

Evolutionary Psychology

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Book Review

A review of Ilkka Pyysiainen *Magic, Miracles and Religion: A Scientist's Perspective*, London: William Heinemann, 2001. 298 pp.

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Eleven of the fifteen chapters in this book have been previously published, and this collection of essays reflects the author's wide range of interests and competence.

Pyysiainen's scholarship is of unusual breadth and depth. He is at home in philosophy and the humanities, has a broad background in history of religions and knows well the literature on evolutionary psychology, and the cognitive science of religion. It is indeed rare to find somebody who can read with equal ease Pali Buddhist writings, the latest experimental studies in psychology, and the most recent publications in the philosophy of science. The common denominator in most essays is the cognitive-evolutionary approach identified with Pascal Boyer, whose writings are often referred to, presented, and interpreted.

Every essay demonstrates the author's familiarity with the literature in several fields, and all of them examine religious ideation in comparison to other kinds of human cognitions. The main issue is indeed what characterizes religious ideas and whether they are unique in any way. The aim is to explain religion, while at the same time uncovering something important about the architecture of the human mind.

Approaching religion as an object of study should start and end with the discussion of relevant psychological mechanisms. Nothing more is needed: "As scholars of religion, we should ... try to explain how religion works by taking into account everything we know about human thought, experience, and behavior. Claims about the need for more empathetic methods cannot guide scientific research because they are mere claims about how the scholar should feel about his or her work. But feeling is not a method and cannot be the basis of controlled inferences" (p. 78).

This volume gives us another chance to reflect on the important contributions of the cognitive-evolutionary approach to religion. Pyysiainen describes "The cognitive science of religion that emerged in the 1990s" as the work of scholars who "...focus on how certain predispositions of the mind quite naturally make some representations more attention-grabbing than others. It is these natural mechanisms of mind that make religion possible" (p. 36). What is correctly noted is that "religious beliefs are spontaneous, natural, and intuitive" (pp. 183-184), that "Religious beliefs are just like common-sense beliefs: they are unreflective natural intuitions..." (p. 115), and that "...certain kinds of ideas are naturally appealing to the human mind and therefore become selected for cultural transmission" (p. 37). The notion that religious beliefs are spontaneous, natural, intuitive and naturally appealing is clear and focused, but there seems to be an inherent contradiction in the way religious ideas are analyzed as the conceptualization proceeds:

We are introduced to the claim that these “spontaneous, natural, and intuitive” ideas are somehow counter-intuitive: “Only believers have thoughts about the expectations and reactions of counter-intuitive agents to various human deeds and behaviors” (p. 115) In defining religion, Pyysiainen suggests that we substitute the term ‘supernatural’ commonly used in defining religion with ‘counterintuitive’. Religious conceptions that are supposedly counterintuitive include “the ideas of nonobservable, extranatural agencies; the belief in that nonphysical components of persons survive death; and the notion of special categories of persons receiving some kind of ‘divine’ inspiration” (p. 39). Furthermore, Pyysiainen states that “‘Counterintuitiveness’ is a technical term referring to violations of intuitive expectations about ontological categories...Counterintuitive means something that contradicts panhuman intuitive expectations of how entities behave...Thus are formed, for example, the ideas of personal beings without a body (gods, spirits, etc.) and of various kinds of artifacts that have psychological properties (e.g. a statue that hears prayers)” (p. 43)

So how can ideas that are both intuitive and counter-intuitive be so popular? The answer is in the concept of optimal or minimal counter-intuitiveness: “...their optimal counterintuitiveness gives religious concepts and beliefs an advantage in cultural selection. They contain one salient violation of intuitive expectations, while in all other aspects they remain intuitive”, but “a statue that hears your prayers wherever you are is too complicated an idea and therefore unlikely to survive in cultural transmission without being simplified” (p. 44).

It would be much simpler and more parsimonious to drop the concept of the minimally or optimally counter-intuitive, because those who use it also claim that it allows for just one violation of the intuitive and that assertions with more violations are going to be rejected. If this is the case, then it is clear that one violation is within the limits of our “natural” intuition, and that more blatant violations may (or may not) be rejected. If some fantasies that are more than minimally counter-intuitive are rejected, then the minimally counter-intuitive equals the intuitive. Religious ideas are intuitively plausible and so are acquired by young children without much formal teaching. Ideas such as those in modern physics or chemistry are indeed counter-intuitive and thus beyond the grasp not only of children, but of most adults (They require not only formal teaching, but a high IQ, of course).

The broader question, which must hinge on the same basic features of the mind, has to do with the flexible boundaries of what children (and adult) regard as plausible. In the discussion above, intuition means an automatic readiness to accept as plausible certain ideas and especially certain narratives. What we can call the rules of human imagination lead to the popularity of some narratives without any metarepresentations, i.e. without any accompanying statements about their importance, and without support from social authorities. We can try to spread rumors, jokes, or legends, as well as religious ideas. Only some of them will be selected for further transmission. It seems that narratives about humans which seems plausible to other humans reflect not only our basic cognitive architecture and our theory of mind (TOM), but our theory of human nature (TOHN).

Certain stories are going to be immediately judged as implausible. Let’s say we are going to tell our next door neighbor the amazing rumor just heard, about the Walton family, the owners of Wal-Mart, who have decided to donate their fortune to their low-paid employees. “You must be joking”, will the neighbor say, hurrying past on his way to the elevator. But were I to tell him about the latest version of a legend about the neighborhood Satanist group, he may be a lot more interested. Our readiness to accept as true assertions about the omnipotence and omniscience of

supernatural agents and about the malevolence of other humans may have something to do with the universal early experiences of helplessness and dependence, which are just as much a biological given as the evolutionary architecture of our minds.