



Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought

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Many of our questions about religion, says renowned anthropologist Pascal Boyer, are no longer mysteries. We are beginning to know how to answer questions such as "Why do people have religion?" Using findings from anthropology, cognitive science, linguistics, and evolutionary biology, Religion Explained shows how this aspect of human consciousness is increasingly admissible to coherent, naturalistic explanation. This brilliant and controversial book gives readers the first scientific explanation for what religious feeling is really about, what it consists of, and where it comes from.

Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought Details

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Doutor Branco says

I was hoping that I would be able to write a proper response in my evaluation of the book once I have finished it. However, I was expecting something a bit clever than what I read. The author develops his assumptions on Charles Darwin's theory of evolution of species yet the writer described the human brain and human thoughts capabilities as "designed", what is a quite interesting paradox.

The author says he uses "imaginary" explanation to make his propositions against religion. It could be more specific than imaginary, and it is not because the author finds nothing solid to validate his assumptions. Another mistake is that he chooses to put all religions on the same level with the same degree of credibility. In so doing, anything that is named religion has the same value. It is a nonsense. There are religions with true beliefs that harmonise with reality and logic and there are others that are not. The problem with it is that the Boyer picked the exotic beliefs from different religions to invalidate all other religions system. Boyer's insistence on including humans in the category of animals evoking few similarities and neglecting the differences is simply without reasoning. Humans and animals are unique in relation to their morphologies, physiologies, behaviors, biochemical particularities, what we call phenotype.

In particular chapter Boyer starts with the following proposition: "It is unfortunate, and almost inevitable, that when we talk about religion we quite literally do not know what we are talking about." Here are some problems which the author did not anticipate. "...when we discuss about religion we quite literally do not know what we are talking about." - What do the writer means with this statement? Is it impossible to know about religious belief? No, that is not so. When the author uses the word "literally" he brings all to a literal stage of ignorance. Yes, in that respect is a little ignorance in knowing, but not only religion, but about everything else in life and science.

We never know literally everything about anything, but we know enough about many things including religion. Let's suppose that the author's assumption is applied to physicians. They do not know the cure for all varieties of human disease and yet we don't argue with the doctor when he decides that we must have an appendicitis surgery in order to get well. We could say: "Well, this doctor doesn't know the cure for cancer or HIV, his knowledge is defined, however, when we discuss about medical-care we quite literally do not know exactly what we are talking about. However, such an ignorance about some facts does not invalidate the physician capacity of operating anyone for their appendicitis problem.

As for Boyer's arguments about human, animal, vegetal and material perspectives of things speaks for itself as a non-sense

Another noteworthy aspect of the author proposition regarding the evolution of religion is the way how he reads ancient religion with a postmodern concept. While writing about the relationship between Shiva and her sons, an ancient concept of religion that cannot be understood without taking in account the time, the culture, the language, the meaning and other aspects involving the religious text, the author choose to ignore all these aspects to validate his postmodern mindset. If religion is a result of the evolutionary theory, it is supposed that in religion itself there is an evolutionary process.

I am not trying to discourage anyone to read this book. It is quite an interesting book to read and grasp a bit of the view of the author. As a religious philosopher I just thought that would be nice, at least to me, to point at some misconceptions.

George says

This book gives a convincing explanation on the origins of religious beliefs. However, it misses an important aspect of contemporary religions, which is an unconditional allegiance to a doctrine, usually personified in the figure of a leader, which may be dead or alive, and who is distinguished from all the others in the sense that he/she has a closer relation with the divine. I think this character of modern religion is stronger than the original search for an explanation on the world's mysteries. Most religious people today don't spend time musing about how's and why's - they just accept what their leader or scripture tells them. I'll be looking forward to a book that deals with this aspect of religion.

Maksim says

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Marije says

Frankly, I think this book is brilliant.

Boyer tackles the question 'why do people believe?' with the help of various scientific disciplines, most notably cognitive and evolutionary psychology and anthropology. He combines results from empirical research, current theories, and his own and other scholars' observations from the field to illustrate the diversity and complexity of what we call religion.

How religion is not explained

He starts out with a summary of some of the most common and popular explanations for religion (by both apologists and sceptics), and why they are wrong or incomplete.

For example, take the idea that people are religious because this provides comfort. Boyer points out that many of the cases people need religious comfort for, are in fact created by religion (e.g. fear of hell or witches). Moreover, the fear installed by belief in these things exceeds the level of comfort religion is able to provide. Thus, this cannot be the explanation.

Other intellectualist ('people believe because it explains X'), cognitivist ('people believe because they are naturally superstitious') and functionalist ('people are religious because it provides order in society') theories are examined equally critically.

Boyer recognizes that religion is an abstraction, a constructed category of behaviours and beliefs that doesn't necessarily translate to reality in the way we expect. The popular explanations often implicitly assume some sort of 'god-spot' in the brain, or one all-encompassing explanation (historically, biologically or otherwise). This book shows that reality is not that straight-forward, and that religion is not some static entity we can pinpoint and dissect.

Ontological categories, implicit inferences, coalition and defection

The explanations that do in fact make sense are not easy. Boyer's style is clear and flowing, a pleasure to

read. But still, I had to read some parts multiple times before I really understood what he was trying to say. I can imagine that it is a bit of a challenge without a background in, for example, religious studies, psychology or anthropology. It is worth the effort though, because Boyer offers a fascinating view on the working of the human mind.

There is not one core explanation, but the way the human mind processes information is crucial in understanding religion. Boyer explains (among other things):

- why we tend to believe some seemingly fantastical concepts but not others;
- how these concepts are transmitted between peoples and generations;
- which expectations of reality developed in our minds and how they influence what we see and believe;
- the implicit processes that regulate our conscious thoughts;
- why it is so easy and common to believe in supernatural agents;
- the amount of counter-intuitive information the mind is willing to accept;
- why we have so many rituals for dead people;
- why religious terrorism has neither 'all to do with religion' nor 'nothing to do with religion', but is understandable when we consider that people function as coalitions and that defection threatens that coalition;
- that there is no fundamental difference between believers and non-believers;
- that there is not one 'original religion' and why religious ideas and practices have much in common nonetheless;
- why we have difficulty accepting an explanation that involves many different inference systems (and what they are);
- and why this is a good explanation anyway.

Don't get discouraged by the terminology. Boyer takes the time to explain them and his analogies are very clarifying. He uses examples from well-known religious traditions as well as from less well-known local traditions like the Kwaio (Solomon Islands) and the Fang (Cameroon), where he did his own fieldwork. He is aware of the danger of ethnocentrism and he avoids it successfully. At times this book is very theoretical, but the real-life examples and the imaginative analogies balance this tendency.

Structure

The chapters are structured with descriptive headings for every part. In the first three chapters, there are 'progress-boxes': the main points summarized in bullet points. Why these boxes are limited to the first and last chapters I don't know, maybe because the later chapters are concerned with more empirical elaborations of the theories discussed in the earlier ones. Boyer explains the important issues repeatedly, but a short listed summary at the end of all the chapters would be even more reader-friendly. The last chapter offers a final progress-box, called *The full history of all religion (ever)*. Yes ;).

Book says

Religion Explained by Pascal Boyer

Religion Explained is about providing scientific explanations for why people believe. The author combines multiple scientific disciplines such as: evolutionary biology, cognitive science, cultural anthropology, archaeology and psychology to show how humans in general believe in the supernatural. It's a very frustrating book on many levels. In general, I agreed with many of the assertions that the author makes but the overall approach of the book left a lot to be desired. The book is composed of the following nine

chapters: What is the Origin? What Supernatural Concepts are Like, The Kind of Mind it Takes, Why Gods and Spirits? Why is Religion about Death?, Why Rituals, Why Doctrines, Exclusions and Violence? And Why Belief?

Positives:

1. Great interesting topic!
2. The author's use of evolution to explain religion. Science is the best way to discover the truths about our world and Mr. Boyer does precisely that. The use of multiple scientific disciplines to explain religion is justified.
3. Goes beyond human "common sense" to explain religion. Goes in great detail on how our minds work. On how we develop inferences to make sense of what is around us. Thorough explanation of inference systems and human nature.
4. Asks many pertinent questions? Questions that need to be asked.
5. Debunks the common notion that a young mind is a simple mind.
6. There is a lot of very good information in this book...more about that in the negatives.
7. Two key topics about humans are discussed: the need for information about the world and cooperation.
8. The strongest parts of this book, is the discussion on intuitive psychology. The use of such devices helps the author explain why religion "appears" natural to humans.
9. A lot of very good concepts are introduced and explained.
10. I like how he uses progress reports (boxes) to highlight concepts and main points captured in the given chapter.
11. Interesting thoughts about morality. "Religion does not really support morality, it is people's moral intuitions that make religion plausible". Some of the most interesting comments are made in this chapter.
12. The book does reward those who are patient with it. It's thought provoking but you need to put in some work to truly enjoy this book.

Negatives:

1. Not a book written for the masses.
2. The inability to communicate ideas clearly! I can't emphasize this enough!
3. I struggled at times to read this book. The author's inability to "sell" his ideas in a straightforward manner was in fact frustrating.
4. Very dry book. Not enjoyable to read at all. It was just too tedious and pain staking to get through at times.
5. The use of poor examples to explain concepts. IMHO, one of the biggest mistakes about this book was to make use of unfamiliar religious tribes to try to explain new concepts. The author constantly made the mistake of referring to these unfamiliar religious groups (Fang people, Kwaio, to name a few) to make his points.
6. I felt like I was taking the scenic route to get to Mr. Boyer's points. The author needs to get to the point.
7. By not being succinct, the author misses the opportunity to convey what would otherwise have been cogent points! It's like watching a great commercial and then wondering what was the commercial trying to sell.
8. Repetitive.
9. So much good and important information in this book but makes the reader work too hard for it.
10. It's not a quotable book.

Overall this book was a real disappointment for me, for what it could have been. This book should have been great but it was executed so poorly. The use of unfamiliar religious groups to explain religious concepts was in fact a big mistake. It's too dry and at times exhausting to read. A little more passion, wit, humor and focus would have done this book wonders! All that being said, the book is still worthy of being read for the

valuable contributions it makes regarding human nature and why we believe.

Alec says

If you can understand this book then you will find it to be one of the most informative books about what happens in the human mind (and brain) when religion is involved. The operative words there are "If you can understand this book" as it was not written for those who are easily lost. If your someone who is pessimistic about how people act when they are we'll say "under the influence" of religion, then this will offer some objective analysis into the issue and you might be a little more sympathetic. Not to their point of view but to how they can make leaps of logic with a strait face. You might even be able to have a little more respect for religion and anything that encourages you to respect others is a good thing right? (I'm an agnostic BTW so my opinion is not based on any strong bias)

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John David says

“Explaining” religion has been a cottage industry within the field of anthropology at least since its academic institutionalization in the United States about a century ago. Pascal Boyer, the Henry Luce Professor of Individual and Collective Memory at Washington University in St. Louis, rejects almost all of these traditional explanations out of hand in the first chapter of his book, and not without reason. He says that all attempts to explain religious thought – the urge to explain the origin of the universe, the need to provide comfort or reassurance, a deliverance from mortality, the need to keep society together, or to provide an objective basis for morality – all fail in some important way. Unfortunately, what he offers in its place are convoluted, disorganized arguments, and the occasional ad hoc rationalization.

Boyer is an anthropologist himself, but is mostly dissatisfied with the reasons that classical anthropology has offered for the persistence of religious belief, as noted above. In “Beyond Belief,” he attempts to fuse the precepts of cognitive psychology with evolutionary theory, perhaps with a bit of sociobiology thrown in. His approach is one that is wholly rationalist and structuralist. In a sense these two terms are interrelated. “Rationalism” (and I use the word in the sense that philosophers word – that is, in opposition to empiricism) suggests that the human mind is built in such a way, of more elementary structures, which facilitate learning. This is not to say that we don’t learn from the world around us, as empiricists suggest; instead, it is an approach which assumes that the structure of the mind itself enables the acquisition of certain cognitive skills (language, belief, et cetera). Structuralism suggests that elements in a given domain – in this instance, religious belief – are impossible to understand without placing them in a larger, overarching system or structure (or “structuration,” as Roland Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss were fond of saying.)

Boyer begins by discussing what supernatural concepts are like. He suggests that mental ideas are like templates. For example, we have the template of “animal” in our head, which might contain mini-ideas like “needs to eat,” “reproduces,” and “produces waste.” The thing about these templates is that they’re remarkably adaptable; we use these Big Idea templates to explain all living phenomena that we see. Boyer suggests that this template works because it’s structurally so close to the way religious (or supernatural) ideas, which change the template in one important way: they have one, and only one, idea in them that intuitively goes against everything else in the template. For example, the template “women” might include a lot of things, but “can have a child without having sex” isn’t one of them; similarly for the template of “man” and “rise from the dead” (both found in Christian theology). Psychological experiments have shown that stories with pedestrian details are difficult for people to retain, while the very rare fantastical element makes a story much more prominent in the memory, and this might have something to do with the persistence of certain supernatural beliefs. Or, as Boyer puts it, “the religious concept preserves all the relevant default inferences except the ones that are explicitly barred by the counterintuitive element,” and thus “a combination of one violation with preserved expectations is probably a cognitive optimum, a concept that is both attention-grabbing and that allows rich inferences” (p. 73 and p. 86, respectively).

Furthermore, the minds that create this series of rich inferences is the rule, not the exception. Boyer gives other kinds of intuitive understanding, like the physics of solid objects (which Boyer calls “intuitive physics”), physical causation, goal-directed motion, and an ability to link structure to function (p. 96-97). This takes us up through approximately the first third of the book.

Unfortunately much of the book is an utter mess as far as trying to present a cogent, coherent argument is concerned. From here on out, we get answers to chapter headings like “Why Ritual?”, “Why Gods and Spirits?”, and “Why is Religion About Death?” that do in fact provide answers, but seem to have no direct relevance to the questions raised in the first third of the book. Here and there, he will pick up the idea of the template, which he spent so long developing, but mostly ignores it in the formulation of arguments, if you can even grace the remainder of the book with so formal a name.

A saving grace of the book are what Boyer calls the progress boxes that are distributed throughout the book, which sum up the arguments in case you’ve lost the thread of his thought somewhere – a not unlikely prospect. The progress boxes are used liberally in the first part of the book, and appear nowhere in approximately the last two thirds except for pages 326-328, which constitute one big progress box that recapitulates the logic of Boyer’s entire approach. For someone interested in Boyer’s approach who doesn’t care to read the entire book, reading only the progress boxes probably isn’t a bad idea. They’ll leave you with the big ideas, and several of the more important details.

I appreciate this book for offering a fairly in vogue approach to a divisive, controversial topic. There are wonderful ideas here, like that of the template and how religious memes need to violate one intuitive idea on a template to be evolutionarily successful enough to be transmitted. I just wish Boyer would have been able to better follow the lines of his own logic, or tie the loose threads together into something more cohesive. He does provide a chapter-by-chapter section for further reading. Perhaps in one of these, a better exposition of these ideas can be found.

Rita Neves says

Super interessante!

Munthir Mahir says

This book proposes an explanation of religion based on evolutionary biology and cognitive psychology. The proposition is not well formulated, and though it has an appealing aesthetic it is also a bit misleading as the proposition is not really based, or is only fragmentally based on cognitive psychology and evolutionary biology (and evolutionary biology being stuck in there in the title for marketing reasons). The proposition could be qualified as cognitive science (research) however the link between research and cognitive psychology theories is a miss. At several points in the book the author seems to try to stretch the proposition a bit too far to fit all facets of religion.

The reason I gave this book 5 stars is that it provides an account of research that can be a foundation to an evolutionary theory of religion - the inference systems which the book revolves around are a good starting point; however, the inferences drawn from them are widely stretched and hardly proven. Religion which is highly influenced and shaped by culture warrants a close look through an evolutionary lens since evolution is partly an accumulation/adaptation to cultural information - though probably only weakly since evolution is mainly a response to environmental factors.

cerebus says

Whilst I agree with some other reviewers that this tends towards the 'dry', I would still highly recommend it for anyone interested in the subject of why we have religion. It is a book that requires attention, it's not one to read when you have half a mind on something else. Taking in areas such as evolution, neuroscience, cognitive science and anthropology, the author presents a very convincing case for why humans have religion, and in a way that initially seems counter to most of the commonly argued ideas. If the ideas presented initially seem counter intuitive, the author is able to explain them in a way which soon makes them seem perfectly intuitive....

I would particularly recommend this book to believers, as the ideas are presented in a way which does not take a position on the existence of deities or otherwise.

Mark says

Religion Explained by Pascal Boyer is a thoroughly researched and considerable book on one of the basic questions that most of us have asked: why religion? Boyer does a good job of differentiating the theories in the book from past attempts ranging from the idea that we are physically designed to worship by god to the arguments put forth by James Frazer in the 'Golden Bough'. The basic premise of the book is simple: "having a normal brain does not imply that you have religion. All it implies is that you can acquire it, which is very different" (4).

Boyer takes an evolutionary look at why human beings choose to be religious given that religious belief is seemingly at odds with the evolutionary drive of eating and procreating. His argument is derived from [among others] archeology, anthropology and [primarily] evolutionary psychology. His conclusion is that we have "inference systems" (17) that work on a sub-conscious level that have helped us survive through the eons by making inferences in the environment in which we live. These inferences are not derived from reason and the use of rational thought, but from the evolutionary drive to survive: those who make more

inferences (correct or not) are more likely to survive.

While I think that Boyer's argument is valid, there are a few issues in the book that found a bit off-putting. First, Boyer presents objections [in full] to his argument (which is good), but seems to write them off completely based upon evolutionary psychological grounds alone (which is not so good). The objections preface his reasoning, which makes the book somewhat disorganized at times. Secondly, there are sections which seem to repeat themselves, making a somewhat dry book more difficult to read. Lastly, I think because Boyer relies heavily upon psychology and less so on neuroscience, that some of the conclusion were hastily come to.

I would conclude by recommending Boyer's book because I think the argument is valid and is part of an ongoing search to scientifically explain something that is so unscientific. Boyer presents his argument clearly, but not always concisely. I think that Religion Explained is a great introduction to a fascinating area of research. However, as an introduction I think the style of writing could have been more approachable.

Andi says

If you can get past the writing style, there are some very intriguing ideas presented in this book. Sadly, that is a big IF. It was sheer determination and stubbornness that allowed me to get through the book in its entirety. I found the information worthwhile, but the presentation to be seriously lacking.

Andrew Lucas says

I finally finished 'Religion Explained'. It is a dense read and almost every sentence is meaningful and asks to be re-read to ensure that it has sunk in. Having got to the end, I feel I should now re-read it to imbue it as a coherent whole. My only reservation is that, whilst the book is pitched to a general audience, it's thesis that this-or-that religious inclination is rooted in 'such-and-such' mental system assumes that those systems exist - assertions that are open to challenge by specialists in the field if this were not so.

Recommended for those seeking an anthropological approach to religion studies.

Rachel says

The intent of this book is to use anthropology and cognitive science to "explain" why religious beliefs developed (and are still common) in humans. I started reading this book with the expectation that it was intended as popular science; but it assumed that the reader already had a background in anthropology and cognitive science. Boyer made his explanations using terminology that was unnecessarily complex; and although the meaning could be discerned from the context, it made the narrative into very heavy reading. Furthermore, he made many bold statements without providing evidence, possibly because he figured his readers had a background in this area and knew where he was coming from. The examples he did provide often fell short for me as a scientist--I felt there were too many obvious loopholes to the experiments described, and it was unclear whether these loopholes were addressed. Overall, I think this book may be interesting to someone who has already read a lot of literature in this field, but I wouldn't recommend it to

someone with a casual interest, nor as introductory material.
