

Morality research sheds light on the origins of religion

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The details surrounding the emergence and evolution of religion have not been clearly established and remain a source of much debate among scholars. Now, an article published by Cell Press in the journal *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* on February 8 brings a new understanding to this long-standing discussion by exploring the fascinating link between morality and religion.

There is no doubt that spiritual experiences and [religion](#), which are ubiquitous across cultures and time and associated exclusively with humans, are ultimately based in the brain. However, there are many unanswered questions about how and why these behaviors originated and how they may have been shaped during evolution.

"Some scholars claim that religion evolved as an adaptation to solve the problem of cooperation among genetically unrelated individuals, while others propose that religion emerged as a by-product of pre-existing cognitive capacities," explains study co-author Dr. Ilkka Pyysiainen from the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. Although there is some support for both, these alternative proposals have been difficult to investigate.

Dr. Pyysiainen and co-author Dr. Marc Hauser, from the Departments of Psychology and Human [Evolutionary Biology](#) at Harvard University, used a fresh perspective based in experimental moral psychology to review these two competing theories. "We were interested in making use of this perspective because religion is linked to morality in different

ways," says Dr. Hauser. "For some, there is no morality without religion, while others see religion as merely one way of expressing one's moral intuitions."

Citing several studies in moral psychology, the authors highlight the finding that despite differences in, or even an absence of, religious backgrounds, individuals show no difference in moral judgments for unfamiliar moral dilemmas. The research suggests that intuitive judgments of right and wrong seem to operate independently of explicit religious commitments.

"This supports the theory that religion did not originally emerge as a biological adaptation for cooperation, but evolved as a separate by-product of pre-existing cognitive functions that evolved from non-religious functions," says Dr. Pyysiainen. "However, although it appears as if cooperation is made possible by mental mechanisms that are not specific to religion, religion can play a role in facilitating and stabilizing cooperation between groups."

Perhaps this may help to explain the complex association between morality and religion. "It seems that in many cultures religious concepts and beliefs have become the standard way of conceptualizing moral intuitions. Although, as we discuss in our paper, this link is not a necessary one, many people have become so accustomed to using it, that criticism targeted at religion is experienced as a fundamental threat to our moral existence," concludes Dr. Hauser.

More information: Pyysiainen, Hauser et al.: "The origins of religion Q1 : evolved adaptation or by-product?", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*.

Provided by Cell Press

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