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Sex, Marriage, and Religion: What Adaptive Problems Do Religious Phenomena Solve?

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## COMMENTARIES

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### **Sex, Marriage, and Religion: What Adaptive Problems Do Religious Phenomena Solve?**

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Religion is best regarded as an impressive array of diverse phenomena. As Pargament (this issue) noted, “religiousness is too rich and too complex to be captured by easy formulas or simple summaries.” Explanations for some religious phenomena, such as rituals and rites, may fail to account for other phenomena such as piousness or prayer. Kirkpatrick (1999) phrased this point succinctly: “‘Religion’ ... refers to such a diverse and multifaceted constellation of beliefs and behaviors that it is highly unlikely to be the product of a unitary adaptation with a single identifiable function” (p. 926). An ultimate understanding of religion, therefore, will require careful analysis of the panoply of its components and their origins.

An evolutionary psychological analysis of religion poses these related questions: What adaptive problems, if any, are religious phenomena designed to solve? Have specific religious mechanisms evolved to solve these problems? Alternatively, are religious experiences by-products of evolved psychological mechanisms that were designed for other purposes?

It is important to note that successful solutions to adaptive problems in the evolutionary sense, be they religious or nonreligious solutions, do not always correspond to human intuitions about “desirable” or “beneficial” or “good.” Consider the finding that religious fundamentalism is linked with prejudice and outgroup discrimination (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Our intuitions, informed by modern Western sensibilities, tell us that prejudice and discrimination are undesirable, and thus, they are from the perspective of those unfortunate enough to be at the wrong end of the their hostile gun. However, evolution by selection operates by the ruthless currency of the relative reproductive success of competing “designs.” Inflicting costs on rival individuals or groups, therefore, can be and often is an effective solution to a suite of adaptive problems that are tributary to reproductive success, even if modern sensibilities judge these phenomena undesirable, bad, or evil.

The goal of this brief article is not to provide an exhaustive evolutionary analysis of all religious phe-

nomena. Interested readers are referred to Kirkpatrick (1999), who provided the most insightful evolutionary analysis to date of many varieties of religious experience, including spirits and other unseen forces, animism, priests, medicine men, and shamans, morality, ethics, mystical experiences, and beliefs about death. Rather, this article has a more delimited aim, seeking to illustrate how an evolutionary analysis might shed a modest light on just a few delimited components of religious phenomena as they relate to sex and marriage.

#### **Regulating Sexual Conduct and Strengthening Marital Bonds**

Few things lie closer to the engine of the evolutionary process than sexual behavior. It is not by chance that evolutionary processes have sculpted an elaborate suite of human sexual desires (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001; Symons, 1979), mate preferences (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Kenrick & Keefe, 1992), mate attraction tactics (Tooke & Camire, 1991), mate poaching tactics (Schmitt & Buss, 2001), and mate retention tactics (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). It is a noteworthy fact that wherever written laws exist, sexual behavior is always a key target for regulation (Daly & Wilson, 1988).

Religious doctrines frequently target mating and sexual conduct as a prime locus of governance and regulation. Indeed, the one of the first directives from the Bible dictates that followers should “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28), suggesting that religion and reproduction are closely linked.

Two of the ten commandments involve specific regulations of sexual thoughts and behaviors. One is “thou shalt not commit adultery,” and for good measure, another enjoins men not to covet their neighbor’s wives. Jesus is reported to have said this: “You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has

already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27–28).

Why would people seek to regulate other people’s sexual conduct? It is usually in a man’s reproductive interest to prevent his wife from committing adultery. Failures to deter her potential sexual unions with other men can and do result in loss of paternity certainty, genetic cuckoldry, and the diversion of his and his partner’s resources to a rival’s offspring (Buss, 2000). It is often in a woman’s interest to prevent her husband from sexually straying—men channel resources to women with whom they have sex. It is in both of their interests to deter mate poachers from encroaching (Schmitt & Buss, 2001). In these senses, some religious proscriptions can be regarded as manifestations of psychological mechanisms, the function of which is to regulate specific forms of the sexual conduct of others—in this case, spouses and rivals.

It is worth noting that these regulations encourage conduct that leads to what many people hold to be desirable ends. We know that sexual infidelity is one of the leading causes of divorce (Betzig, 1989; Buss, 2003). Thus, these religious injunctions, to the degree that they work, are likely to encourage marital fidelity, strengthen marital bonds, lead to greater stability of families, and reduce within-group discord that typically flows from sexual conflict.

### Religious Leaders and Multiple Mates

Regulating the conduct of others, of course, is not the same as self-regulation. It will not come as a surprise that “religious hypocrisy” exists (e.g., Exline, this issue) or that there is a profound sex difference in its expression. Religious leaders, typically men, not infrequently use their power, like many men in secular positions of power, to gain preferential sexual access to young, attractive, fertile women.

Many heroes of the Bible lived in polygamy and had concubines. Abraham had a child with his wife and another with the servant of his wife (Genesis 16, 21). Jacob had 12 children who became the heads of the 12 Tribes of Israel. Some of them were born from his two wives, Leah and Rachel; others were born from his wife’s two servants (Genesis 29). King David had a large harem. Solomon boasted 700 wives and 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3; 2 Samuel 3:2–7; 2 Samuel 5:13; 2 Samuel 15:16; 2 Samuel 16:21). Gideon, Saul, Caleb, and Manasseh were all reputed to be produced by concubines (Judges 8:31; 2 Samuel 3:12; 1 Chronicles 2:46, 48; 1 Chronicles 7:14).

No religions, whether mainstream or fringe, seem to be exempt. David Koresh used his power in the Branch Davidians to have sex with many women, some barely postpubescent. Jim Jones, of Guayana fame, went from woman to woman within his church, creating rivalry

and resentment among the women who felt sexually used and then cast off.

The association between male religious leaders and preferential sexual access to women, of course, does not always come in the form of religious hypocrisy. In many cases, it is formally sanctioned. Some religions formalize the leader’s sexual access to multiple women, as in certain segments of the Mormon population. Westermarck (1925), in his classic treatise, *The History of Human Marriage*, devoted an entire section to the topic of “why defloration is performed by the holy man.” In ancient India, for example, “the priest alone can purify the garment of the bride, just as he is the only one who is not polluted by contact with sacrificial blood” (p. 191). The blood, in this case, refers to bleeding from the breaking of the virgin hymen. Sexual intercourse with the holy man was thought to be highly beneficial. In native Greenland, women felt fortunate if the *Angekokk*, or prophet, proffered his sexual caresses. Among the *Tachtadshys* in Lycia, the “*dede*” was entitled to have sexual intercourse with any woman that struck his fancy at the yearly religious assemblies. The *Zikris* believed that virgins who had intercourse with the *Mulla* (high priest) were thereby cleansed by process—a purification from intercourse that resulted in the removal of danger. It should come as no surprise to discover who fostered these beliefs.

Westermarck (1925) noted

Defloration of a bride ... could never have come to be looked upon as a right unless the act had been attractive. It is not to be believed that the chief or priest slept with another man’s bride from unselfish motives alone; and there may be cases in which the right to do so was nothing but a consequence of might. (p. 194)

The fact that kings, chiefs, emperors, and despots throughout human recorded history have exercised similar “rights” is probably no coincidence (Buss, 2003). Men in positions of power often exploit their status to gain preferential sexual access to young, desirable women. Religious leaders, often powerful and revered, are apparently not exempt.

Many religious leaders abstain, of course, and this brief treatment in no way is meant to malign either religious leaders across the globe or the women who are sexually attracted to their powers. The key point is that these patterns of religious phenomena are sufficiently common that they require explanation.

In a certain sense, these phenomena are simply variants on an ancient theme. Women have evolved mate preferences for men in positions of power (Buss, 2003). Men have evolved powerful status-striving mechanisms, in part because men in status gain greater sexual access to more numerous and more desirable mates. It is therefore not by chance that men far outnumber women as religious leaders. It is not by chance

that women are sexually attracted to priests, rabbis, shamans, gurus, holy men—men who are, or who claim to be, closely linked with higher powers. It is not by chance that men sometimes take advantage of their positions to gain sexual access to the women who desire them, and it is not by chance that the excluded men sometimes become infuriated when they discover that their religious leaders have exploited their positions of power for personal sexual gain.

### Conclusions

It is not inconceivable that many religious phenomena are closely linked with solutions to adaptive problems recurrently posed by survival and reproduction. As many have noted, religion can bring a bounty of benefits: “Religion offers [people] relatively accessible resources and compelling solutions to problems in living” (Pargament, this issue). Framed in terms of evolutionarily adaptive problems, religion can provide charity in times of trouble, aid through evolutionary bottlenecks, coalitional allies, defense against hostile outsiders, tools for regulating the sexual conduct of one’s spouse, means for dissuading intrasexual rivals from mate poaching, increased access to potential mates, the means to inflict costs on rivals, a justification for attacking out-groups, paths for ascension in a status hierarchy, and many others. Religion may offer one complex suite of solutions to many of the recurrent problems humans have faced over the long course of evolutionary history.

This does not imply that there are evolved mechanisms specifically designed for religious phenomena. There may or may not be. Religious phenomena may simply parasitize existing evolved mechanisms or represent byproducts of them. Indeed, Kirkpatrick (1999) made a compelling case that many religious experiences are by-products of mechanisms designed for intrasexual competition, kin favoritism, reciprocal altruism, coalitional psychology, and the attachment system. This analysis does not imply that all religious experiences and behaviors will yield to this mode of analysis. The psychology of specific beliefs, rituals, piety, spirituality, faith, confession, atonement, prayer, virtuous striving, and miracles—phenomena that many believe lie at the core of religious experience—may defy easy explanation by recourse to evolved psychological mechanisms.

Nonetheless, looking through the lens of evolutionary psychology provides one way to gain fresh insights into the ways in which certain religious phenomena may reflect effective solutions to human adaptive problems and thus serve well the interests of those who experience them.

### Notes

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