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Book Review

God as Alpha Male

A review of Jay D. Glass, *The Power of Faith: Mother Nature's Gift*. Corona del Mar, CA: Donington Press, 2007. 208 pp. US\$24.95 ISBN 978-0-9660536-1-6 (paperback)

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Immediately after the publication of *The Origin of Species*, many biologists took issue with evolution, and although much of that opposition was ultimately grounded in the perceived religious – or rather, anti-religious – implications of evolution by natural selection, the reality is that biologists have generally been rather quiet about potential connections or disconnections between their discipline and religion. Not so the other way round: especially in the United States, the “faith-based community” found evolution deeply offensive, and indeed, Protestant fundamentalism in America owes much of its impetus to anti-evolutionism.

In any event, such bio-reticence has largely evaporated, and bookstores are now filled with efforts on the part of biologists, psychologists, anthropologists and evolutionary-minded philosophers to confront religion. Not all, of course, are critical, but it is safe to say that the majority are, if only because efforts to “biologize” religion – to inquire into its adaptive significance – are unavoidably inimical to believers’ insistence that religion (rather, *their* religion) is necessarily true, rather than something that people follow because it meets an evolutionary need. By now, most of these works are well known to readers of this journal; Jay Glass’s *The Power of Faith* probably is not. I have chosen to review it not simply for this reason, but because its main thesis is intriguing and thought-provoking ... although, in my opinion, more than a little flawed.

In a nutshell, Glass argues that “In the original state of nature, for both animals and humans, loyalty to a Supreme Being (aka dominant male, king, warlord, etc.) offered protection from enemies and provided the necessities to sustain life. Those that did not put their faith and trust in a god-like figure did not survive to produce the next generation.” The jewel in Glass’s argument is his reworking of the 23rd Psalm, as it might describe members of a chimpanzee troop speaking of the dominant male:

God as alpha male

PSALM XXIII

The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

He makes me to lie down in
green pastures

He leads me beside still
waters.

He restores my soul.

He leads me in the paths of
righteousness for his name's
sake.

Yea, though I walk through the
valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,
for you are with me.

Your rod and Your staff
they comfort me.

Your prepare a table before
me in the presence of my
enemies.

You anoint my head with oil.

My cup runs over.

Surely goodness and mercy
shall follow me

all the days of my life;

and I will dwell in the
house of the Lord

Forever.

THE CHIMP'S PRAYER

The dominant male is my leader;
I shall not want.

He makes me to lie down in
green pastures

He leads me beside still
waters.

He quells my anxiety.

He shows me how to survive
for his name's sake.

Yea, though the jungle is full
of threats,

I will fear no evil,
For you are with me.

Your strength and Your vigor
they comfort me.

You protect me from other
animals.

You bless me.

My cup runs over.

I feel safe in your territory

as long as I am in your troop;

I submit and accept your
dominance

Forever.

Admittedly, the author's version overstates the degree of affiliation between "average" chimp and dominant male(s), but upon first reading it nonetheless made me smile, since it appealed simultaneously to my own Unholy Trinity: the animal behaviorist, evolutionary biologist, and atheist within. As it turns out, however, Glass isn't being sarcastic. He *isn't* suggesting that because human submission to god is derived from a nonhuman primate's submission to the dominant troop leader, religious devotion is a peculiar anachronism that we ought to outgrow. Far from it! Instead, Glass proposes that on the one hand, "God is a fiction, a creation of our rationalizing human brain. On the other hand, the message within the answer is that if the origin of our religious faith is in our genes, we have no choice but to put our faith and trust in God, even though in the realm of logic he does not exist."

An intriguing argument, this, and one that would doubtless be unacceptable to the devout, predicated as it is on the non-existence of god. What about the rest of us? First, do we really know that "the origin of religious faith is in our genes"? The ubiquity of religion might suggest this, yet human religions are far from homogeneous; religious faith couldn't be "in our genes" the way, for example, kin preference clearly is, or patterns of male-female difference, etc. Moreover, monotheism isn't universal, nor is worship of male god(s) – both of which are implied by Glass's thesis. Thus, *The Power of Faith* overstates the role of the dominant male as leader of the pack ... not only in animal societies, but in human religion as well. It also focuses too intently on chimpanzees, omitting, for example, bonobos, which may if anything be more closely related to *Homo sapiens*, but among whom dominant males are something of an oxymoron.

Most controversially, author Glass claims that "we have no choice" when it comes to religious devotion, that "we are compelled to put our faith and trust in a Supreme Being in just the same way as we are compelled to breathe." This reminds me of the famous *Mad* magazine cartoon featuring a sneering Tonto telling The Lone Ranger: "What you mean *we*, white man?" I, for one, have chosen *not* to put faith or trust in any presumed supernatural being, and I submit that I am not alone in having made such a choice. (By contrast, I acknowledge my need to breathe, and can't help concluding that the two "compulsions" are not identical.)

Then there is the philosophically vexed matter of free will – not to mention ethics – in the face of genetically mediated tendencies and inclinations ... assuming, for the moment, the debatable claim that such tendencies and inclinations even exist with respect to religious belief. Thus, evolutionary psychologists agree that human beings are inclined, by virtue of their genetic background, to favor their kin and disfavor nonkin. By the same token, the evidence is overwhelming that *Homo sapiens* is somewhat inclined to treat stepchildren less benevolently than biological offspring. But clearly, this does not mean that "we have no choice" but to subject stepchildren to neglect or abuse! Nor does it require that doing so is somehow necessary for us to live fulfilling lives. Even assuming, therefore, that "human nature" demands god via the same mechanism that certain "nonhuman primate nature" demands a troop leader (a dubious, although entertaining assumption), it is no small stretch to conclude that "we have no choice" but to give in to such a demand. Indeed, aren't we being most human – in the sense of distinguishing ourselves from other species – when we say No to our inclinations, especially when they derive from our evolutionary past? Whether we *should* do so is another matter, and

presumably one that depends on the inclinations in question, not to mention each person's ethical judgment.

On a more operational level, one cannot help questioning the presumed adaptive value of faith – belief without evidence – in *any* individual or construct, especially one that lacks demonstrable material reality. Insofar as a troop member “worships” his or her leader, at least the existence of that leader is undeniable, along with (in most cases) the negative consequences of deviation. On the other hand, to my knowledge, god is generally less likely to strike down disbelievers such as myself than a dominant animal is to punish would-be rebels. (Despite the claim of now-sainted Rev. Jerry Falwell, it seems unlikely that the terrorist acts of 9/11 were god's punishment of us heathens.)

Disbelief in god thus seems less costly than failure to honor and obey one's demonstrable leader: I am far more liable to be punished by the Bush Administration for my public disapproval of its policies than to be called to account by god for my equally public, atheistic blasphemy. In short, whereas rebellion against the powers and principalities can readily lead to fitness-reducing consequences, it is much less clear that apostasy will bring about similar retaliation from the Deity. It is nonetheless possible, of course, that religion has established and maintained itself precisely by exacting temporal punishment against apostates, which would seem to argue in favor of Richard Dawkins's meme theory of religious belief, while providing an alternative to Glass's hypothesis.

The Power of Faith offers much more to critique, not least the author's persistent slippage into “good of the species” language, as well as a tendency to be redundant and repetitious, to say the same thing over and over again. And yet again. Like many others, this book would have benefited from rigorous editing.

And yet, it has redeeming virtues, beyond that marvelous chimp-psalm. There is something compelling in Glass's basic hypothesis (once the egregious “we have no choice” is tossed overboard), not least the widespread human tendency toward abasement before a Supreme Being, as well as the stubborn tenacity of belief itself. Thus, in a notably generalizable anecdote, the author recounts how, an atheist college student, he nonetheless found himself importuning god for assistance at a final exam. Glass is also persuasive when describing the power of the siren call “Follow me to the Promised Land,” and in his analysis of how religion is “nature's anti-anxiety drug,” Prozac via deity/dominant leader.

On a recent airplane trip flying over some of the small villages of the province of Quebec – and altogether without benefit of faith or the Power thereof - I found myself thinking that a Martian anthropologist might well conclude that each town must be occupied by small creatures of about the same dimensions, along with at least one dramatically larger, powerful Leader whose suitably oversized domicile included, among other things, a steeple. It is accordingly my guess that despite its flaws, *The Power of Faith* captures at least part of a genuine and provocative truth, warranting the attention of those evolutionary psychologists interested in the biological underpinnings of religious faith.