

tionally nonviable (perhaps because individuals resistant to religious commitment might also be rendered resistant to other, clearly beneficial kinds of sociality). These would be reasonable arguments, worth exploring – but A&N do not make them.

One of the intriguing aspects of the memetic approach is that it obviates the need to argue for dubious fitness benefits of cultural behaviors like religion. Instead, memeticists posit an interaction between two distinct sets of replicators, genes and memes, with the spectacular variation observed in human cultures due in part to their co-evolutionary relationship (Durham 1991). In theory, this model would be less vulnerable to standard objections against group-selectionism because the evolution of the second, cultural replicator could easily stay ahead of so-called selfish adaptations rooted in genes. A&N minimize the potential for memetics to illuminate the selective factors responsible for acquisition of religious concepts, but their own data on the mnemonic advantages of minimally impossible stories are easily accommodated by the memetic approach and would illuminate such factors. In the end, there seems little advantage to preferring a modularist, developmentally improbable “black box” psychology to memes.

Religion is neither costly nor beneficial

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Abstract: Some forms of religion may in some cases alleviate existential anxieties and help maintain morality; yet religion can also persist without serving any such functions. Atran & Norenzayan (A&N) are unclear about the importance of these functions for a theory of the recurrence of religious beliefs and behaviors.

Atran & Norenzayan (A&N) want to avoid anthropological functionalism; yet they try to differentiate religion from mere fiction by emphasizing that only religion involves a ritually expressed and strengthened passionate commitment to the group interests that may also benefit individuals in the long run. Religion creates social cohesion, enhances mental health in individuals, and alleviates existential anxieties related to death and deception (see also Atran 2002a). Yet such functions do not cause the cultural recurrence of religion. Religion is an inevitable by-product of our evolved cognitive structure, a parasite of natural cognitive mechanisms (as also argued by Boyer 1994; 2001). Counterintuitive representations that typify religion (Boyer 1994) are bound to arise because of the fluidity that characterizes human cognition. It is their specific social use that makes them religious.

In the background of A&N's argument is Atran's (2002a, p. 169) tentative suggestion that “the more traditionally and continuously religious the person, the less likely to suffer depression and anxiety in the long run.” Yet many extensive literature reviews have shown that results from studies on religion and mental health are mixed and even contradictory. Bergin (1983), for example, found that in 23% of the reviewed studies, there was a negative relationship between religion and mental health, in 47% of the studies the relation was positive, and in 30% there was no relationship. This is close to what one would expect by chance. Another alternative is that the results are skewed because of methodological difficulties. Almost all studies of so-called conversions, for example, suffer from various kinds of methodological shortcomings, such as near total reliance on measures of self-perceived change (Emmons & Paloutzian 2003). Gartner (2002) is suspicious of the existence of such difficulties, yet acknowledges the fact that the very idea of “religious concept” has no generally accepted definition. Krymkowski and Martin (1998) found that in the papers published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, beginning from 1986, religion was prominently taken to be an independent causal

factor, affecting things such as abortion attitudes, alcohol consumption, and so on. Such explanations are highly problematic because no sufficient attention has been paid to the mechanisms by which religion supposedly exercises influence, the direction of causality is not always clearly established, and controls are not always used. Often it is not clear what is meant by “religion.”

Gartner (2002) claims that much of the discrepancy in the findings may be explained by differences in the ways mental health is measured. It is therefore very difficult to find unequivocal causal relationships. Gartner (2002) argues that the studies that found a negative relationship between religion and mental health typically employed personality tests with only limited reliability and validity, whereas the studies that found a positive correlation were based on real-life observations concerning drug abuse, delinquency, and the like. However, it is not clear what it is in religion that contributes to mental health: professing certain counterintuitive beliefs, performing rituals, the social relationships among believers, or what? (Cf. Levin & Chatters 1998.) Thus, George et al. (2002) conclude that “we are far from understanding the mechanisms by which religious involvement promotes health.” Pargament (2002) remarks accordingly that, even when significant results are obtained, they provide only little insight into how religion works.

A&N actually warn: “All of this isn't to say that *the* function of religion is to promise resolution of all outstanding existential anxieties any more than *the* function of religion is to neutralize moral relativity and establish social order” (sect. 7, last para.). But they are unclear about the other functions religion might have, and ultimately leave the role of functional explanations unspecified. It is not clear, for example, whether they wish to explain the persistence of religion by its functions, or only want to distinguish religion from mere fiction by its functions.

It is more likely that religion persists because in everyday thinking there is little reason to try to eliminate it; this would require the kind of reflective thinking that typifies science, and which is cognitively costly and of little relevance in everyday life (see Barrett 2004; McCauley 2000; Pyysiäinen 2003a; 2004; Sperber & Wilson 1986). Religion persists because it is plausible in the context of everyday thought. This in no way necessitates that religion is useful in the sense of providing an antidote against anxiety or other fears. Some forms of religion may do this in some instances, but this is not a necessary characteristic of religion. A&N's experiments, for example, only show that a death prime activates religious beliefs, not that they necessarily alleviate anxiety in the face of death. Religious beliefs differ from fictional ones in that only religious beliefs are believed to be capable of guiding actual motor interaction with real objects (see Cruse 2003). It could be speculated that ritual action enhances this belief, irrespective of whether it helps alleviate anxiety. All that is needed is that persons believe that neglecting the ritual duties could be dangerous. This belief arises when people combine randomly generated counterintuitive representations with social practices such as baptisms, weddings, and so forth (see Pyysiäinen 2003b). Religion also does not always have to be in any sense “costly”; nonreligion often is more costly.

Does commitment theory explain non-kin altruism in religious contexts?

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Abstract: Atran & Norenzayan (A&N) fail to address several problems with commitment theory as it relates to non-kin altruism in religious contexts. They (1) provide little support for the contention that religious sacrifices function as signals, (2) do not distinguish between religious specialists and lay believers, and (3) conflate definitions of cooperation and sacrifice.