Public Abstract

First Name:Ryan

Middle Name:Michael

Last Name:Ellsworth

Adviser's First Name:Craig

Adviser's Last Name:Palmer

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

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This thesis attempts to advance evolutionary understanding of religion by identifying what is meant by the word religion; that is, what behaviors should and should not be considered religious, and exploring the implications this definition has for explaining the evolution of this behavior. In the first chapter, a brief and impartial summary of recent theory and research into religion from the perspectives of evolutionary cognitive psychology and behavioral ecology is presented. Chapter 2 discusses one of the prominent points of contention in the evolutionary study of religion; this is the issue of whether religion is an adaptation or by-product. The implications of how religion is defined for how it is explained are also introduced in chapter 2, as well as a discussion of what is required to build a valid argument for religion as an adaptation. Chapter 3, focus is shifted from the topic of explanation to that of definition. Here, critical discussion of what is and is not appropriate criteria for an accurate definition of religion is presented, existing definitions are scrutinized, and in their place, an alternative definition is proposed. Chapter 4 presents the results of two studies formulated to test the definition of religion posited in chapter 3. Finally, Chapter 5 lays out an explanation of the evolution of religion as a traditional behavior that was directly favored by natural selection for its effects on the descendant-leaving success of ancestral humans.