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Human nature and the sociology of religion

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In sociology, *the group* is a basic unit of analysis, and this *a priori* has indeed inspired Turner's points of view: The origin of religion is driven by natural selection, not in order for us to be religious creatures per se, but as a by-product of a neurology that evolved to make us more social and group-oriented, we are told. More specifically: religious behaviour is merely a small extension of our normal interpersonal behaviour.

Undoubtedly, religion evolved for many reasons, and it serves several functions in human life. Among other things, religion may have helped us to trust, and collaborate/trade with, non-kin and strangers (Norenzayan & Shariff 2008), and to gather in large groups, communities and cultures, as suggested by Turner (however, see Dingemans & van Ingen 2015 and Olson & Li 2015 for empiric reservations about these assumptions).

I am quite convinced that many religious behaviours are only extensions of basic social programmes. *The sacrifice*, for instance, is an essential ritualized gesture in religious practice worldwide. However, it is also a key factor in human sociality ("you have to give to get"), as well as a general evolutionary interaction unit based on a cognitive reciprocity-programme well known in animal life, from sperm whales and vampire bats to primates as ourselves (Høgh-Olesen 2006, 2013, Mauss 1925/1990).

My main objection is Turner's narrowing of focus. It is okay to cut a long and complex story short, but, in my opinion, the overall picture consists of more components than group cohesion. Moreover, - some of the stepping-stones used by Turner, to reach this shortcut, are questionable and hard to substantiate empirically.

"The emotions are biased toward the negative", Turner states, and *"it is easy to see how negative emotions – fear, anxiety, concern, worry, regret, and the like – could come to dominate thinking"*, he continues. Is this true, and where is the baseline to substantiate this statement?

It is easier for us to spot harmful objects among harmless, than the opposite (Öhman, Flygt & Esteves 2001), but this does not mean that our emotions are biased toward the negative; we merely have inborn dispositions to react to specific key stimuli signaling danger.

Humans belong to the category of *Neophile* animals (together with species like parrots, corvids, dolphins and the rest of the primates), which means that we have a strong affinity for novelty. Our *optimal stimulation level* is extremely high, as we are curious, explorative creatures by nature. So, we are intrinsically motivated to explore things for the sheer pleasure of exploring, and do not need external rewards to do so. This curious *go-ahead programming* is the reason why we are omnivorous food opportunists living in all the habitats and climate zones this world can exhibit, which simply is not the behaviour of an animal dominated by negative emotions such as *"fear, anxiety, concern, worry, regret, and the like"*.

In comparison with most other animals, indeed humans are extreme *sensation seekers* with ultra-high stimulation levels. Inside our species, however, some are more sensation seeking than others (Zuckermann 2007), but wherever we do the psychometrics, the distribution between high- and low-stimulation-seekers is Gaussian, so in every culture there are just as many lightheaded “go-ahead-optimists”, as there are wary, structure-seeking “take-care-worriers”. In addition, one of the main factors behind our evolutionary success is our ability to use these personality differences in complex collaborative endeavours.

In short, humans as a species are not biased towards worry and negative thinking. If such sentiments are brought into the equation, we have to take a differential psychological look at the field and ask, if institutionalized religion has primarily been invented in order to comfort the worried, structure-needing members of a community – like a therapeutic device to pamper us when stress and stimulation are far above the optimal. Moreover, is this the reason why, most of the time, the more happy-go-lucky temperaments among us do so well without it?

Another stepping-stone makes me stumble: a group is not a “*natural unit*” to humans, we are told, and we “*lack bioprograms for group formation*”. Furthermore, “*humans do not have natural tendencies to form families*” [sic]. These are indeed strange assumptions that bring the author in opposition to most of the scientific world.

Humans belong to the category of group-living animals, and within this category we are, comparatively speaking, “ultra-social” creatures with exceptional abilities as to long-term pair bonding, to form bands and tribes with specialized workgroups, and to unite in large collaborative, political and commercial alliances and trusts (Lovejoy 1981, Campbell 1983, Tomasello et al. 2005, Høgh-Olesen 2010, Tomasello & Vaish 2013, Tomasello 2014, and countless more references). We engage in complex large-scale cooperation, unparalleled in the rest of the animal world outside the eusocial insects – involving tens, hundreds, or even thousands of participants, united in “super-groups”, pursuing common goals through elaborate individual specialization and division of labour, and sometimes involving radical self-sacrifices for the benefit of the group. And, which is most peculiar: we do so with non-kin and total strangers. We are far more social than our xenophobic cousins, the chimpanzees (de Waal 2005).

Due to our, in the course of time, expanding brains, we have practiced neoteny at least since *Homo habilis*/*Homo erectus*. Our babies are born premature, unable to cling to a female who has lost most of her body hairs, and too helpless to be left on the ground unattended. This selects for the exceptionally strong, close and long-lasting human bonds between a male who provides and protects and a female who returns his favours by taking care of the offspring and offering her particular man exclusive sexual services (Lovejoy 1981). In short: the evolutionary strategy of neoteny selects for the family unit as a functional ecological human niche. So by the time that *Homo sapiens sapiens* appears on stage, we have a natural tendency to long-term pair bonding, to form close-knit family ties (the structure of the family unit may vary from nuclear to more inclusive forms), and to form groups, bands and tribes. Therefore, it is natural for humans to form groups.

Is it difficult for these groups to last? How shall we answer this question, and where is the authoritative empirical baseline to guide us? In a modern society, interest groups change as fast as the areas of interest uniting them. Nevertheless, our more central and basic group formations seem to be quite stable. The western divorce rate may fluctuate, but never the less, family- and friendship-groups are quite stable and long-lasting and so are work groups, political groups and religious groups. Old soldiers, united for 12 to 14 months in their youth, serving their national service, gather to rallies 50 years later. Moreover, they may not even have been in war together to do that.

Dedicated sports- and music-fans as well are quite stable in their support of a special club, artist or band, and so I could continue.

Does religion help us to become more social and group-oriented?

Indeed it may. Inside *the in-group*, religion may be a god's gift: a force that unites us, glues us together and makes us sacrifice our lives for the common good. Between groups, religion may be the devil's dynamite: a force that tears us apart and divides tribes, countries and cultures. Religion serves many interesting functions in human life, and group cohesion may be one of them, but evidently, religion is a double-edged sword when it comes to group dynamics, so in order to understand why religion evolved more factors have to be added to the equation.

Religion appears to be a bi-product of behavioural programs and cognitive faculties selected for other purposes. Our most basic framework conditions have to be taken into account. For instance, humans are social-hierarchical creatures, have an innate authority program, are concerned about status, and establish pecking orders. We award alpha status to special persons, places, objects and animals, and submit to these forces. From this disposition to the idea of a hierarchical cosmos with powerful gods, spirits, ancestors, totem animals, and special power-places and -objects, there is only a minor leap.

Likewise, humans are storytelling, symbolic creatures, who invest meaning, plot and motives in incidences happening by chance. We even invest meaning, plot and human motives in the arbitrary movements of simple geometric figures, as shown in Heider & Simmel's (1944) famous experiments. Just as we suspect agency and intentionality when the wind moves the leaves, because an inborn system ("the Hyperactive Agency Detection Devise") operates on the assumption that it is better to be safe than sorry (Barrett 2004, Boyer 2002). From these dispositions to the faith in supernatural powers – seeing us, sending us symbolic messages and interfering with our lives – again there is only a minor leap. In short, religion came in through the backdoor while we were busy doing other things. It emanates from, among other things, our social-hierarchical and symbolic, narrative nature. Inside the in-group, it may help us to unite and comfort ourselves in times of stress, fear and over-stimulation, just as it may serve other purposes. However, to say that religion evolved to makes us more group oriented is, in my opinion, a too narrow explanation.

I welcome the new disciplines of evolutionary sociology and neurosociology, and trust that the field of religion will benefit from these approaches. Especially the focus on other forms of selections (Spencerian, Durkheimian and Marxian) may be constructive. These selection dynamics, we are told, are "*very different to those posited by Darwin and modern biology, but they are as natural to superorganisms as is Darwinian selection for the evolution of organisms and populations*".

Here a few clarifications would be helpful: in what substantive way do these other forms of selections differ from the Darwinian selection mechanisms? In addition, in what way are they – despite their differences – as natural to superorganisms as natural selection to the evolution of organisms and populations?

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