# Adaptive faith: Religion in evolutionary perspective

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The Indian peacock's train, a famous example of evolutionary adaptation. Some rights reserved by BS Thurner Hof.

*The explosion of research in evolutionary biology and other sciences is challenging older understandings of human nature as well as theological accounts of the human condition. As part of a yearlong project on evolution and human nature, the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, has supported the research of resident scholars in theology, biology, anthropology and political science and has encouraged interdisciplinary discussions. Here's an excerpt of a conversation among the research fellows.*

**Dominic Johnson**, *professor of international relations at Oxford University:* A lot of new information is coming out about religion from an evolutionary perspective that puts religion in a new light. It suggests that there are adaptive fitness benefits to religious beliefs and behaviors. This understanding offers a very different perspective from that of New Atheist writers like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett. Those thinkers use evolution to explain why religion exists, but they argue that religion is maladaptive. The alternative view also takes an evolutionary perspective but sees religion as providing adaptive benefits.

**Jan-Olav Henriksen**, *theologian at the Norwegian School of Theology:* Theologians will eventually be able to take in this new information and develop it—but some religious believers are not very open to science. And some scientists are not very

open to religion, because they are also trapped in the old paradigms. So this new field presents an important challenge to both science and theology.

**Jeffrey Schloss**, *biologist at Westmont College:* It's true that the emerging discipline—or constellation of disciplines—disagrees with Dawkins. But the fact that something is adaptively beneficial does not necessarily make it morally beneficial. Infanticide might be a practice found in many species and is adaptively salient, but we would find it morally repugnant. What constitutes moral salience is not an empirical question. But once we have that value on the table, it is a fair empirical question to ask: Does religion contribute to human flourishing, however we conceive of flourishing?

The next question is: Are the propositions of a particular religious belief true? Some people, like David Sloan Wilson, affirm the adaptive salience of religion but believe that religion is an adaptive fiction. The truth or falsity of religion is not something that science itself can answer, unless it is a specific claim like the age of the earth. Here's where Dawkins makes his chief error: he argues that religion and science are attempts to explain the same phenomenon in the same kinds of terms—and that science is right and religion is wrong. But that constitutes a misunderstanding of the religious enterprise, which is to advance understanding but not necessarily to offer causal explanation.

**Aku Visala**, *research fellow in science and religion at Oxford:* Regardless of the problems with his work, Dawkins has put his finger on the right pulse by insisting that this is a question of truth. Often the conversation is about adaptation, but that can obscure the idea that truth is the main reason for the whole discussion. It isn't just a practical conversation about whether religion and science can coexist. We are interested in whether the claims that scientists make—and that theologians and religious people make—are true or false.

**Celia Deane-Drummond**, *theologian at the University of Notre Dame:* That raises the issue of ultimate and penultimate explanations. For many biologists, an "ultimate explanation" is an evolutionary explanation. Theologians balk at the idea that evolutionary equals ultimate, but within the empirical paradigm it is the most long-reaching explanation you can have. So if we change the word *ultimate* to *long-reaching* or simply *evolutionary*, it becomes less offensive to theologians. To a degree, the issue is the language that we are using.

**Lee Cronk**, *anthropologist at Rutgers University:* To the extent that we've had trouble communicating with each other, it's because some of us come from a science background and others from a humanities background. You could replace all the evolutionary biologists with chemists and all the theologians with art historians and you would still have the same problems in communication. The religion and evolution debate is not causing the problem. On the truth or falsity question, from an anthropological perspective, I am trying to explain behavior. The truth or falsity of someone's religious claims doesn't matter to me. It only matters if it is true or false to them. That will help me explain behavior.

**Schloss:** I recognize the commitment of anthropology to respect different cultures. On the other hand, I cannot imagine giving an anthropological explanation for a behavior that is based on a belief that is demonstrably false. I am not saying that it is easy to determine the truth or falsity of religious beliefs. But it is hard for me to see how we can escape the questions of truth or falsity using anthropological means.

**Richard Sosis**, *anthropologist at the University of Connecticut:* I want to pick up on Celia's point about the ultimate in theological and scientific terms—from the other side of the aisle, so to speak. If you describe God as omniscient, for example, that may be problematic not only for the relationship between religion and science but also between religions. Yoram Hazony in a recent essay in the *New York Times* said that God is not universally understood as omniscient. In some traditions, God is seen as limited. Most interesting, however, was how numerous commenters interpreted Hazony in the framework of Dawkins and Harris. They didn't see that Hazony was making a theological point; they all assumed that he was saying: "My theology doesn't work, therefore, I have to change it in response to these attacks by Dawkins, Harris and others." That highlights the challenge that we have here.

**Eugene Rogers**, *theologian at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro:* I don't understand why people find the New Atheism interesting. I understand that it gets a lot of popular attention, but it seems to me much too thin to have purchase on any particular religion. It assumes that religion in general resembles a thin kind of Christianity. And the attempt to explain theism—whether you think that theism is a good thing or a bad thing—tries to explain something that doesn't exist. There is no Church of Theism, no community with coherence and rituals called the Church of Theists. So trying to explain theism as adaptive or maladaptive—I just don't see the point.

**Henriksen:** One of the reasons why the New Atheists have an audience is that the public doesn't have much information about theology. And theology can be so abstract that it creates the impression that it is about theism and not about concrete religious practices and traditions. This may sound paradoxical, but the thin understanding of a philosophical concept of religion combined with a lack of theological understanding feeds New Atheism and makes its audience bigger.

**Sosis:** Why is the New Atheism interesting? Well, one reason is that the fastest growing sociological category for religion is "no religion." That needs to be explained.

**Robert Song***, ethicist at Durham University:* I do think that our conversations have clearly shown that the traditional division between religion and science as presented, for example, in the creationists versus Dawkins debates really is history. Evolutionary biologists do not agree with Dawkins, and theologians have little in common with creationists. From my perspective, there is a serious concern about whether the material approach of Dawkins can be sustained. Can materialism sustain itself as an explanation for evolution? Can it give us an understanding of what it is to be a human being—a living, believing, human being—or even what it is to be a scientist?

**Conor Cunningham***, theologian at the University of Nottingham:* But if religion is adaptive, is it to be inferred that it is no longer true? Surely then you have to ask: If science is adaptive, in the sense that it makes possible modern hospitals, for example, is it no longer true? Is it reduced in some way because it is adaptive? Does adaptivity mean less true?

**Schloss:** That's a fair question. A more nuanced version of that question is: What are warrants of the belief? Do we have adequate grounds to believe something to be true? I am an evolutionary biologist and a Christian theist, so I am convinced that Christian belief is both true and warranted. The difference between science and religion goes like this: religious beliefs could be shown to have fitness-enhancing outcomes, even if there were no moral reality or God or objects of belief that religious beliefs target. But scientific beliefs could not be fitness enhancing if they did not adequately describe the empirical realm from which they are derived. If science is a formalized process for developing beliefs about the empirical world, then we would have reason to describe science as truth-targeting in a way that we would not describe religious belief to be. The theist could believe that all of reality,

including the evolutionary process, set in motion events that produced beings that are truth-targeting in all realms, including empirically, morally and religiously. I happen to believe this myself.

**Johnson:** I want to respond to Gene's point about the Church of Theists. Variation is important to biologists because we are not trying to explain universal behaviors; we are trying to explain ecology: Why are we seeing certain types of beliefs in one place and not in another? That's the essence of biological anthropology. As Lee said, in a way, truth claims don't matter. You are trying to understand particular behavior in a particular sociological context. The variation you point to, Gene, is the very reason for our study.

**Deane-Drummond:** One of the worries driving the creationist movement isn't just about the scientific content of Darwinian claims, but about the sociocultural, moral and ethical impact of Darwinism on the world. It is perceived to be an undermining of sociocultural norms. The difference in our conversation is that many of the theologians sitting around this table are willing to accept evolutionary biology on its own terms. Where it becomes more uncomfortable is when that science seeks to become all-embracing. It moves into a form of metaphysical naturalism. That pressure or urge to take over other disciplines is something that can be avoided only by a mutual conversation. If we can show that sort of mutual restraint, we will further the dialogue. That is one of the problems with the way the conversation has been organized around Dawkins—there is no sense of restraint.

**Rogers:** In the spirit of Celia's comment, I agree with Dom that variation is the crucial point. The more that evolutionary biology can segue into evolutionary anthropology and even into cultural anthropology and talk about thick details, the more attention that religious studies scholars will pay to it.

**Henriksen:** This is again a topic on which we theologians face problems with our constituencies. For example, theologians are used to thinking about theology as something that develops, as does religion. But religious people often think of religion as something that contains eternal and universal truth. They often do not have a historical understanding of it. Can something be true yet historically and culturally conditioned?

**Cunningham:** Theology in the Christian tradition has understood itself as a container that may have eternity in it, but the vessels are earthly. Therefore, it is

open to examination from a number of disciplines. It can be approached scientifically. But I still want science to recognize its dependence on metaphysics, and then maybe also on theology. I want an examination of the telos involved in its practice. Science says: objectivity is good, subjectivity less so. I want scientists to acknowledge that they are engaged in a teleological activity.

**Visala:** There is an evolutionary account of theology, but science is also evolutionary. It develops in a particular kind of way. The concepts that scientists use have a history, and they come from many different places. And scientists are human beings, as Connor has so emphatically said. But we are also always left with the question of truth, which doesn't always emerge out of our explanations of behaviors. It might not be the scientist's job. But for the theologian or the philosopher, it might be.

**Schloss:** In this group I haven't heard any resistance from theologians to the idea that theology is socially and culturally embedded and that it responds to new information, including scientific information. It is interesting that when theology changes in response to science, the media often refer to it as a "retreat," whereas if something changes science's idea of itself, it is called an "advance." Most religiously inclined people would see a conversation like this as an advance. I think it is possible for theology and metaphysics and intuition to inform science. Not that these prejudge particular conclusions, but that they might inform the reservoir of hypotheses deemed plausible to merit investigation.

Take, for example, the notion that religions are complex adaptive systems. You could entertain this claim apart from any theological commitment, but it might also be supported by such commitments. Or take the idea that human beings flourish in environments in which they make altruistic investments in one another. Or that evolution itself has a thematically coherent trajectory. All of these might be deemed more plausible with certain theological precommitments. Then we roll up our sleeves and test these ideas empirically the way any idea is tested.

**Cunningham:** One thing we must make clear is that something like intelligent design is beyond the pale for many of us insofar as it looks at phenomena and says, "Oh, you can't explain that, and therefore there is a designer." I think that the theologians here want to look at the cosmos holistically, not isolating one aspect of it. Intelligent design is not a hypothesis on the table.

**Deane-Drummond:** When theological ideas are taken up by science, the meanings themselves change. And scientific meanings change when they are woven into a theological context. We each have our own meaning worlds, so to speak. I am committed to allowing theological insights to be drawn into scientific contexts, as long as they are not dismembered there and the rich cultural context they come from is forgotten. The word *ecology* takes on different meanings in different realms, for example.

**Johnson:** We should have a conversation about the difference between theology and religion as it is practiced by everyday people. It may be that we end up trying to work out the differences between the intellectual approach of religion and the intellectual approach of science but say very little to explain the behavior of real people. Evolutionary anthropologists are interested in explaining the behavior of people, not necessarily in explaining the behavior of theologians.

**Schloss:** You could say the same thing about science. The doctrine of materialism is one that is affirmed rhetorically, but it is not clear to me that it matches the behavior of any scientist.