires a “dual inheritance” model of cultural evolution separate from biological inheritance

Hypotheses:

Minimal Counter Intuitive (MCI) entities

Gods are like us but with increased powers (comic book heroes)

We can predict their actions and will, and take steps to mollify them

Being like ordinary entities, supernatural ideas are easy to spread, but have an added element of specialness (drama)

Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD)

Based on evolutionary psychology, with the idea there are special “modules” in cognition dedicated to selected functions

We evolved to identify animal and human agents, and to be able to predict their actions

“Misfires” in the case of natural forces and events.

Prosociality

Humans are selected to act altruistically towards kin

Consequently we tell ourselves philosophical stories to justify this

This increases the fitness of those who accept religious ideas, through reciprocal altruism

Costly signalling

Based on the idea that some traits evolved to honestly show that fitness is high to attract mates: high cost signals are honest advertising

Religion is costly to practice, and so it shows who can be relied upon as reciprocal altruists, and are not cheaters

Problems:

MCI

Consistent with religion but not exclusive to it (sporting and military heroes)

HADD

Modularity in cognition is unproven and often disproven in specific cases

More likely a *disposition* than a device

Tradeoff between Type I errors (false positives) and Type II errors (false negatives). We may have an optimal error rate.

Prosociality

Many think that humans are just Prisoners Dilemma actors, acting rationally in their own interests (and those of their kin)

Evidence is that humans do tend more than other apes towards prosociality, but not a lot (~5%)

Culture is a better explanation of altruistic actions like saving a child in danger

Costly signalling

Again, not unique to religion.

Ignores the experiential aspects of religion

Issues

If religion is a natural phenomenon, are we inevitably religious?

That is, are we prisoners of our biology?

If religion is natural, is religion false?

Evolutionary debunking arguments

Are some or all of these hypotheses true?

They are not mutually exclusive

Is religion a single phenomenon?