What is Atheism, Secularism, Humanism

6. Why Religion?
Cognitive Evolutionary Theory
One question that secularists and rationalists can and must ask is why religion exists at all?

• We can dismiss religious explanations of religion like
  • “god gene”
  • *Sensus divinitatus*
• They are circular (they presuppose what they are trying to prove)
• There is no evidence for them
• They do not explain religious diversity (not all religions have “gods” or “the divine”)
There have been many attempts to explain the existence and nature of religion, going back to ancient times

- Ancient Greek Euhemerus: “gods” are merely deified humans
- “With respect to the gods, too, our ancestors believed carelessly, credulously, with untrained simplicity; while worshipping their kings religiously, desiring to look upon them when dead in outward forms, anxious to preserve their memories in statues, these things became sacred”
Psychological Theories

- Anthropologist E. B. Tylor: people got the idea of religion from certain uncanny experiences = animism
- Rudolf Otto: the basis of religion is a particular experience, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: the Other, the loss of self and feeling of oneness with the cosmos
- Sigmund Freud: picked up on Otto’s “oceanic feeling” and added wish fulfillment and magical thinking
Sociological Theories

• Karl Marx: religion is a (false) symbolic projection of real economic facts and relations
• For the under-class, “the heart of a heartless world”; for the ruling class, “the opium of the masses”
• Émile Durkheim: the source of the idea of religion is society itself
• The fundamental idea of religion is “the sacred”
• Society is the model of the sacred: before and above the individual, providing groups and categories
For Durkheim, religion is

- “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set aside and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them”
- The key to creating and sustaining religious sentiment is ritual, which generates a kind of “electricity” that results in “effervescence” and collective consciousness
- A.R. Radcliffe-Brown: religion functions not to fill individual needs but to fill social needs--social integration and perpetuation
Recently, psychology, sociology, and biology have converged into a theory of the cognitive-evolutionary origin of religion

- Much of this work is inspired by Dan Sperber’s theory of the spread or “catchiness” of ideas (“epidemiological model”)
- The human mind has evolved to be susceptible to certain ideas (whether true or not)
- Especially the idea of “other minds”
- Stewart Guthrie *Faces in the Clouds*: attributing mind or *intentionality* to the non-human world is “a good bet”
Justin Barrett went further and proposed a “hyperactive agency detection device” (HADD)

- "belief in God is an almost inevitable consequence of the kind of minds we have. Most of what we believe comes from mental tools working below our conscious awareness. And what we believe consciously is in large part driven by these unconscious beliefs."

- The main question in this emerging cognitive-evolutionary theory is whether religion is specifically selected by evolution or whether it is an accidental by-product
Selectionists assert that religion confers evolutionary advantages (whether true or not)

- Joseph Bulbulia argues that religion enhances individual health and survival
- religion is like a placebo, and “religiosity evolved as a mechanism of self-healing”
- “if believing in supernatural causation helps us to recover from illness or meet the terrors of life, then tendencies to fall into such deceptions will be conserved and more intricately articulated”
- he considers religion to be a deception, specifically a self-deception, but a useful one
Most selectionists theorists see the benefit of religion not for individuals but for the group

- David Sloan Wilson: religion contributes to group cohesion, social control of members, and the regulation of mundane affairs like resource use
- One key mechanism of religion is “costly signaling”
- Religion is difficult, costly, and wasteful as a means to demonstrate the commitment of members to the group and its norms (deception detection)
The by-product approach is exemplified by Pascal Boyer and Scott Atran

- Boyer *Religion Explained*: humans evolved “hypertrophied social intelligence” or extreme sensitivity to interpersonal information
- The human mind is a system of many different mental processes or modules, including causality, reciprocity, moral interest, story-telling, and “agency detection” and “essentialism”
- Essentialism = the sense that each thing has an “essence” that distinguishes it from other things
- We develop “templates” for various objects and experiences
When something violates our expectations or templates, it is particularly interesting

• The ideas that “stick” are “maximally counterintuitive”, e.g. a being that lives forever or has no body

• Religious ideas are like any other counterintuitive and sticky ideas: religion is just such a by-product, the result of “mental systems and capacities that are there anyway”

• mental modules and habits evolved originally for totally human/social purposes, and “we can explain religion by describing how these various capacities got recruited, how they contribute to the features of religion.... We do not need to assume that there is a special way of functioning that occurs only when processing religious thought”

• Religion is in a very real way a “side-effect” or “spin-off” of normal mental activity
Scott Atran makes much the same argument, with more technical detail

- “Religious beliefs and practices involved the very same cognitive and affective structures as nonreligious beliefs and practices—and no others—but in (more or less) systematically distinctive ways”
- “there is no such entity as ‘religion’” and therefore nothing to explain other than the regular functioning of the human mind and its evolution
- Religious ideas are the result of many modules of perception, emotion, and conceptualization, especially agency detection
Summarizing much of the thinking in cognitive-evolutionary theory, Atran defines religion as

- “(1) a community’s costly and hard-to-fake commitment (2) to a **counterfactual** and counterintuitive world of supernatural agents (3) who master people’s anxieties, such as death and deception”

- As psychologist Lee Kirkpatrick phrases it, religion “is a kind of socio-emotional-cognitive cheesecake”

- We do not have an instinctive drive for it, and we do not need it, but it pushes all of our otherwise-evolved tastes and tendencies

- Combining selectionist and by-product perspectives, religion could have emerged as a cognitive by-product and then provided some individual or social benefits