

Book Review

Religion Evolving: Cultural, Cognitive, and Ecological Dynamics. By Benjamin Grant Purzycki and Richard Sosis. Equinox Publishing, 2022. 262 pages. \$100.00 (hardcover), \$32.00 (paperback or e-book).

The evolution of religion is a contentious topic in the academy. Many scholars dismiss the approach as a repetition of old mistakes. Those who see questions about the evolution of religion as viable are themselves divided along old fault lines, with some prioritizing beliefs and others behaviors. In *Religion Evolving: Cultural, Cognitive, and Ecological Dynamics*, Benjamin G. Purzycki and Richard Sosis synthesize a decades-long research program that speaks to the skeptics and the engaged to show how appropriately complex and holistic models of religion push us beyond the concerns of both camps by providing a more realistic view of the way that religious systems are responsive to socioecological challenges.

A key to their argument is that religious systems are complex adaptive systems. Purzycki and Sosis detail this approach in chapter 9, but it permeates the book. By “complex,” they mean that religious systems are irreducible: if you remove any individual piece, then the whole system substantially changes. These complex systems are adaptive in the sense that they are linked to fitness challenges within their environment. Crucially, that environment is both physical and social. In *Religion Evolving*, this functional and systemic view is presented as an essential tool if we are to move beyond the byproduct/adaptation debates from twenty years ago and build an integrative understanding of the cross-cultural variation and similarity in religious beliefs and behaviors.

Before exploring the importance of this approach for research in the evolution of religion, Purzycki and Sosis directly address the concerns of those who dismiss evolution as irrelevant, if not harmful, for understanding human culture. They, helpfully, identify most of these concerns as rooted in the use of cultural functionalism as an interpretative lens. In chapter 2, Purzycki and Sosis present the ways in which current functionalist methods are a different species than the ad-hoc naïve functionalism of the mid-twentieth century. By reviewing the broad empirical foundations for claims that religious beliefs and rituals help resolve socioecological challenges, Purzycki and Sosis make it difficult to dismiss evolution as irrelevant to our understanding of religious systems. This review also lays groundwork for the rest of the book, which integrates these findings into a systematic framework.

To build this systematic framework, along with the case for its necessity, Purzycki and Sosis begin with research on the evolutionary origins and functions of religious beliefs. Some of the ideas here will be familiar to both the skeptics and the engaged. Supernatural beliefs build on our psychological predispositions toward pattern detection, teleological thinking, and inferring

the minds of others. What is helpful about Purzycki and Sosis's integrative approach is that it speaks to the ways that these beliefs will vary in response to particular socioecological contexts and challenges. Accounting for this variance across cultures is a crucial step beyond the naïve functionalism found in earlier evolutionary accounts of religion.

For example, one of the more developed areas of research in the cognitive and evolutionary science of religion suggests that the belief in supernatural punishment functions to prevent free-riders within one's group. Purzycki and Sosis's ethnographic sensitivity is a crucial addition to this literature as it leads them to ask: what do gods care to punish? In chapters 4 and 5, they show how this question helpfully extends and specifies the supernatural punishment hypothesis to link these beliefs more robustly with the various cooperation challenges that any particular group may face.

Part of their answer to this question, expanded on in chapter 4, is that the content of gods' concerns will vary along a spectrum between moralistic concerns and ritualistic concerns. Moral concerns will increase alongside social complexity in order to overcome the issues of anonymity within larger societies. Ritual concerns, on the other hand, will be more prevalent in smaller groups that are more oriented toward and dependent on shared action. Chapter 5 builds on this approach by presenting a case study on the domains of knowledge that people tend to attribute to gods. This analysis gives empirical weight to the functional claim that supernatural agents in complex societies are believed to be particularly interested in immoral social information. The case study also gives the reader a good sense of the type of research on which they draw.

As Purzycki and Sosis turn in the middle of the book from religious beliefs to religious rituals, they expand their argument beyond functionalist accounts of cross-cultural variation to integrate these beliefs with ritual behaviors. Chapter 6 provides a crucial step in this expansion as they show how religious beliefs themselves cannot be considered apart from the social context within which these beliefs are held, professed, and passed down. Drawing from various examples, Purzycki and Sosis helpfully blur the lines between religious beliefs and behaviors by carefully identifying the dependencies that exist between the two. Chapter 7 furthers this move into the broader context by bringing in ample evidence that costly rituals function as a crucial social signal of one's commitment to the group.

A core theoretical example here is the feedback loop that exists between costly rituals and the endorsement of unverifiable beliefs. The two support each other while also jointly solidifying individual commitments to the group. This feedback loop is just one example that helps Purzycki and Sosis persuasively argue that the byproduct versus adaptation debates that used to bog down evolutionary accounts of religion are largely a side effect of focusing too narrowly on beliefs or behaviors in isolation from each other. In contrast, a systemic approach can consider the ways in which religions draw from various cognitive predispositions to build systems of beliefs and behaviors that are dynamically attuned to socioecological challenges. This intuitive and empirically grounded argument should help solidify the field's movement away from these debates while also providing a framework for more holistic interpretations in future studies.

In the final portion of the book, Purzycki and Sosis work to solidify their integrative account of religions as complex adaptive systems. Here the chapters necessarily become more theoretical and aspirational. Yet, even as they venture into more theoretical terrain, Purzycki and Sosis remain attentive to the extensive ethnographic and experimental work that has been conducted across the globe. The balance they provide between the broad integrative framework demanded by cultural evolutionary approaches and the thick descriptive attention demanded by the particularities of any given context is perhaps the greatest strength of the book. By pulling their various fields together, Purzycki and Sosis have provided a solid foundation for future work on the evolution of religion.

This book may not change the minds of those scholars who are dismissive of evolutionary approaches to religion. Purzycki and Sosis present and weave together evidence that makes it difficult to dismiss current evolutionary work as simply a repetition of older naïve functionalist accounts. Some, however, may see the theoretical extension of this evidence as overly speculative. As the framework becomes more complex, it also becomes more difficult to falsify. However, Purzycki and Sosis are clear that in many ways the account they provide is still provisional and aspirational. More work is needed, and as chapter 10 makes clear, this work will be deeply collaborative. As such, the tone throughout the book is not one of imperialist scientific certainty, as evolutionary approaches are often portrayed, but rather a tone of invitation. This tone is perhaps as important as the content they present in helping Purzycki and Sosis successfully navigate the contentious debates surrounding the evolution of religion. For those of us interested in understanding the ways in which religions are shaped by evolution, this work marks a watershed in the field by bringing together the existing work and synthesizing it into a framework that puts old debates to rest while providing a guide for future inquiry.

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