

Could it be that religion is more like sex than school?

October 2 2017, by Peter Kevern



The Ecstasy of St Theresa, by Gianlorenzo Bernini in Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Credit: Dnalor 01, CC BY-SA

A lot of arguments about religion treat it like going to school: a religion is a set of lessons to be learned, tests to pass and rules to follow, all watched over by the great headmaster in the sky. That assumption shapes the sorts of questions we ask of religions and religious people: are your teachers telling the truth? Have they trained you to behave properly? And why do you think it's a good idea to go to school anyway?

But there's an increasing body of evidence to suggest that we need to think about religion in a different way: not as a process of training or indoctrination, but as arising from some deep-seated instincts, hardwired into our brains and then shaped by our cultures. This is more like the way we think about sex, emotions and relationships.

The shift in thinking arises from a field of study known as the [cognitive science of religion](#), where cognitive psychologists and evolutionary theorists have joined forces to address a puzzling question. In the words of [Jeffrey Schloss](#):

"Why, despite a century of presumed secularisation, does religion persist in the western world, and why does it seem easier for human beings to be religious than to be secular?"

The answer they propose is that our brains are hardwired with cognitive biases that have evolved in order to help us to survive, but which have the side-effect of making it natural to develop religious belief. For example, we are cognitively predisposed to imagine that every rustle in the bushes is a creature watching our every move: this [hyperactive agency detection device](#) was of real benefit to early humans alone in the jungle. It might have caused our early ancestors to run away from a few imaginary tigers, but they also will have escaped one that might otherwise have eaten them. The side effect, however, is that we see unseen watchers everywhere. From this point, it is a relatively easy leap to believe in gods that watch over us, unseen.

According to this model, we did not evolve to be religious, but ended up with religion as a spandrel, an [unintended by-product of the main evolutionary process](#). Nevertheless, unintended consequence or not, it is now part of our mental architecture and culturally infused throughout our societies – and this is why religious behaviour proves so durable and persistent.

The hyperactive agency detection device and other mechanisms become incorporated into our social and cultural life. They help keep us honest with each other, help us to care for each other and fight our common enemies, and they become codified into the religions that survive and evolve alongside human societies. It is in this sense that religion is more like sex than like school – we might choose to ignore it or decide to have nothing more to do with it, but it will keep returning to haunt us in some form or another.

A new perspective

This evolutionary account of the existence and persistence of religion in most, if not all, human societies (it depends a lot on how you define it) is hotly debated and open to criticism from a [number of angles](#). Opponents point out that the move from identifying in-built biases in human cognition to a theory of why we create entire religious universes that structure societies looks suspiciously like a "[just-so story](#)" – one that is highly speculative and requires us to make some assumptions for which there is little or no evidence. The [cognitive science](#) of religion gives us an interesting account of why we have religious *intuitions*, but tells us nothing about how these are translated into particular religious beliefs and practices.

Nevertheless, its description of religion as driven by deep-seated desires rather than rival accounts of reality opens up an intriguing set of questions and possibilities.

1. *Whatever floats your boat.* We no longer believe that everybody's sexual life has to be the same. Some people choose to give up sex altogether, others have multiple partners. There is a whole range of LGBTQI+ preferences now recognised alongside "vanilla" heterosexual monogamy. Perhaps our religious desires and impulses should be allowed the same diversity and recognition?
2. *You mean the whole world to me but ...* I do not expect everybody else to see how absolutely wonderful and perfect my partner is. What is absolutely true to me, religiously, may not make any sense to you. And that's OK. Truth claims do not belong in affairs of the heart, or in affairs of the spirit. Arguments about whose religion is true similarly miss the point.
3. *Don't shut me out.* Although the religious drive is nothing like as powerful or fundamental as the sex drive for most people, it would be unwise to attempt to repress it completely. Perhaps the rise of extremism religion is partly to do with the "[return of the repressed](#)", the violence with which an aspect of our character may reassert itself when it has been pushed down and ignored for too long.
4. *I love you ... I just don't like you.* We have ambiguous relationships with our partners, sometimes adoring them and sometimes hardly able to be in the same room as them. Sexual attraction is part habit, part mystery, part madness. Most religious people, if pushed, might say something similar about how their spiritual involvement or commitment fluctuates and varies over time. It's much more complicated than can be captured by simple questions like "What do you believe?" or "Are you religious?"

This sort of approach to religion has the potential to upset devoutly religious people but also the "devout atheists" who can see no place for it. It provides an explanation of religion which can sit alongside, but does not require, appeals to the call of god or the truth of religious claims. It

also stands as a warning to the devout atheists that religion will never go away, and that attacks on [religious people](#) as irrational will not make any real difference. At the same time, it opens up a new and intriguing set of possibilities for thinking differently about how [religion](#) fits into our world, and how we might learn to express our religious instincts in a diverse society without blind dogmatism or violence.

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