

The Origin of Religions Revisited

When we study the history of life, it is easy to see that life has evolved over time. The fossils of creatures that lived before us faithfully record the innovations and changes leading to the diversity of life that we observe today. The history of religion is much shorter, yet it too has left a fossil record revealing some of the innovations and changes leading to the diversity of religions which now surround us. These histories are fairly clear in their lessons and would not even be debated but for one fact: the theory of evolution is deadly to religion. It is ironic that this should be so, because as this paper will show, religion may be responsible for humankind's fascination with the unraveling of mystery. However, religion may be a special case of mystery - religion depends on mystery and once the mystery is unraveled religion may not survive.

The evolution of humankind and religion are inextricably bound together. For millions of years evolution was controlled by one set of rules. The rules were simple: whichever genes carried the design for creatures most efficient at getting their genes copied into a new generation would come to dominate any gene pool. Then at some point those genes described a new environment. The new environment was a brain of sufficient power to support language. A new replicator would soon take advantage of the new environment. Not surprisingly, a rule very similar to the one for genetic replicators would apply to the new replicators. Whichever language constructs were most efficient at getting themselves copied would come to dominate the pool of language constructs.

Religion is really just a language construct - a word-based replicator. All replicators are affected by their environment and normally affect their environment in turn. The replicators must then adapt to the changes or perish. Thus we can see that the rules regarding natural selection of replicators apply equally to biological life and bodies of religious thought. The remainder of this paper will deal more directly with the details of this thesis.

Evolution of life is a fact. The evidence is overwhelming. For example, within our lifetime we have observed the rise of drug resistant bacteria and pesticide resistant insects. Within recorded history certain moths of the British Isles have evolved in response to changing levels of industrial pollution (Berra, 1990). On an even larger time-scale, the fossil record provides hard evidence of plants and animals that have changed over time (Darwin, 1998).

The Theory of Evolution explains the evidence. Scientific theories are by definition changeable and good scientific theories are constantly fine-tuned as new evidence is discovered (Berra, 1990). Darwin's original theory of evolution is no exception. The theory of evolution has been refined to better explain the original evidence as well as evidence collected since Darwin's day. The original theory of evolution said there was dependency with change regulated by a concept known as "survival of the fittest." The updated theory is also based on dependency with change, however the regulation is more precisely understood in terms of the genetic code.

Bodies of religious thought also evolve. The evidence is overwhelming. For example Christianity is clearly descended from Judaism. In turn, Judaism can trace its roots all the way back to the mythology of Zeus (Drews, 1998). History records how Christianity evolved when Copernicus proved the Earth was not at the center of the universe. History also records how one variety of Christianity evolved again in 1950 when Pope Pius XII stated:

The Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that, in conformity with the present state of human sciences and sacred theology, research and discussions, on the part of men experienced in both fields, take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it inquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter - for the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God. (Pope Pius XII, 1950)

In essence, Pope Pius XII had said Catholics could talk about and even believe in evolution as long as God was still the giver of souls. Some call this religious accommodation of science "Theistic evolution." Theistic evolution was the result of religion evolving to survive in a newly changed environment. Many people no longer believed God conjured the Earth and man from nothing, but adapted by believing God's unseen hand directed our creation via natural laws. Religion has left a rich fossil record in the form of ceremonial centers, elaborate burial sites, and ancient texts. For those willing to look, that fossil record reveals the evolution of religions in much the same way as rocks reveal the evolution of life.

The theory of memes explains the evidence of evolving religions in much the same way as the theory of evolution explains the evidence of evolving biological life. Memetics or the study of memes is a new field of study concerned with thoughts and ideas interpreted as replicators (Dawkins, 1989). As replicators, some ideas and thoughts are better adapted to make use of resources and cause themselves to be copied into new hosts. "The beliefs

spreading most vigorously prevail in the natural selection of memes, giving them the best odds of spawning new variants and combinations. Such innovation, in turn, drives propagation by supplying both new and strengthened thought contagions” (Lynch, 1996, p.12).

In this context religions may be considered meme-plexes which are constantly evolving to more efficiently reproduce themselves (Blackmore, 1999). Interpreted as meme-plexes, religions behave in clearly predictable ways. The religions which are growing fastest are most appealing in the rewards offered. Furthermore, religions which are growing fastest emphasize evangelism while punishing invading proselytes (Lynch, 1996).

Religious memes may have influenced the evolution of man. A religious meme might influence the survival and reproductive success of susceptible populations through several mechanisms. For example, a meme that limited the number of sexual partners would also limit the spread of venereal disease and thereby increase the reproductive success of those whom the meme was able to influence. A meme enforcing a healthy diet free of tainted meat would reduce food poisoning and thereby increase the health of those under the meme's influence (Blackmore, 1999). By selecting behaviors which lead to increased reproductive success of its hosts, religious memes were in effect also selecting for susceptibility to the meme or meme-plex.

If memes or meme-plexes have affected our evolution, then we should be able to observe some evidence within ourselves. What characteristics of humankind might best be interpreted as making humankind more susceptible to a religious meme-plex? Humankind has an innate fascination with his origins and seems to need an explanation. This innate fascination is not apparent in any other animal. Before science offered other explanations, this would seem to have the effect of making humankind a ready vessel for the waiting meme-plex. The meme-plex is automatically downloaded to the new host as parents or religious leaders “answer” the questions of the young mind's origins.

Human curiosity is another characteristic seeming to go well beyond that of any other creature on Earth. We have a deep-seated desire to understand our surroundings. Again, before science offered competing ideas, this curiosity would seem to facilitate the transfer of a meme-plex to new hosts. The young mind in particular seems to ask “Why?” A parent or religious leader was happy to answer and by doing so unwittingly transferred the meme-plex to the next generation.

There are other characteristics of humankind which may show how our genes have been manipulated to better accommodate religious meme-plexes. The “God Module,” if it exists, seems to be responsible for all sorts of visions and spiritual feelings in persons where it is not normally inhibited - such as persons with certain types of brain-damage.

The term “God Module” was coined to describe a part of the brain which some people believe to be responsible for “spiritual” experiences. Many people would like to interpret the “God Module” as evidence that our creator made us in such a way that we could properly worship him. Mainstream scientists and free-thinkers are likely to dismiss the whole idea as illogical ranting or seek an explanation that does not involve religion (Noelle, 1998). Perhaps a better explanation is provided by the idea that the “God Module” does indeed exist and represents another way in which the genetic code of humankind has been manipulated by meme-plexes to better accommodate those meme-plexes. A brain structure which created spiritual feelings or visions would seem to mesh nicely with humankind's curiosity about his origins and surroundings. There would not only be more things for the meme-plex to “answer,” but perhaps even a means of more directly controlling the host. If we are wired so that we feel the constant presence of a supernatural being, then we are more likely to follow the rules of the watching meme-plex - and more likely to pass along the genetic code for accommodating the meme-plex.

Our need for ceremony crosses all cultures and has existed for all of recorded history. Does ceremony help our genes, or does it exist because it enhances the transmission of meme-plexes? There is evidence that Neanderthals placed flowers with the dead (Eccles, 1991). We still perform that ceremony to this very day. Yet, flowers for the dead can not be interpreted in terms of getting genes into the next generation. However, from the vantage-point of a meme, flowers for the dead make perfect sense! Finally, does our recorded history exist to help us, or does it exist primarily to help stabilize and validate the meme-plexes which we host?

Why are there Temples, Priests, and Nuns? Many religions include religious leaders who do not have children. Many religions also require the building of elaborate ceremonial structures. Can either temples or celibate religious leaders be interpreted as enhancing the reproduction of the genes in the temple builders or celibate religious leaders? Natural selection, even in terms of a selfish gene says “No.” Does a celibate religious leader make sense from the vantage-point of a selfish meme? Yes, because all their resources and energy which would have gone into reproduction are now redirected to replication and reinforcement of the meme-plex! Purely ceremonial structures

must be interpreted in the same way. These structures reinforce and spread a meme-plex, but cannot be interpreted as contributing to the reproductive success of the builders. Building a temple or other purely ceremonial structure represents a diversion of important resources away from childbearing and child-rearing.

The evidence shows that humankind is really just a replicating machine and vehicle for memes in much the same way as plants and animals are just replicating machines and vehicles for their genes. Many would take issue with such a statement, however there is not really an opposing view! There are only opposing meme-plexes. The opposing meme-plexes are not necessarily based on logic or rational thought. The opposing meme-plexes must also be understood as the result of centuries of evolution, during which the memes most resistant to eviction from a host mind would have been the ones most likely to survive and replicate. Therefore expecting a meme-plex-hosting mind to successfully recognize that it is hosting a self-serving meme-plex is roughly analogous to expecting an alcoholic or heroin addict to recognize his own alcoholism or addiction.

If truth and logic are to prevail over the meme-plexes, the playing field will need to be leveled first. Meme-plexes have harnessed some powerful human characteristics such as greed and the profit motive. i.e.: televangelism. Science has offered little other than complicated truths and logic. Religious meme-plexes also offer everything from retribution against our enemies to everlasting life. The reality of science is harsh, offering nothing more than fleeting moments of understanding. Clearly, religious meme-plexes have far greater appeal than scientific meme-plexes.

The appeal of religious meme-plexes can not be underestimated. For example John Eccles writes “I am constrained to attribute the uniqueness of the Self or Soul to a supernatural spiritual creation” (1991, p.237). Eccles further concludes “Each Soul is a new Divine creation which is implanted into the growing foetus at some time between conception and birth.” Eccles is a highly educated scientist and Nobel Prize winner and reached this conclusion after exhaustive research into the evolution and inner workings of the human brain! This is somewhat analogous to having a person who could measure electricity examine a computer. They might be able to understand and measure some electronic pulses, but this would give them no insight as to the intricate interplay of various bits of software that made the computer work. They would not understand and might conclude that some sort of magic controlled the computer display. Will Eccles have to be shown an actual

printout of the human program? Would he still cling to the idea of a divine programmer?

Eccles is not alone when he reaches such a conclusion. Professor Arthur Drews has collected volumes of evidence showing the syncretic history of Christianity. He concludes that Christ was not an actual historical figure and that Christianity should therefore be abandoned. However, he is no supporter of evolution and the word does not even appear in the English translation of *The Christ Myth*. Instead Drews describes Darwinist thinking as an “equally fatal superstition in the sole reality of matter and in the redeeming truths of physical science” (1998, p. 299). The memes of religion must be powerful indeed.

Those bumper plates with the Jesus fish eating the Darwin fish could turn out to represent the truth, but for all the wrong reasons. We are supposed to interpret the Jesus fish as destroying the blasphemous ideas of Darwin because to do so is the will of God. If we instead interpret the Jesus fish as representing the Christian meme-plex and the Darwin fish as representing scientific memes, then the Jesus fish is winning the struggle because it is better evolved to appeal to the average mind than is scientific truth. Ironically, if religion wins it will be further evidence of how the rules of natural selection apply equally to biological life and other replicators.

Religious memes may have inadvertently created humankind's drive for knowledge by enhancing curiosity. The same quest for knowledge is making existence more difficult for religious memes as scientific theories inoculate many potential meme-hosts. The same quest for knowledge has led to many discoveries and many new discoveries have the effect of eliminating the mysteries formerly used by memes as connection points to the human mind. It would seem we are at a crossroads. We may follow the path of truth as rational and logical science - or we may follow some other path that makes us feel better. What is certain is this: we can not do both.

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