

Chapter 18

The Evolution of Evolutionary Theories of Religion

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Abstract This paper gives an overview about the development of evolutionary theories of religion. It distinguishes four types namely: (i) a common sense understanding of evolution, (ii) evolution as proceeding to higher levels, (iii) the teleological model of evolution, and (iv) the functional evolutionary notion of religion. Every category is illustrated by an important historical example. Examples are from: for category (i) antiquity and historicism; for category (ii) Schleiermacher, Hegel, Comte, Tylor, Frazer, Bachofen, and Bellah; for category (iii) Aristotle, Paley, and Chardin; and for category (iv) Jäger, Malinowski, D.S. Wilson, E.O. Wilson, Voland. A certain development in complexity of these theories can be observed. The sequence in this development is like this: (a) level of religious consciousness (Schleiermacher, Hegel); (b) correlation between religious consciousness and society (Comte, Tylor); (c) function of particular religions in particular societies (Malinowski). Though functional evolutionary theories of religion dominate the current discussion, their shortcomings are being discussed in Sect. 18.3 and a model is proposed to combine functional and essential features of religion in order to come to a comprehensive understanding of religion, which is not exhausted by its function. Various possibilities to understand the essence of religions are proposed, such as doctrines, transcendence, and experience.

18.1 Introduction

The relation between the concept of evolution and religion has been not without tensions ever since the emergence of evolutionary theories in the middle of the nineteenth century.

However, the perspective under which religion is regarded from an evolutionary point of view has dramatically changed in the course of time. At first religion was

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regarded as superfluous or even harmful, then it was seen as problematic and finally as somehow serving a function with regard to the struggle of life.

In the nineteenth century the heroes and founding fathers of the evolutionary way of thinking interpreted religion within their scientific framework and predicted that religion would necessarily disappear in the course of progressive scientific insights and control over nature. Evolutionary thinkers like Charles Darwin, the founder of positivism, Auguste Comte, or the founder of religious studies, James G. Frazer, could understand religion within their positivistic world view only as a deficient way to explain natural phenomena. This point of view was dominating many decades.

In the late twentieth century when it became apparent that religion still survived even under unhealthy conditions and became still not extinct as anticipated by many naturalistic scientists, a kind of turnaround emerged in the scientific community. Something must be special with religion. Thus, the founder of sociobiology, Edward O. Wilson (1929–) diagnosed, “Religion constitutes the greatest challenge to human sociobiology and its most exciting opportunity to progress as a truly original theoretical discipline” (Wilson 1978, p. 175). He even claimed that religion would become part of the naturalistically oriented scientific paradigm:

[...] the final decisive edge enjoyed by scientific naturalism will come from its capacity to explain traditional religion, its chief competitor, as a wholly material phenomenon. Theology is not likely to survive as an independent intellectual discipline. (Wilson 1978, p. 192)

Finally in the twenty-first century, scientists asked whether or not religion might play a positive role in the evolutionary process. The science journalist Rüdiger Vaas (Vaas 2007) stated on the front page of *bild der Wissenschaft* in February 2007 “Why belief helps.”

So one can see from this short sketch that religion has gained an astonishing acceptance in the scientific community ever since it was excluded from scientific studies in the nineteenth century as an undertaking that retarded scientific progress. Again religion is on the scientific agenda even under the auspices of the concept of evolution. However, it is not always very clear what evolution actually means in the context of religion. This chapter aims toward clarifying different concepts of evolution as they emerged in history and asks for an appropriate one for the evolution of religion by proposing a concept that includes functional and essential parts of religion based on a specific understanding of religion as a part of human nature.

18.2 Four Types of Evolution

18.2.1 Common Sense Understanding of Evolution

Firstly, I mention the common sense use of evolution. This understanding of evolution simply means that things change and nothing remains as it is. Even in antiquity we find some traces of ideas about the development of religions as soon as a consciousness of historical development had arisen. One can identify authors like

Herodot (*Histories*), Plutarch (*de Iside et Osiride*), Lukian (*De Deo Syria*), and Cicero (*De Natura Deorum*), although neither of them uses the word evolution. The original meaning of *evolutio* in Latin language is “to flip a book open,” like Cicero: “*evolutio poetarum*” in *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, 1, 25.

It is interesting to note that such a general common sense understanding of evolution of religion arose also as a result of historicism in the nineteenth century. The so-called “Göttinger Religionsgeschichtliche Schule” as a subdivision of historicism applied historical methods to the Bible, seeking its dependence from other contemporary religions.

This scientific endeavor brought into focus of attention the problem how the peculiarity of the Jewish–Christian tradition relates to the general history of religion. How can historical relativity of religious development be reconciled with the claim of Christianity to be the highest form of religion? Or are there common universal traits of religion that are applicable also to Christianity? Starting from this problem, one of the most famous representatives of the “Religionsgeschichtliche Schule,” Ernst Troeltsch, came up with the concept of evolution in the aforementioned general sense.

He wanted to show that within the process of evolution of religion, Christianity can rightly demand the highest form – absoluteness – of development:

The expression absoluteness originates from modern evolutionary apologetics and makes only under these presuppositions a particular sense. It includes the horizon of the general history of religions, accepts other non-Christian religions as relative truth and encompasses the construction of Christianity as the absolute and perfect form of religion, which includes all relative truth of other religions (Troeltsch 1912, p. 9)

Ernst Troeltsch’s major concern was not to let Christianity fall prey to historical relativism in the evolutionary process. But he did not want to do this by finding laws of the evolutionary process in accordance with the natural sciences or the more or less deterministic reasoning of Hegel (Troeltsch 1912, p. 24). He emphasized the contingency and novelty of historical processes in relation to the deepness of history:

[...] Essential for history is: that in the development of the any time given forces originating individual and specific, which is not deducible, but is a new creation in relation to the given, emerging from the transcendent depth of history (Troeltsch 1912, p. 55/56)

18.2.2 Evolution as Proceeding to Higher Levels

From this general common sense understanding of evolution one can distinguish another one that includes an additional feature: the degree or level of development reached by the evolutionary process.

We find this understanding of evolution in the works of the church father of the nineteenth century, the German theologian Daniel Friedrich Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834), especially in his early work, that made him famous, the *Talks about Religion to the Educated Among its Dispraisers* from 1799, although

Schleiermacher does not use the word evolution in the context of religious development. He uses the German word *Stufe* (meaning step or stair; Schleiermacher 1967, p. 87/96/164). Schleiermacher does not develop an elaborated theory, but his work has the character of loosely connected ideas. He distinguishes four levels of the development of Religion (Schleiermacher 1967, pp. 95–99.)

The first level is that of idolatry and fetish, the second level is that of polytheism, the third level is that of unity in diversity (Spinocism), and the fourth level is opening the limitations of finite consciousness to the infinite and that of time to eternity. Here is his final conclusion about this ultimate goal of religion at the end of his second talk:

In the midst of finitude to become one with infinitude and being eternal in a moment, that is the immortality of religion (Schleiermacher 1967, p. 95–99)

Religion as understood by Schleiermacher is a specific trait of the human mind (*Gemüt*). This understanding of religion is a watershed in Christian theology because it deviates from traditional Christian theology, which was based so far on either supernaturalism or revelation.

Under this presupposition of Schleiermacher's understanding of religion as a particular feature of the human mind he succeeds in interpreting religious evolution as an upwardly directed process of education (*Bildung*), which is governed by imagination. Accordingly, every new level of the religious consciousness is associated with a higher value, liveness, and perfection. Thus he writes,

Not only in its being you must recognize humanity, but also in its becoming. In addition it has an ample course which it does not recurrently but progressively pass through. Also it is formed by its inner changes towards the superior and perfect (Schleiermacher 1967, p. 79)

By connecting the religious consciousness with the particular German understanding of "Bildung" which is not completely covered by the Anglo-Saxon notion of education, Schleiermacher is able to associate religion with the highest level of recognition in contemporary society, which is "Bildung" of the individual. Thus, his concept of religious evolution is rather individualistic and is not related to the specific structure of society.

This means his evolutionary theory of religion is conditioned by his context of values and the specific structure of the German society in the Age of enlightenment and romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century.

Earlier in the nineteenth century the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) developed in his *Lectures about the philosophy of religion* (1821–1831) also a level understanding of the evolutionary process of religion (Hegel 2000). He tried to combine the general evolution of the religious consciousness with the particular Christian tradition and wanted to show that Christianity is the highest form of religion. The final aim of the evolutionary process is that after the self-alienation of the world-spirit he finally comes to the self-reconciliation. The result – the telos – is the end of history.

Quite different is the level-oriented understanding of evolution of Auguste Comte (1798–1857). In contrast to Schleiermacher for the French founder of sociology

religion is not a matter with different levels of perfection, but rather a form of primitive dealing with the world. So in a sense he also has a level-oriented understanding of the evolution of religion, but sees religion as a primitive human endeavor of knowledge acquisition that needs to be overcome. Therefore, it has to be substituted by science as the only and highest form of acquisition of knowledge. Again the levels are measured within the matrix of the contemporary value system of the society. For Comte this highest value was “positive knowledge” gathered by science. In this sense he develops a hierarchy of levels of knowledge, his famous *law of three stages (loi des trois etats)*, which is: Theology, Metaphysics, and Positive Knowledge.

Each of our leading conceptions – each branch of our knowledge, passes successively through three different theoretical conditions: the Theological or fictitious; the Metaphysical or abstract; and the Scientific or positive (Martineau 1853, p. 1)

The first level is subdivided in fetishism, polytheism, and monotheism. This concept first appears in his Opuscule fundamental from 1822, but was already formulated by Condorcet and Turgot (Bury 1955, p. 157).

However, in Comte’s system a new idea appears. He claims that there is a correlation between the structure of society and the way it acquires knowledge. Primitive societies base their acquisition of primitive knowledge on religion, the more developed society in the Middle Ages on metaphysics and the highest form of the development of society does so by science (Table 18.1).

Likewise the founder of British Anthropology, Edward B. Tylor (1832–1917) who was inspired by Spencer, Darwin, and Comte, follows a level-oriented model of evolution of culture, without applying it directly to religion. His model is: Savageness, Barbarism, and Civilization (Wunn 2002, pp. 329–331) (Table 18.2).

Tylor confines himself with identifying the two extremes of his hierarchy: animism as the religion of savageness and protestantism as that of British nineteenth century society (Wunn 2002, p. 335). We see a different picture in the works of James G. Frazer (1854–1951) one generation later.

It is Frazer’s intention to discover laws of the religious evolution. His claim is that the different levels he identifies are more and more efficient modes to cope

Table 18.1 Correlation between structure of society and knowledge acquisition

Levels of progress	Theology	Metaphysics	Positive knowledge
Prevalence to society	Primitive society	Middle Ages	Modern scientific society
Function in society	Dysfunctional acquisition of knowledge	Destruction of religion	Progress

Table 18.2 Evolution of culture

Levels of religion	Animism	–	British protestantism
Prevalence to society	Savageness	Barbarism	Civilization

Table 18.3 Modes to cope with reality

Levels of religion	Magic	Religion	Science
Function of religion in society	Dysfunctional coping with reality	Dysfunctional coping with reality	Functional coping with reality by discovering laws of nature

with reality (Wunn 2002, p. 336). The levels he identifies are: Magic, Religion, and Science (Table 18.3).

The three mentioned representatives of a level-oriented understanding of religious evolution have one thing in common. They all interpret religions from their scientific perspective as deficient form of knowledge in accordance with the understanding of science in the nineteenth century, based on a mechanistic and deterministic interpretation of the laws of nature (Wunn 2002, pp. 330–349). There is no attempt from the side of these scholars to understand religion for what they are: religions!

This marks the great difference to another representative of a level-oriented understanding of religious evolution. Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887) is neither influenced by positivism nor by Darwinism. He is a child of the German Romantic movement. Rooted in this context he develops a different methodological approach which is not based on the concept of law of nature like the aforementioned authors. His method is concerned about understanding religions as forms of life in their own right. This means he does not want to scientifically explain religions, but his method is that of “sentient, emphatic understanding” (Bachofen 1861).

This distinction of explanation and understanding is of paramount importance for the German humanities and theology in the nineteenth century and the attempt of their representatives to assure and defend the scientific status of the humanities against the conquering attitude of the successful natural sciences. In fact Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) based the different mode of pursuing science between the hermeneutically oriented humanities and the natural sciences on his famous distinction of “explanation” and “understanding” (Dilthey 1910).

Again, he like Comte and Frazer finds a correlation between a specific form of society and its corresponding form of religion (Table 18.4).

Bachofen’s main concern was to understand religion emphatically from their own inner essence. Valuation of religions as a kind of deficient form of knowledge like

Table 18.4 Corresponding levels of society and religion

Levels of society	Primordial horde	Cross-over	Agriculture	Town- culture
Level of religion	Telluric	Amazon	Lunar (substantial- motherly)	Apollonian (spiritual-paternal)
Deity	Aphrodite	–	Demeter/Isis	Athena/Apollo
Gynaikokraty/ Patriar- chy	Gynaikokraty/ Heterism	Gynaikokraty	Gynaikokraty	Patriarchy
Symbolism	Marsh plant/ water-animals	–	Spike/grain of seed	–
Relation of sexes	Promiscuity	–	–	Patriarchy

Table 18.5 Development of society and level of religion

Levels of religion	Primitive religion	Archaic religion	Historical religion	Early modern religion	Modern religion
Levels of society	Primordial horde, no socialization (rites/myths)	Functional differentiation between religion and politics	Literal cultures, religion: transcendent	Reformation, dualism religion/politics	Pluralism, privatization of religion

they were interpreted by Tylor and Frazer was alien to him and did not fit within main stream thinking of the nineteenth century. This emphatic understanding of religion was recovered rather late by V.W. Turner (Turner 1967).

For the twentieth century, the model of religious evolution comprising five levels by the American sociologist of religion Norbert Bellah (1927–) was formative. It is inspired by systems theory.

It is an essential trait of Bellah's model that it describes the evolution of religion as a process of increasing complexity and differentiation. This increase of complexity and functional differentiation occurs in accord to the development of society (Bellah 1970; Wunn 2002, pp. 360–368). Bellah distinguishes five levels, which are correlated to the development of society (Table 18.5).

As a final common feature of all level-oriented theories of the evolution of religion it should be noted that they all more or less presuppose an upward development of religions correlated to some extent to society.

18.2.3 *The Teleological Model of Evolution*

The first representative of a teleological understanding of evolution is Aristotle, who coined the notion of teleology as a result of his observations in nature in general and of organic life in biology in particular (Aristotle 1942, *De generatione animalium*, book I, Chapter 1, 715b, and book I, Chapter 1, 715a4–7; Aristotle 1978, *De motu animalium*, 700b15–29; Aristotle 1933, *Metaphysics*, book I, Chapter 3, 983a32; Aristotle 1929, *Physics*, book II, Chapter 2, 194a29f). Interestingly, he had a dispute on the teleological development in nature with Empedokles, who claimed that all development in nature is driven by pure chance (Aristotle 1929, *Physics*, book II, Chapter 8, 198b29–199a32), thus foreshadowing the debate in the nineteenth century between Darwin and the representatives of natural theology based on teleology. In antiquity Aristotle won the battle, in the nineteenth century the revenant of Empedokles, Charles Darwin was the winner.

Due to the Aristotelian reception by theologians and philosophers in the Middle Ages teleology becomes part of the scientific canon. However, already as early as the fourteenth century teleology was severely criticized in the context of the emerging nominalistic philosophy of nature and extinguished in favor of the *causa efficiens*, the efficient causes. In the seventeenth century, teleology was completely replaced by the concept of law of nature within the Scientific Revolution. It was only in

biology that teleology survived as a scientific concept as late as the nineteenth century. Nineteenth century famous biologists like Gerhard Oncken (1800–1884) or Johannes Müller (1801–1858) took it still seriously as scientific.

As is generally known, British natural theology was based on the teleological interpretation of nature. The long-standing tradition of natural theology found its climax in the work of William Paley (1743–1805) and his book *Natural Theology*.

The studied theologian Charles Darwin owes his decisive inspiration to coin “adaptation” or “fitness” as a scientific term to him. In natural theology adaptation and fitness was interpreted as the result of divine creation. The “fallen theologian” David F. Strauß ironically commented,

It is fitness in nature, in particular in the realm of organic life to which those referred who wanted to demonstrate, that the world can not be conceived out of itself but only as the work of an intelligent creator (Strauß 1895, p. 143)

Darwin replaced this theological interpretation of adaptation as a result of the divine creator by a scientific explanation, in which the evolutionary process is governed solely by pure chance. Thus teleology was extinguished from biology and theology suffered because the argument of divine design could no longer be sustained. The problem arose whether or not the evolutionary process of creation based on chance could be reconciled with the idea of divine creation and teleological providence.

In fact, the French Jesuit and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1954) tried to make evolution by chance compatible with a divinely inspired upward evolution. In his speculative system he combines the three levels of religious evolution “cosmo-genesis, bio-genesis, and noo-genesis” with a teleological interpretation of evolution. One has to concede, however, that his teleological angle of evolution is not based on a Darwinian perspective (Teilhard de Chardin 1959).

The final aim of the evolutionary process is the cosmic Christ, the point Omega. His grandiose system can be interpreted as the attempt to find speculatively a substitution for the lack of meaning that appeared as a result of a purposeless Darwinian evolutionary process without ignoring the undeniable empirical fact of natural evolution. This teleological interpretation both of evolution and religion does not include other religions than Christianity. This means Teilhard is not interested in religious universals, he wants to do theological apologetics in favor for Christianity based on science.

18.2.4 The Functional Evolutionary Notion of Religion

The functional notion of evolution of course was introduced by Charles Darwin (1859). It was one of his major scientific insights. But Darwin did not apply it to religion. He wanted to explain the adaptation of any organism to its environment, its fitness, by a natural causal process, mutation, and selection. Teleology became dispensable. Evolution thus is purely functional. In this case it aims toward explaining the adaptation, the origin and survival of the fittest, and the changes in species as well as the emergence of a new species.

Biological evolution is the process, in which in a situation of competitiveness and selective pressure different strategies of survival are tested on the basis of undirected trial and error. This means that the most suitable ones are selected as the most appropriate, but this is not necessarily the case, because by pure chance the most adaptive may be extinguished. Even retardation is possible in biological evolution. Therefore there is no preordained and thus no predictable aim and purpose of evolutionary processes.

This understanding of evolution has its contemporary contextualization also. It is well known from the history of science that Darwin's key notion of competition and the "natural selection" in the struggle for survival of the species was inspired by the Anglican theologian and minister and later economist Thomas Malthus (1766–1834). D.F. Strauß had already drawn attention to this fact:

Darwin's struggle for survival is nothing as the extension to a principle of nature, what we already know as a social and industrial principle for a long time. (Strauß 1895, p. 125)

In 1798 Malthus had predicted in his paper, *Essays on the Principles of Population*, a catastrophe in the development of the human population, because the increments of growth of the population obey a geometric, but the production of food obeys only an arithmetic law of progression.

Thus, this functional notion of evolution also mirrors exactly the currents of Darwin's society, namely the English Manchester capitalism.

Now it is interesting to note that Darwin did not apply his functional understanding of evolution to religion. He could have asked: Do religions have a function in the struggle of life? He did not ask this question. In contrast he had a rather negative interpretation of religion from an evolutionary perspective. In his book "*The Descent of Man*" from 1871 Darwin in a chapter dwelled about the difference between human beings and animals on the role of religion, too. Again, he could have asked the question about a role of religion in the evolutionary process. He did not. In contrast he confined himself to the remark that the outstanding mental abilities of human beings led to a succession and also to a ranking order of religions.

In a loose sequence he mentions the "believe in invisible powers," "fetishism," "polytheism" and finally "monotheism." Obviously he follows unconsciously the pattern of a level-model. Darwin acknowledges the value of these levels of religion in their evolutionary succession. But he depreciates very much the value of contemporary religion (Darwin 2002, p. 121). However, Darwin does neither pose the question why religions survived despite they are obviously dysfunctional, nor does he ask whether or not religion can have a positive role in the struggle of life. This is even more astonishing, because as soon as 1869, 2 years before the publication of Darwin's book *The Descent of Man* from 1871, the German zoologist and anthropologist Gustav Jäger (1832–1917) addressed this issue in his book *The Darwinian Theory and its Relation to Moral and Religion* in the form of an elaborated functional theory of religion and Christianity (Jäger 1869). It is proven that Darwin had read this book.

Even an exchange of letters between Jäger and Darwin survived (Darwinproject 1869–1870, 1875–1876). But he does not in the slightest way allude to Jäger's

theory, which would have amplified his own theory. Instead he adheres to a level-oriented theory that is already outdated according to his own methodological standards. One can only speculate why Darwin did not take over Jäger's ideas.

Now I want to briefly sketch Jäger's arguments. Jäger gave five public lectures in Vienna. In these lectures he describes the development of religions and asks, if they have a survival advantage. He starts with natural religion, proceeds to ethical religion, ancestor worship, and Israelite religion, and ends with Christianity.

I do not want to go into the details of his arguments. But may it suffice to briefly point to a trait of Israelite religion. He claims that in particular this religion by virtue of its high ethical standards is able to maintain inner social stability on the one hand and at the same time maintain an aggressive stance to its outside enemies.

Jäger cites psalm 118 and concludes,

Where do you find expressed in the so called classical literature of Romans and Greeks such an aggression, such an energy in the struggle of survival? It fitted very well to the practical requirement, which the Darwinian expects from a form of religion, that it is a weapon, that it augments the energy of self-defense of the society as well as of the individual, that it creates social cohesion, without which the individual is nothing. This requirement is met by the Israelite idea of God to a degree, that it surpasses by far natural religion which gallops from abstraction to abstraction and finally ends up in atheism. (Jäger 1869, p. 114–115)

Jäger comes to the conclusion that Christianity based on the principle of division of labor, charity, and the belief in immortality is the religion with the highest advantage of survival. As a result, Christianity is not only compatible with Darwinism, but Darwinism has its natural habitat in Christianity:

So our objective exploration has shown us, based only on practical aspects, not only that religion is a weapon in the struggle of survival, but that Christianity in comparison with other religions has accomplished the highest capacity for survival. Thus you may have realized that the Darwinian is neither Hindu nor Turk, but stands in the case of Darwinism on the grounds of Christianity. (Jäger 1869, p. 119–120)

Later in his life he became an entrepreneur and an advocate of healthy woolen attire. He founded factories in Germany, Great Britain, and America and thus became the inventor of woolen cloth, which he supposed to be very health sustaining. He sold them especially to the upper classes, because they were very expensive. This new conceptual and ground-breaking perspective on the nature of religion by Jäger from 1869 was completely forgotten. Jäger's functional approach was not successful in Germany. Religion and evolutionary theory thus became segregated. This becomes apparent in an influential contemporary book: *Die Darwinistischen Theorien und ihre Stellung zur Philosophie, Religion und Moral*, (Schmid 1876).

The functional evolutionary approach on religion was reinvented by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942), a disciple of James Frazer (Malinowski 1983) and elaborated on empirical grounds during his fieldwork in Melanesian primitive societies. He made a significant progress in comparison to his precursors in the nineteenth century, because he showed that one can reasonably distinguish between religion based on rites and religion based on magic. They differ in their function. Whereas rites as an expression of religion is related to important steps in life (birth, adolescence,

marriage, etc.) magic is related to unforeseeable contingencies of every day life. Moreover, he showed that magical and empirical acquisition of knowledge is compatible with primitive societies, thus proving the level-oriented evolutionary theories of religion as being wrong.

Functional theories of religion became very prominent in the twentieth century: in biology (Campbell 1966), sociology of religion (Bellah 1970; Dux 1982; Döbert 1973), sociobiology (Wilson 2002, Voland and Söling 2004; Wilson 1978), evolutionary psychology (Boyer 2004), demography (Blume 2007), religious studies (Wunn 2002), medicine and life expectation. (Grossarth-Maticek 2003; Grom 1997; Breitenbach 2002; Dourley 2002; Fabricatore et al. 2004; Koenig 2001; Benson 1984; Piron 2003; Ritter 2005), but less in theology (Theißen 1984; Huyssteen 2006; Achtner 2007). In most cases they are associated with some kind evolutionary benefit.

However, the application of a functional Darwinian understanding of evolution still suffers from a so far unresolved theoretical problem. The problem is: What is the natural unit of the evolution of religion. Edward O. Wilson argues,

At the one extreme, the one more likely to produce hard religiosity, the group is the unit of selection. [. . .]. At the other extreme, generating a softer and more ambivalent religiosity, individual selection is the ruling force in Darwinian evolution (Wilson 1978, pp. 186–187)

Is it the gene, the individual or the religious community? In any case one encounters specific problems. For example, if one takes religiously motivated altruism, one has to show that altruism is compatible with Darwinism. The argument according to Edward O. Wilson is as follows:

A narrow interpretation of Darwinian natural selection would predict this outcome: because people governed by selfish genes must prevail over those with altruistic genes, there should also be a tendency over many generations for selfish genes to increase in prevalence and for a population to become ever less capable of responding altruistically.

How then does altruism persist? (Wilson 1978, p. 153)

The solution proposed is that the phenotypical altruism is just the expression of genotypical egoism, so there is no real altruism as revealed by the solutions of kin-selection and reciprocal altruism (Hamilton 1995). But one question still remains unsettled, namely that of altruistic behavior at the expense of one's own extinction. Already Tertullian said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" (Wilson 1978, p. 149).

An example for taking members of a religious group as the natural unit is the work of David S. Wilson, who reintroduced group-selection ("Religions are well known for their in-group- morality and out-group-hostility" (Wilson 2002, p. 10)). But how can one understand a group, consisting of heterogeneous members, as a functional unit? That is what D.S. Wilson concedes as an unsolved problem: "Thus social groups are a nebulous and heterogeneous category with respect to the concept of adaptation" (Wilson 2002, p. 7). This minority position was first developed in an extensive way by David S. Wilson:

Religion returns to center stage, not as a theological explanation of purpose and order, but as itself a product of evolution that enables groups to function as adaptive units – at least to a degree. (Wilson 2002, p. 6)

Applying these insights to the study of religions, we should think of religious groups as rapidly evolving entities adapting to their current environments. (Wilson 2002, p. 35)

To theoretically understand a social group as an adaptive unit, one has to focus on such aspects of a society that make it in a formal sense to a kind of self-operating system. To this end, for example, the social binding mechanisms such as control mechanisms, coordination and cooperation at the one hand and adaptive complexity on the other hand can be identified as such mechanisms that enhance internal cohesion (Wilson 2002, pp. 5–46/86–160; Wilson 1978, pp. 149–194). In addition one has to shift from biology to culture as the realm where evolution is operating, even if biology and culture are related to each other, for instance by language (Wunn 2002, p. 487ff).

The recent functional theory of religion of Eckart Voland in this volume based on the individual as natural unit identifies five traits of religious functionality: first, a survival benefit, self-preservation through improved mastery of contingencies; second, strengthening the community by work toward common goals; third, in-group social identity by myths and as well as out-group competitiveness; fourth, solving the “free-rider” problem by compelling communicative honesty; and finally, religion aims toward strengthening moral standards within a group. Whereas these features of religion operate as biological functional, the religious metaphysics, as Voland claims, is biologically irrelevant in terms of survival and needs therefore to be classified as a negligible non-functional byproduct of evolution.

18.3 Conclusion and Discussion

So far I have identified four different types of evolutionary theories. Of course these are idealizations and partly overlapping. There is an overlapping between the teleological and the level-oriented theory of evolution, like in Hegel’s philosophy of Religion. Also, there is an overlapping of the functional and the level-oriented understanding of evolution. However, there is a mutual exclusion of a functional and a teleological interpretation. Finally, I want to ask the question, if there is such a thing as an evolution of theories of evolution of religion. Or is the sequence of their development purely accidental? Some observations are offered.

1. In antiquity only some changes in religions were noticed by authors like Herodot. This lack of theoretical understanding may be due to the fact that in Greek philosophy – with exception of Heraclitus – change was regarded as something of inferior scientific interest. Even more, change could not be thought of as scientifically accessible. Also the theoretical scientific consciousness was not developed to the necessary degree.

2. The theoretical frameworks of evolutionary theories in the works of authors like Schleiermacher, Comte, Tylor, and Bachofen was contingent upon the main cultural currents of their time. This indicates that the evolution of evolutionary theories will continue.
3. It can be noticed that there is an interesting increase of differentiation and complexity of evolutionary theories of religion, which follows an underlying pattern. Evolutionary theories of religion started with some kind of level orientation. The next step was to correlate these levels of religious awareness to a particular structure of society.

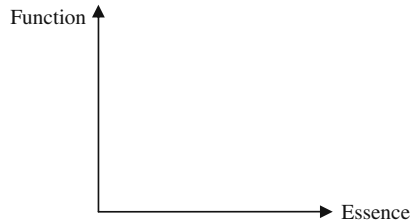
Finally, this correlation was specified by asking the question what particular function religion serves in a given society. The sequence in this development is like this:

1. Level of religious consciousness (Schleiermacher, Hegel).
2. Correlation between religious consciousness and society (Comte, Tylor).
3. Function of particular religions in particular societies (Malinowski).

I want to conclude with a suggestion to extend the theoretical framework of a functional theory of religion. According to empirical research, at least as presented in this volume, it seems irrefutable that religion has a beneficial effect on survival. The question, however, remains open to which aspect of religion this benefit can be attributed. Rightly, Voland asks, if this benefit can be seen as the result of its content, its implicit or explicit metaphysics, which he claims to be functionally irrelevant or only relevant to the underlying innate religiosity. One can reformulate the same question according to Voland's own phrasing: "Is there a religiosity without religion?" In fact, many functions of religion can be substituted by other contents as the examples of Voland indicate. A striking example is the take-over of the religiously inspired midwinter festival by folkloristic carnival. However, there are also empirical examples which seem to show that the content of a religion is somehow related to its biological functionality. In particular, the research made on long term persistence of settlement groups in nineteenth century America shows, that religiously committed groups performed much better in long term persistence than secular, for example, humanistic or socialist orientated groups. If the content of religion was irrelevant and could be substituted by any other content, like a socialist vision, one would expect that both perform equally well.

This example makes obvious that the content of a religion which goes beyond the biologically conditioned religiosity as the handicap principle in this case (Sosis and Bressler 2003), has some function, too, in terms of a benefit for survival. One could even argue that it is certain religious content that activates the handicap principle much better than a worldly one. The argument then is that it is the combination of a certain religious content or essence with its function that leads to an appropriate understanding of religion. Of course this would include religiosity as the biological basis of religion. The concept which I suggest here is a mutual intertwining of function and essence of religion. This more complex and abstract notion

of religion avoids the unnecessary combat between an essentialist and functionalist approach to understand religion in its various forms, because both can be seen as special cases of this more complex and abstract approach. It also offers the possibility for a classification of religions, because the relation between functionality and essence has to be empirically determined. A variety of combinations are then possible. For instance, one could argue that there are highly functional religions with little essence at the one hand and religions with a deep essence which are not at all functional or even dysfunctional. This theoretical approach could be depicted as a two-dimensional diagram.



The notion of essence of religion needs further clarification. In principle many classifications are possible. However, I would like to draw a basic distinction between religious essence as the *teachings*, *transcendence*, and existential longing for salutary *religious experience*. How these three features interact with function has to be determined in every single case and is thus a matter of empirical research. A few historical examples may highlight what is meant and stimulate further research.

18.3.1 Religious Essence as Teaching

Not all, but many religions have truth claims that are intellectually formulated in dogmas. For instance, the dogma of justification, which means how to become accepted by God, or the dogma of trinity is of paramount importance for Christianity. Do they have any function in terms of fitness for survival? Certainly the doctrine of trinity has no such function. Its only function is the intellectual attempt of clarifying how the Christian God could be conceived. It is different from the doctrine of justification. The conviction of being accepted by God could very well serve the function of coping with the contingencies of life or stimulate to a high degree of activity. The basic three solutions of Lutheran, Reformed, and Catholic theology of the problem of justification in fact lead toward different functions of survival. As example, one can mention the “inner-worldly asceticism” with the function of strong and successful activity in the world triggered by the specific solution of Reformed theology, as Max Weber has shown. Thus essence and function go hand in hand.

18.3.2 Religious Essence as Transcendence

The idea of a transcendent and free creator beyond the world belongs to the very essence of both Judeo and Christian belief. This religious conviction, based on the numerous accounts of his interaction with his chosen people, has both a frightening and liberating effect. I will focus on the latter one. The liberating effect or function is the pushing back of divinization of worldly features that claim religious adoration like in pagan religiosity. For example, in many myths like in the Egyptian religion or in the Enuma Elish, planets and in particular the sun were seen as Gods and had to be worshipped. Nature as a whole in these religions is understood as divine deserving religious respect. Thus it is not accessible to human control except by magic in some cases. Pushing back this divinity of nature paves the way to a rational control over nature which is in fact the biblically motivated *dominium terrae*, as a divine order of the transcendent God (Gen. 1, 26–28). Stripping off nature of its divinity makes it rationally accessible according to the order – later called laws of nature – with which the creator has endowed it. The positive function of this religious accomplishment for survival is obvious in Western tradition based on these grounds – often at the expense of religions that did not follow this path and became extinct. Again we see the interaction between essence and function.

18.3.3 Religious Essence as Religious Experience

The variety of religious experiences is overwhelming and cannot be simply categorized. It ranges from mystic exaltation to the experience of grace, repentance, or fanatic intolerance based on being the only one possessing the truth. One common feature, however, is striving for salvation, whatever this means in a particular religious tradition. Such a striving for salvation can have a completely otherworldly orientation, like in Gnosticism in its various ancient and recurrent forms. It is obvious that such a non-worldly orientation in connection with a religious devaluation of worldly affairs is not very likely to have a positive effect on coping with life. In fact, Gnosticism with this deep religious essence did not develop any functions for survival, simply because surviving in this world itself was already regarded as religiously worthless. That is why Gnosticism did not survive as a religion. Again we see a connection between the essence of religion and its function. In this case there is a deeply religious essence combined with the complete absence of any survival benefit.

This model to always understand religion as a combination of its essence and its function or dysfunction seems to be more appropriate to categorize the great variety of religious phenomena and thus to avoid the theoretical shortcomings of a solely functional approach. It also opens up new horizons for empirical research about how to determine the relation of essence and function with respect to function or dysfunction of a particular religion.

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