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# The Conscious Evolution of Humans: Towards a Religious Reform

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## **Abstract**

Through contemporary understandings of evolution, humans are known as highly evolved individuated selves that possess superior cognitive abilities and a capacity for self-reflection. The development of exceptional human abilities of awareness of themselves and the surrounding environments has enabled humans to consciously evolve (Heyes). Conscious evolution refers to the capability of humans to be conscious participants in the evolution of their societies through perceiving cultural and social patterns and reacting with those existing patterns. Religions are patterns of social action that have persisted over time and are built upon certain beliefs and rituals that a human group develop to answer questions about the meaning and purpose of existence. The emergence of human religious consciousness dates back thousands of years ago to early Homo sapiens continuing until contemporary major world religions and philosophical traditions (Peoples et al. 262). Religions have had fundamental impacts on our epistemological foundations and the emergence of scientific inquiry. Although religions might have started as means for humans to find meaning and order in the universe, they have become ends for which human groups fight and engage in conflicts. A possible approach to have a better understanding of human nature could be the analysis of religious ideas and experiences in the light of the modern advances in evolutionary psychology and neuroscience. Studying religious consciousness through evolutionary lens with relation to the environment is necessary to gain deeper insights into the human condition and to reconcile between religions and the modern philosophical and scientific understandings of life.

*Keywords:* Religions, Evolutionary Psychology, Cultural Evolution, Reform

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## **Introduction**

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Religious beliefs and rituals are mysterious phenomena in our evolutionary history and have puzzled philosophers of science and evolutionary theorists. They have been fundamental elements of human societies, influencing our epistemological, ethical, and even aesthetic foundations. In the contemporary world, we live between two threatening currents of fundamentalism and religiophobia, which could be attributed to the overly polarized nature of the secular-religious dichotomy. Accordingly, providing a new understanding and re-interpretation of the origins and purpose of religious beliefs and rituals could be helpful to combat these two threats. Although religions might seem to vary substantially, all religious traditions share remarkably similar underlying parallels that could lend themselves to evolutionary explanations and adaptive values. The goal of this paper is to provide a potential framework for understanding religious beliefs and rituals through evolutionary psychology lens. Through understanding that we are consciously evolving species, we not only would acknowledge that our understanding, interpretation, and endorsement of religious beliefs should be evolving but also embrace religions for their evolutionary functions and as a heritage of humans' attempts to make sense of themselves and the external world.

### **Are Rituals Unique to Humans?**

Religious beliefs and rituals have been a fundamental constituent in the structure of many human societies from pre-historic to modern times. From the simple rhythmic motor patterns in invertebrates and vertebrates to the more complex cultural and religious manifestations, rituals

could have many different forms. According to modern neuroscience, some of those ritualistic behaviors could be innate behavioral patterns like mating rituals, but others could be learned and acquired through complex environment interactions that influence the basal ganglia and cortical brain areas (Graybiel 361). Although it might seem that social rituals are unique to human societies, there is a rising evidence in ethology and evolutionary psychology suggesting that other animal group could exhibit similar social rituals. For example, *Homo naledi*, an extinct hominin species, were found to exhibit social ritualistic behaviors through archaeological and anthropological studies (Val). *Homo naledi* placed the dead bodies of their group in caves, which has led some scientists to view this activity as an advanced ritualistic behavior and as a sign of symbolic thought. Those mortuary rituals might suggest that *Homo naledi* were able to see themselves as beings that transcend the natural world, which could indicate that they were capable of symbolic thinking (Madison). Additionally, *Loxodonta africana* (African elephants) have been found to show high levels of interest in elephant skulls and ivory and exhibit dramatic reactions to the dead bodies of other elephants (McComb et al). Although those observed rituals do not have religious basis, they might help us understand the development and evolution of human religious rituals. Examining those ritualistic behaviors in other animals could reveal the evolutionary parallels and distinctions between rituals that have religious basis and others that do not. In other words, identifying the traits of religious rituals that make them unique to humans among other animalistic social rituals could give us insights about how humans have evolved to have religious rituals.

### **The Necessary Traits for Evolving Religious Rituals**

Looking at the closest living relatives of humans, non-human primates like bonobos and chimpanzees, Barbara J. King argues that they possess certain traits that are necessary for the

evolution of religious imagination. Since we share a common ancestor with these animals, it is likely that human religious rituals have emerged over time as a result of the traits that our common ancestors had. For instance, our common ancestors most likely had relatively rich cognitive abilities, exhibited some capacity for symbolic communication, and had a sense of social structure and realization of the self. In other words, King traces an evolutionary trajectory that connects humans with other primates through highlighting some shared traits between them like empathy, social meaning-making, and imaginative thinking, which could be the precursor traits for evolving religious imagination (King 212). In order to understand religions through evolutionary terms, it would be helpful to understand the survival and reproductive functions they might have served throughout history.

### **How Religions Might Have Evolved**

There are two main views that address the possible mechanisms which have driven the evolution of religious consciousness (Sanderson). It is important to note that, although the two views are abstractly different, the distinction between them does not matter much for the main argument since they both offer explanations for religious beliefs and rituals in the light of evolution. The first view considers religions as adaptations to conditions that selected for the evolution of religious groups. This view considers that religions have an evolutionary function of improving cooperation and inducing cohesion within human groups, and individuals that were able to form religious beliefs and practice rituals were the ones able to survive. The other view considers religions as spandrel, a characteristic that is a byproduct of the evolution. According to this view, some traits that humans acquired through natural selection have led them to establish religions. For example, consciousness might have forced early human groups to realize the importance of

cooperation and cohesion within groups and the necessity of having shared moral codes and value structures, leading them to establish religions as possible solutions to such challenges (Gould 58).

A practical approach to understand the evolution of religions is to break them down into smaller elements like social structures, beliefs, traditions, arts, etc. From a pluralistic perspective, I think it is plausible that some of those elements might have begun as adaptations and others as byproducts of other traits. In other words, religions are too intricate to be exclusively classified as either adaptations or byproducts. For example, developing complex social structures might have started as adaptation; there was selection for individuals with cognitive abilities that made them capable of forming beliefs and performing the necessary social interactions for survival and reproductive success. Hence, it is possible that early human groups survived because of adaptations to conditions that selected for developing complex social structures like religions. Another element of religions that could be considered as an evolutionary byproduct is forming supernatural beliefs. As humans developed consciousness and complex cognition, they might have been overwhelmed by natural phenomena, and due to our cognitive limitations, the deceiving nature of senses, and lacking the means to understand the intricate nature of the human mind, humans could easily form supernatural beliefs. Considering supernatural beliefs as only evolutionary spandrels does not necessarily exclude their evolutionary advantages since supernatural beliefs could sometimes provide a multitude of evolutionary and social advantages like emotional strength, confidence, and persistence in the face of adversity. For example, tending to supernatural powers or gods during natural disasters and crises could be a powerful way for some humans to find refuge through meaning and hope, leading them to have better chances for survival.

While showing that different elements of religion could have started separately as either evolutionary adaptations or spandrels, it is important to acknowledge that those elements could

also be very intersectional and deeply informed by each other. For instance, supernatural beliefs could be influenced by the existing social structures, and they also could provide a framework for reconstructing or maintaining a particular religious social structure. This supports the proposition that taking a pluralistic approach in examining the evolutionary origins of religions could be more appropriate for the complex, multifaceted nature of human religions.

Whether we view religions as adaptations or spandrels, we explain the emergence of religious consciousness through evolutionary terms. As consciously evolving species, religions for so long have shaped and affected our epistemological and ethical foundations, and their shortcomings in certain aspects might have even motivated scientific and philosophical developments to overcome those challenges. I think that this could lead us to reconcile with religions as an integral part of our conscious evolution that our current cultural developments have been contingent upon. One important aspect to highlight about the value of religions is their normative powers that could guide humans to act morally and responsibly. Religious identities connect individuals to a subjective transcendental value that provides them with meaning and fulfillment. Understanding those evolutionary advantages of religions can also help us embrace them as a heritage of humans' attempts to make sense of themselves and the external world, which could still provide us with many interesting intellectual and philosophical insights and could have so much to offer about living a good life and understanding of who we are.

Nonetheless, the social powers of religion could be “constructive” as well as “oppressive”. Internalizing religious beliefs in a literal, fundamentalist sense could lead to the emergence of psychological oppression among believers, forcing members of a particular religious community to conform to the oppressive traditions of their religion and to have guilt and diminished feelings of self-worth if they fail to live up to those oppressive norms (Bartky 106). The result of such

oppressive social norms in religious communities would be inducing hatred between members of the community with conflicting interests and perspectives, ruining social relationships, and inhibiting individuals from making existential choices and living authentically. The purpose of discussing those oppressive powers of religions is not necessarily to suggest radically breaking from any form of religiosity, as detaching oneself from one set of religious social powers could mean internalizing different powers that could be just as controlling and oppressive for other people. For example, eliminating religions from societies could mean just replacing religions with other political ideologies or economic systems that serve as new powers for controlling the society by inadvertently leading individuals to tie their self-worth with fulfilling certain other prescribed societal roles and meeting certain materialistic expectations.

Accordingly, the goal of acknowledging both the benefits and shortcomings of religious social powers is to become aware of such powers and to explore healthy ways by which we can aspire for reforming our societies and cultures. Understanding that we are consciously evolving species shows that religious beliefs and rituals should not be taken as an ultimate authority for morality or as absolute, indubitable truths. As human societies are evolving, our understanding, interpretation, and endorsement of religious beliefs should be evolving as well, which could be a practical approach to combat fundamentalism.

### **Addressing Potential Challenges**

Someone might challenge the whole idea that taking an evolutionary psychology approach might contribute much to our understanding of religions for two potential reasons. The first is that classical evolutionary theory is good for explaining changes in heritable biological traits relative to the relevant environmental pressures. Nevertheless, when it comes to religions, there might not be much reason to think that either beliefs or rituals are evolutionary in the same sense as other



biological traits. The second reason is that we do not have sufficient archeological or anthropological evidence concerning early human lives, so we might not be able to make valid assumptions about the emergence of their belief and rituals. Hence, religion might not be a phenomenon that lends itself well to evolutionary explanations.

Though it is true that religious beliefs and rituals themselves are not biologically heritable, the ability or tendency to form and accept those beliefs is. For example, the human mental capacity for symbolic thinking is heritable and could be studied through classical evolutionary terms. Hence, one could argue that evolutionary pressures have selected for individuals that had the mental capacity for symbolic thinking and were able to form religious beliefs and practice rituals that helped them survive in cohesive social structures, which would be a possible way of explaining religious elements through classical evolutionary terms. Additionally, although we might not have enough physical evidence for the evolution of religions, I believe that there is some value in giving “how possibly” explanations for the evolutionary psychology of religions, even if we do not have good “how actually” explanations. Religions have deeply influenced modern epistemological and moral values, so it is worth considering the potential evolutionary origins and significance of religious beliefs and rituals. Religious failure is imposing serious challenges on human societies, and that suggests that humans should reform their understanding of religions to solve the philosophical dilemmas of religious thoughts.

In order to reform religions, I think it is important to understand their potential roots. One way to reconcile with religions is to acknowledge their potential evolutionary origins and their contributions to our cultural and conscious evolution. To challenge fundamentalism, we can suggest that scriptures, like any other philosophical text, are inspired by “God” but not necessarily revealed, and that there is some sort of sustained inspiration through our conscious evolution. By

this I intend to highlight that having an evolutionary psychological approach in explaining the origins of religions does not fully undermine their epistemic and moral authority but just negate taking fundamentalist approaches about those religions. This could be achieved through taking what one might consider as religious truths more metaphorically than literally by approaching scripture as a divine inspiration instead of approaching it as a revelation. One might also consider that divine inspiration for humans is represented in having an evolving mind that is capable of establishing and reforming complex social and value structures, like religions, that might be necessary for survival. This would be a pluralistic approach that bridges the gap between the overly polarized reality of a secular religious dichotomy and advances our understanding of the human condition. Human conscious evolution is “God’s” or “nature’s” imprint in the human mind that should make us conscious participants in the evolution of our societies through recognizing oppressive patterns of our beliefs and traditions, aiming for reforming them and envisioning freer ways of living. The human mind has been evolving as a tool for promoting survival and well-being of humans, and as we do science and philosophy, we are continuously being inspired to have a better understanding of ourselves and the world and to have a more fulfilling life.

## **Conclusion**

Humans have the unique capability of possessing higher levels of consciousness and cognitive abilities that enable them to consciously evolve. Conscious evolution refers to the capability of humans to be conscious participants in the evolution of their societies through perceiving cultural and social patterns and reforming those existing patterns. The emergence of human religious consciousness could be pluralistically attributed to both evolutionary adaptations and byproducts. Although religions could have many advantages for humans, it became a necessity for humans, as consciously evolving beings, to reform their religious beliefs to become more

tolerant and rational. Studying the evolutionary psychology of religion is necessary to have a better understanding of the human condition and to reconcile between religions and modern philosophical and scientific developments.

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