



## Book Review

*In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* by Scott Atran  
New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Reviewed by Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi

The dust jacket of *In Gods We Trust* shows us El Greco's *Vision of St. John* and the title page Rembrandt's *Sacrifice of Isaac*. There is more artwork, illustrations of various rituals and structures, together with plenty of examples, quotations, and references taken from scores of cultures and traditions, as well as several academic disciplines.

With almost 1000 references and discussions of most of human history and culture, from Neanderthal burials to suicide-bombers in the Palestinian anti-colonialist struggle, this book is consciously and truly encyclopedic in scope, and shows both breadth and depth of scholarship. Its theoretical framework is what has become known as cognitive anthropology, together with an evolutionary emphasis.

Its explanandum, religion, is defined as "(1) a community's costly and hard-to-fake commitment (2) to a counterfactual and counterintuitive world of supernatural agents (3) who master people's existential anxieties, such as death and deception" (p. 4). The author makes no "...distinctions between magic and myth, between primitive and modern thought, or among animistic, pantheistic, and monotheistic forms of religion" (p. 8), and that is to his

credit. Such distinctions, when they appear in the literature, usually reflect ethnocentrism and apologetics.

The explanans rests on two foundations: a cognitive argument and an evolutionary one. The cognitive argument is that "Religion involves extraordinary use of ordinary cognitive processes to passionately display costly devotion to counterintuitive worlds governed by supernatural agents. The conceptual foundations of religion, like those of culture itself, are intuitively given by highly specialized, universal cognitive domains that are the evolutionary endowments of every human being, such as folkpsychology, folkbiology, and folkmechanics" (p. 51). This seems like a convincing and reasonable idea.

The evolutionary argument (similar to that presented by Stewart Guthrie in 1993, in *Faces in the Clouds*) is that "Supernatural agents are..., in part, by-products of a naturally selected cognitive mechanism for detecting agents—such as predators, protectors, and prey... This innate releasing mechanism is trip-wired to attribute agency to virtually any action that mimics the stimulus conditions of natural agents: faces on clouds, voices in the wind,

shadow figures, the intentions of cars and computers... Among natural agents, predators such as snakes are likely to be candidates for deification as are protectors, such as parent-figures” (p. 15). It is easy to note that more protectors (parents) are chosen than snakes, but this hypothesis of an innate releasing mechanism is supported by some clear findings about our innate tendency to interpret motion as evidence for intention.

The evolutionary argument (repeated on p. 51) is the heart of this book, but the evolutionary sources of religious ideation do not imply that religion itself is adaptive.

Hard-wired, basic cognitive systems of humans lead to perceptual errors because we can take no chances and always err on the side of caution. If this is the origin, then how is this error maintained with such consistency? And how does religion lead to such readiness to sacrifice? “In every society known there is... hard to fake public expression of costly material commitments to supernatural agents, that is sacrifice (offering of goods, time, other lives, one’s own life, etc.)” (p. 13). The phenomenon of religion is described as an evolutionary puzzle or dilemma, because religion is just too costly to be adaptive: “Religions are not adaptations and they have no evolutionary functions as such” (p. 12).

Despite the cognitive and evolutionary arguments, and despite the claim that “The conceptual foundations of religion, like those of culture itself, are intuitively given” (p. 51) we are told that religious beliefs are “systematically counterintuitive in the same basic way” (p. 9). Later on in the book, we read that “In all cultures, supernatural agents are readily conjured up because natural selection has trip-wired cognitive schema for agency detection in the face of uncertainty. Uncertainty is, and likely will always be, ubiquitous” (p. 71). If natural selection has created this ubiquitous mental operation, which is so common and so readily accepted, why is it counterintuitive?

One answer suggested by Atran, is that

the degree to which religion is counterintuitive is minimal, and embedded in both the ordinary work of everyday cognition and humanity’s existential concerns: “The beliefs current in religious doctrine and liturgy consist of logically unintegrated counterintuitions and anecdotal episodes that evoke a much richer substrate of everyday, commonsense beliefs... Core religious beliefs minimally violate ordinary intuitions about how the world is, with all of its inescapable problems, thus enabling people to imagine minimally impossible worlds that appear to solve existential problems, including death and deception” (p. 83). It seems to this reviewer that the religious solutions to death create worlds that are rather maximally impossible, but maybe it’s a matter of taste (and hope). And it seems that the intuitive-counterintuitive distinction remains unclear, and may be usefully dropped. The counterintuitive is most easily found in academic research, and this book is a good example. Magical and religious ideas are natural and intuitive; it’s physics we have to work on so hard.

As I tried to illustrate with the above quotations, the reader finds himself constantly challenged and provoked into an intellectual ping-pong game as he follows the arguments and the huge body of findings marshalled to buttress them. Because of the wealth of anthropological data, and the author’s basic approach, the book is largely non-ethnocentric. The author reminds us that body-mind dualism is not René Descartes’ error, but is found in every culture. Still, it seems that when discussing monotheism, Atran chooses to ignore its presence in some pre-literate cultures.

The book contains well-argued critiques of other theoretical approaches, such as the temporal lobe theory of religious experience, memetics, and even Kevin MacDonald’s bizarre theory of Jewish “eugenics”.

Among the hundreds of cases and claims cited, I had trouble in a few cases, where it seemed that more critical thinking was needed before joining this piece into the great

mosaic. Thus, the practice of “slaying one’s own healthy and desired offspring...” cannot cover “adolescents caught up in contemporary Western Satanic cults or Afro-Brazilian Voodoo” (p. 6). This is just the stuff of urban legends. The idea that “...beliefs held in faith become not only immune to falsification and contradiction but become even more strongly held in the face of apparent falsification or contradiction” (p. 93), supposedly derived from *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger, Schachter & Riecken, 1956), has been disconfirmed more than once. The mass-suicide at Masada (pp. 54,134) is considered by historians today as an invention by Josephus.

The cognitive anthropology of religion has been one of the most important developments in the study of religion over the past two decades. It follows the Enlightenment tradition as expressed by Hume (cited by Atran on p. 68) who observed that in the human mind “...trees, mountains, and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion”. The “old” psychology of religion

used the terminology of animism and projection. The new cognitive anthropology of religion avoids these terms, insisting on the evolutionary machinery that makes costly, but acceptable, errors inevitable. Atran managed to combine the old and the new by relating the automatic cognitive operations to existential anxieties. This combination will be a benchmark and a challenge to students of religion in all disciplines.

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