



## Book Review

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

Reviewed by David L. Smith

Scott Atran, a cognitive anthropologist and psychologist, presents in this volume a rich, nuanced cognitive-evolutionary account of religion. Eschewing attempts to translate genes directly into behavioral propensities, group selectionism and memetics, Atran situates his project firmly in the emerging synthesis of cognitive science and evolutionary biology.

From this vantage, religion is not doctrine, or institutions, or even faith. Religion ensues from the ordinary workings of the human mind as it deals with emotionally compelling problems of human existence, such as birth, aging, death, unforeseen calamities, and love.

Religion is costly and its doctrines typically starkly counterintuitive. If one assumes that religion is an item that has been directly selected for, this entails a Quixotic quest to identify specific fitness enhancing features of religion offsetting its considerable costs, but if religiosity is an essentially non-adaptive consequence of adaptive features of human cognition, then we are free to look for the payoffs elsewhere: *'Religions are not adaptations and they have no evolutionary functions as such.'* Atran regards religiosity as a phenomenon fed

by several evolutionary sources. Religion, like other cultural phenomena, 'results from a confluence of cognitive, behavioral, bodily and ecological constraints that neither reside wholly within minds nor are recognizable in a world without minds' – the evolutionary landscape of the book's title – each defining ridge of which is constituted by a set of psychological faculties. One such influence consists of primary and secondary affective programs. Another involves the social intelligence module, which was probably rooted in ancestral experiences of avoiding predators and hunting prey, and received tremendous impetus by the selection pressures exerted by group living. A third lies in the operation of functionally independent evolved cognitive modules such as those devoted to folkmechanics, folkbiology, and folkpsychology.

The book begins with a discussion of evolution and, in particular, cognitive evolution. Although much of this will be 'old hat' to anyone with a serious interest in evolutionary psychology there are some gems here (I particularly enjoyed the powerful critique of the use of attachment theory to explain religiosity). We then move on to a discussion of the human

tendency to detect agency where none is present. The belief in supernatural agency can in large measure be accounted for by the same cognitive adaptation that caused our remote ancestors to interpret the sound of a breeze rustling a bush as the presence of a saber-toothed tiger. In short, 'supernatural agency is an evolutionary by-product trip-wired by predator-protector-prey detection schema'. The next two chapters cover the counterintuitive nature of religious thought and the significance of sacrifice. In Chapter Six Atran concentrates on the dynamics of ritual and revelation in the context of the cognitive psychology of memory. Chapter Seven, 'Waves of Passion', surveys the burgeoning literature on the neuropsychology of religious experience which includes some fascinating accounts of experimental work and a nice critique of Persinger's work. Chapter Eight criticizes traditional sociobiological and group-selectionist accounts of cultural evolution on the grounds that these strange bedfellows all neglect the causal significance of the cognitive architecture of the human mind in the generation of culture. They are 'mindblind'. This chapter contains a rather striking account of group selection as ultimately a notational variant of Hamiltonian kin selection, and inci-

sive critiques of group-selectionist claims made by David Sloan Wilson and Kevin MacDonald. Chapter Nine is a marvelous and highly original critical analysis of memetics. The final chapter - 'Why Religion is Here to Stay' - pulls it all together.

I have little but praise for this marvelous book. I am ashamed to say that, although I was familiar with the author's pioneering work on folkbiology, I had not read anything by him prior to *In Gods We Trust*. It does not take long to realize that one is dealing with a formidable mind; Atran is not only a fine writer, his breadth of knowledge and intellectual depth are nothing short of inspiring. This book is one to read slowly and savor. Keep a post-it pad handy, to mark the pages: the scope of this book is so wide-ranging that whatever your research interest in evolutionary psychology, it is bound to be touched upon at some point in these 400 pages of informative analysis.

David Livingstone Smith, Ph.D., Director, New England Institute for Cognitive Science and Evolutionary Psychology, University of New England, Westbrook College Campus, 716 Stevens Avenue, Portland, Maine 04103, USA. Email: [dsmith06@maine.rr.com](mailto:dsmith06@maine.rr.com).