

NYT. 12/24/02. *The Origin of Religions, From a Distinctly Darwinian View* by Natalie Angier

In a world overwhelmed by religious conflict, where no faith seems secure from the wrath of competing creeds, humanity's religious impulse can look like a decidedly mixed blessing, a source of violent intolerance as much as a prescription for upstanding and altruistic behavior. How can a force that transforms convicted murderers into placid samaritans, and that has given the world Handel's "Messiah," the mosaics of Ravenna and Borobudur Temple also have spawned the Salem witch hunts, Osama bin Laden and columnists who snarl that America should invade Muslim countries, "kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity"? What sort of Jekyll-and-Hydra-headed beast is this thing called religious faith?

In the view of Dr. David Sloan Wilson of Binghamton University in upstate New York, a very natural and very powerful beast indeed, and one that helps explain humanity's rise to global dominance. Dr. Wilson, a renowned evolutionary biologist, proposes that religion - with all its institutional, emotional and prescriptive trappings - ranks as a kind of mega-adaptation: a trait that evolved because it conferred advantages on those who bore it. But whereas evolutionary biologists traditionally view an adaptation as the outcome of a struggle between unevenly matched individuals - say, between one polar bear with a cleanly cloaking white coat, and another with a slightly less effective form of camouflage - Dr. Wilson sees religion as the product of group selection at work. In his new book, "Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society" (University of Chicago Press), Dr. Wilson argues that the religious impulse evolved early in hominid history because it helped make groups of humans comparatively more cohesive, more cooperative and more fraternal, and thus able to present a formidable front against bands of less organized or unified adversaries.

By taking an evolutionary perspective on the subject, Dr. Wilson said, religion's twinned record of transcendent glories and shocking barbarities becomes comprehensible and even predictable, though not, perhaps, inevitable for the future. Dr. Wilson, 53, wears big aviator glasses, talks in an energetic, reedy voice and is as lean as an El Greco saint. On a recent gray afternoon in Washington, he discussed his book over lunch at a hotel bar that was quiet and smoky enough to please a church mouse.

Q. You're trying to explain the evolution of religion. So how do you define your terms? What is a religion?

A. Religion has a superficial definition, which is a belief in supernatural agents, but some people regard this definition as shallow and incomplete. The Buddha, for example, refused to be associated with any gods. Or you could say that religion is something that handles concepts of an afterlife, but that definition, too, is limited, and it excludes a number of faiths. A scholar at a religious conference told me that what little Judaism has to say about the afterlife is only there because Christians asked them. I've found that when you go beyond the superficial definitions of religion, it's very difficult to distinguish anything fundamental about religion that is not also fundamental to other social organizations. For example, the concept of sacredness, and the existence of a symbolic system that distinguishes the sacred from the profane, extends to many other social organizations.

Q. So what's special about religion that makes it such a powerful force in human history?

A. I think that religion has been very good at rearranging the nonreligious furniture of our mind into a coherent whole. It takes things like faith, which is what allows you to keep going even in the absence of information, evidence or immediate gratification, and which everybody needs, and it takes forgiveness, which is what you ask for when you transgress, and it reworks these modules, to put it crudely, and tries to set them in a permanent "on" position.

Q. What do you gain by looking at religion from a Darwinian standpoint?

A. Certain ways of thinking and study methods that we routinely use as evolutionists turn out to be very new from the standpoint of religious scholarship. If I'm looking at guppies or beehives, the first thing I'll want to know about a trait is, Is it an adaptation or not? So I ask that about religion. If it's not an

adaptation, maybe it's a spandrel - a byproduct of some other evolutionary process - rather than an adaptation. Maybe back in the Stone Age it was adaptive to be nice to others because most people around us were relatives who shared our genes, and then we ended up being nice to nonrelatives, too. Maybe religion is even a maladaptive spandrel today, the way our sweet tooth makes us fat. Or maybe religion is like a parasitic disease, which evolved to transmit itself like the AIDS virus, and isn't good for any of its hosts but gets passed on anyway. If religion is an adaptation, we can ask, Did it evolve because it benefited whole groups, or some individuals within a group? Was it a sting operation, with some leaders fleecing rather than leading their flocks? This is almost certainly true in some cases, but is it true as a rule? These are hypotheses that we can frame and address as we would a study of nonhuman organisms. And the great thing about religion is that descriptive information about it exists in abundance.

Q. You suggest that religion is an adaptation, an example of group selectionism at work.

A. Religious believers often compare their groups to an organism, or a beehive. One of the keys to the success of religion is its emphasis on the moral equality of those in the community. You might be rich, and I might be poor, but in some sense you're no better than me. This guarded egalitarianism may be fundamental to the willingness of people to cooperate with others, including those who are unrelated to them, and to become the primate equivalent of a eusocial species like bees or ants.

Q. Give me an example of looking at the natural history of a religion.

A. The coolest example can be seen in what the religious scholar Elaine Pagels wrote about the evolution of early Christianity. When you compare the gospels that eventually made it into the New Testament with the many competing gospels that were rejected, what you find is that those that made it in were the ones that were best as blueprints for various early Christian communities. The narrative differences in the four Gospels - of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - and the fact that Jesus is shown as being well received in one but practically thrown off a cliff in another, were not the result of the passage of time, or of memories fading. These Gospels were serving the needs of different Christian communities in different social environments. They're fossils of local adaptations.

Q. So if the egalitarian impulse is strong within us, can we assume that institutions like slavery were unnatural blips in human history?

A. Unfortunately not. Religions and other social organizations may preach kindness and cooperation within the group, but they often say nothing about those outside the group, and may even promote brutality toward those beyond the brotherhood of the hive. That has been the dark side of religion. But it is not an inevitable side of it. I don't want to come across as naïve, but there's no theoretical reason why the moral circle can't be expanded to ultimately include everybody. Nor is there any reason why we can't take a surgical approach to religion, and keep what is positive about it while eliminating the intolerance.

Q. What about you? Are you religious? Do you believe in God?

A. I consider myself a communitarian, and there are many things I admire about religion, but no, I don't believe in God. I tell people I'm an atheist, but a nice atheist.