

[JSRNC 9.1 (2015) 122-124]
doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v9i1.26395

JSRNC (print) ISSN 1749-4907
JSRNC (online) ISSN 1749-4915

Book Review

Matt J. Rossano, *Supernatural Selection: How Religion Evolved* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 294 pp., \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-19-538581-6.

In recent years, the evolution of religion has become the subject of intense debates in the cognitive science of religion. The key question is whether religion should be considered a by-product of ordinary human cognition or an evolved solution to some adaptive problem. In *Supernatural Selection*, Rossano elaborates his own views on the evolutionary origins of religion. Although at the outset he claims not to take sides and aims to create an overarching framework, he clearly leans toward the idea that religion has adaptive value: in the course of our natural history, religion provided certain fitness benefits, leading selection to favor the religious over the non-religious—hence, the title. In fact, Rossano suggests that religion had two benefits: at first, supernatural beliefs embodied in shamanistic practices consolidated the placebo effects provided by intense rituals and thus delivered subtle but real health benefits. Support for this assumption mainly comes from paleontological and anthropological data indicating both the antiquity and ubiquity (and thus the early origins) of shamanism and from psychological and medical studies showing that religious belief and ritual bring health benefits. Second, religion added a supernatural layer to our moral mechanisms, making their functioning more effective and thus opening the road toward ever-increasing social complexity. Eventually, in the struggle for life, the more complex religious groups outcompeted their simpler, secular rivals. Sociological and anthropological research indeed suggests that religious groups tend to be more cooperative. As such, Rossano bases his account on data from different relevant scientific disciplines, which he molds into a coherent system. Given the current boom of available material, this effort is truly praiseworthy. The data, however, allow for multiple interpretations, many of which are at variance with the author's own and so provide ample food for discussion.

Rossano acknowledges that supernatural beliefs originally came about as by-products of ordinary cognitive mechanisms such as a hyperactive agency detection system and theory of mind (Guthrie 1993; Barrett 2000; Boyer 2001; Atran 2002). In fact, most researchers who take the adaptationist position would not quibble over this idea. The debates are mostly about what happens next. Once religious beliefs are in place, do they generate or co-opt behaviors that result in benefits in terms of survival and reproduction? Rossano clearly believes they do, but for reasons I explain below, I tend to disagree. Nonetheless, we are entirely in accord when Rossano typifies religion as 'a supernaturalization of human social life' (p. 11). This is a helpful description of what religion does: it expands our social circle to include agents that we cannot observe but with whom we can interact. In fact, humans pretty much treat these agents as they would treat any other human: they bargain with them, they beg them, they confide in them, they blame and curse them, and so on. From this point on, however, our interpretations part ways. On the basis of interpretations that I think are

often too speculative, Rossano endorses the adaptationist story I briefly summarized earlier. But religion does much more than supernaturalize the social life: it supernaturalizes *everything*. In virtually every culture, supernatural beliefs latch onto causal explanations, rituals, social institutions, moral rules, hygienic procedures, food regulations, sexual relations, art, and even agricultural practices.

The ubiquity of supernatural ideation poses a serious problem to any adaptationist account because it makes defining religion next to impossible, and this obscures what religion could be an adaptation *for*. Rossano acknowledges this problem: 'If we are not even sure what religion is, how can we link it to an environmental challenge for which it was an adaptive response?' (p. 157). He subsequently solves the problem by narrowing the origin of religion down to shamanism, but this still does not adequately explain how religion takes on other shapes. Surely we can concoct a plausible adaptationist story in each and every case, but this approach would load an almost unbearable burden of proof onto adaptationists' shoulders. The more parsimonious alternative is simply to deny that religion constitutes an adaptation and explain the ubiquity of religion in terms of dynamic cultural processes in which evolved mental inclinations systematically lead humans to prefer supernatural over natural accounts. As such, we can also predict that the alleged adaptive role of religion, particularly in the evolution of morality, will be redundant. Surprisingly, those who defend an adaptationist scenario often admit as much and argue that religion simply makes things more efficient, as does Rossano:

Just as religion is not necessary for morality, promises of sex or money are not necessary for weight loss. But those promises might help motivate people to follow the 'rules' of weight loss. What sex and money are to losing weight, religion is to moral behavior—not that religion promises sex and money for being moral, but it does promise things and it does motivate (p. 175).

This comparison merely suggests, however, that at best, religion may function as a cultural scaffold that brings out the best in us by tapping into moral intuitions about fairness. However, on other occasions, as Rossano himself realizes, it can also bring out the worst. When Rossano then also acknowledges that 'a secular environment can produce competent moral skills just as a religious one can' (p. 186), I fail to see where and when religion is necessary to explain morality. Some current theories of evolution can adequately explain the evolution of morality without any reference to religion (e.g., Alexander 1987; Baumard, André, and Sperber 2013).

These criticisms of Rossano's adaptationist account should not to be taken as a dismissal of the book. On the contrary, at times Rossano argues for thought-provoking ideas that prompt the reader to engage in the ruminations about the evolution of religion. If you are interested in the evolution of religion and morality, or even human evolution in general, this book is one of the works you should have on your list.¹

1. For further reading, see, among others, Lawson and McCauley 1990; Boyer 1994; Bering 2011; Norenzayan 2013.

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