Study finds simple explanation for endurance of religion

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Childcare can be expensive, stressful, and annoying to organise, but a University of Otago-led study has found it may also be behind religion's resilience.

Scholars have predicted the demise of religion for a long time, but it is not disappearing as quickly as anticipated.

Following the collaborative study, lead author Dr. John Shaver, of Otago's Religion Programme, believes a contributing factor is that religious people are able to have larger families because they get more help looking after their children than secular people.

"While religion has been declining in New Zealand for decades, our findings point to a countervailing trend, one that is driven by the co-operative breeding dynamics of religious communities.

"Co-operative help to mothers is one of the reasons for our success as a species. In modern environments mothers receive far less help than in our recent past. Less help drives down fertility levels in modern environments. However, religious mothers have more help, and more children than secular mothers," he says.

For the study, just published in journal *Evolution and Human Behaviour*, researchers analysed data from 12,980 people enrolled in the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study (NZAVS).

Dr. Shaver says the NZAVS, which is led by Professor Chris Sibley, of the University of Auckland, enabled the researchers to access data from a large national sample, whose population is roughly half religious and half secular.

"We found that religious people have more children, and that non-reproductive (those who don't currently have their own children) religious people tend to look after children who are not their own more frequently than non-reproductive secular people.

"Our findings point to why religion is not disappearing as quickly as many have predicted – religious people are able to have more children because they get more help with childcare than secular people.

"We hope that our research draws attention to the impact of a person's religious behaviour on core biological and sociological processes."

Co-author Professor Joseph Bulbulia, of Auckland, says the group's findings are consistent with evidence that religious people generally enjoy greater within-group co-operation, compared to secular groups. It is also the first study to find that co-operation extends to childcare.

"Though we think co-operative parenting explains only part of the puzzle of religious fertility, our result is an important first step for explaining a phenomenon that is vital for predicting the societies of the future," he says.

Another interesting finding from the study, Dr. Shaver says, is that, relative to New Zealanders of European descent, Māori and Pacific Islanders have more children, and people of Asian descent have fewer. Māori and Pacific Islanders also look after children who are not their own more frequently, while Asians engage in lower levels of co-operative childcare.

"Again, at a nationwide scale, this suggests that high fertility and co-operative parenting are broadly co-ordinated. Across all ethnic groups, though, the effect of religion on fertility and co-operative parenting holds," he says.

This is the first of many studies the researchers have planned. In particular they are interested in exploring the extent to which co-operative childcare contributes to child well-being.

More information: John H. Shaver et al. Alloparenting and religious fertility: A test of the religious alloparenting hypothesis, *Evolution and Human Behavior* (2019). DOI: 10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2019.01.004

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