

Book Review

Religion as Moral Innovation

A review of John Teehan, *In the Name of God: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Ethics and Violence*, Wiley-Blackwell: London, 2010, 288 pp., US\$24.95, ISBN 1405183810 (softcover).

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In the Name of God, by John Teehan, takes the evolutionary framework and applies it to the reading of religious texts. The result is a provocative discussion of the ubiquitous phenomenon of religious belief that can change the way we understand the role of religion in society. With a selected focus on the religious text of Judaism and Christianity—the Bible, Teehan persuasively argues that these religions evolved to solve the unique problems encountered as humans moved from small societies organized based on kinship, to larger complex societies made up of strangers. Religion, therefore, is an institutionalization of a moral code to implement large-scale cooperation beyond kin, in order to promote “social cohesion and individual striving” (p.192). Morality and violence, far from being contradictory concepts, are merely flip sides of the same coin.

Teehan’s analysis spans a wide range of material but his incisive and focused approach conveys arguments without overwhelming the reader. Drawing from the latest research in cognitive science, he provides a background of our evolved moral psychology (Chapter 1) and also explains the psychological basis of religious belief (Chapter 2). After setting the stage, the evolutionary lens is focused on the religious text of Judaism, as he examines the portrayal of Yahweh (God) through the Hebrew scripture and the Ten Commandments (Chapter 3), as well as on Christianity, with emphasis on the gospel teachings of Jesus Christ (Chapter 4). Finally, he addresses the critical issue of religious violence as culminated by the events of September 11 (Chapter 5) and tries to synthesize the lessons of the previous chapters with the environment of the modern day to show how a moral system that avoids the discussed pitfalls may be forged (Chapter 6).

Whereas the mention of religion and evolution in the same breath is usually accompanied by fierce criticism or emotionally charged arguments, Teehan’s take is refreshingly neutral. He sidesteps metaphysical issues of the existence of God, and instead discusses our evolved predisposition to believe in supernatural agents and the resulting conception of God. In particular, our instinct to view supernatural agents in the ontological category of *person*, and our ability to conceive of some minimally counter-intuitive super traits (e.g. invisibility, immortality, prescience) as plausible, led to the representation of God as a “full access strategic agent”—a

divine moral enforcer who is privy to all moral lapses and capable of dealing out divine punishment.

Morality, as defined, is not an objective “truth” but is the product of “human strivings to create a worthwhile life as social beings in a natural world that provides both opportunities and dangers, and this is intrinsically dynamic” (p. 194). In this light, one may make sense of how the seemingly gratuitous violence depicted in the Bible can be reconciled with its basic tenets (e.g., the commandment, Thou shalt not murder). For example, how can the portrayal of a morally perfect God who commands against murder be reconciled with one that punishes its general for sparing the lives of women and children (Num. 31:17-18; p. 149)? Teehan argues that the evolved strategic function of moral ethics is to promote in-group cohesiveness and is thus not applicable to the out-group. A member of the out-group is a potential cheater who threatens the survival of the in-group, and thus, should be eliminated if necessary. In addition, the violent nature of God, as seen by the plague that Yahweh created in a fit of jealousy to wipe out 24,000 Israelites (Num. 25-9, 16-18; p. 159), is instrumental in ensuring obedience to laws by demonstrating the power of the group's enforcer and emphasizing the catastrophic consequences of defection.

Of course, not all moral guidelines involve such dire outcomes. Some rituals, ostensibly more banal in nature (e.g. observing the day of the Sabbath, kosher food laws, circumcision) serve as important signals of commitment to the group and are badges to maintain the distinction between the in-group and the out-group. These rituals, which are hard to fake, indicate depth of immersion into the group so as to prevent outsiders from easily assimilating and reaping membership benefits without any prior or intended future investment.

Christianity, with its message of love and universalism in the New Testament (in contrast to the fire-and-brimstone nativism of the Old Testament), may at first seem immune to an evolutionary analysis. Teehan explains why this is not the case—universalism’s flip side is exclusivism where “anyone can be a Christian but only Christians may be saved” (p. 168). Far from eliminating the out-group, Christianity merely expanded the in-group from kin and ethnicity to potentially all mankind, and this expansion is arguably necessitated by the struggle of nascent Christianity competing with a more powerful and established Judaism. Even the ethic of “turning the other cheek” may be seen as a wise submissive strategy in times of oppression where retaliation would mean certain death. Thus, Jesus’ message of universalism may be seen as a moral innovation to handle the challenges of the new social environment where the day’s Judaism no longer adequately served the current needs of its followers.

With this rapid expansion, the threat of cheaters and defectors is ever more urgent. This is evident in Jesus’ escalation of the distinction between the in- and out-group to new levels. Nonbelievers are “the sons of the evil one” (Matt: 13:37-19; p. 162) and will be thrown “into the furnace of fire” (Matt: 13:40-43; p. 163), in the process, dehumanizing nonbelievers, and implicitly sanctioning violence against them.

Therefore, Christian universalism with its sense of certitude, creates a black and white dichotomy with a definitive boundary around the in-group, and consequently has set up fecund conditions for violence (p. 206). Teehan shows that the Spanish Inquisition, long defended as the fault of men and not religion, is but an expression of the intrinsic aspect of the religious system and its capacity for violence. The Inquisition can thus be seen as a “mechanism for policing the boundaries of the group”, in order to guard against defectors by targeting those whose commitment to the group was deemed insufficient (pp. 170-171).

Not naïve to the critiques leveled against the evolutionary analysis of religion and morality, Teehan devotes a significant portion of the last chapter to discussing them. He argues against what he considers to be the most serious charge, that morality without God lacks an *ultimate* justification, “something that makes sense of our moral obligations and duties [...] which is not grounded in the merely contingent” (p 188). An evolutionary account of morality, Teehan argues, does not need an “eternal grounding in order to justify moral judgments” (p. 193) and will not result in moral relativism and chaos. Instead, this account provides an insight into morality that may pave the way for true moral progress. He concludes the book by promoting his brand of moral pragmatism: *humanism* – “a moral system in which the central value [...] is the well-being of human beings” (p. 217).

Overall, Teehan does a commendable job elucidating his thesis of religion as moral innovation while treating the material with sensitivity and respect. As he takes the reader through the evolutionary perspective on religious doctrine, he avoids unnecessary breadth and does not attempt to cover all the relevant scripture, but instead uses the most poignant examples to illustrate his point. The result is an enjoyable read packed with insights, covering research from a wide range of disciplines, which will appeal to both the researcher in the field as well as the interested layman. Anyone who has pondered the nature of religion and its apparent contradictions will find *In the Name of God* a gem and emerge with a deeper understanding of morality and the religious mind.