Module PS4092
Semester 2, 2014-2015

The Evolutionary Psychology of Religion and Belief

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Fridays 11am-1pm
Location TBA

“The predisposition to religious belief is the most complex and powerful force in the human mind and in all probability an ineradicable part of human nature... It is one of the universals of [human] social behavior, taking recognizable form in every society from hunter-gatherer bands to socialist republics”


As a species, we construct many kinds of belief systems out of what are sometimes the flimsiest evidence, and retain whatever beliefs our local environment favours in the face of confirming, or even seemingly disconfirming, evidence. It is not easy to see what biological advantages or ecological functions bodiless spirits or costly sacrifices may have afforded our distant ancestors. Nonetheless, humans engage in religious activities that foster hope, seemingly beyond reason, and commitment, beyond self-interest. Religious practices can be costly, often materially and in terms of time and emotional expenditure. Religious beliefs can be counterfactual and counterintuitive and therefore cognitively demanding to maintain. But religion has persisted nonetheless, even in our increasingly empirical world.

This module is designed to give students the opportunity to enhance their understanding of how evolution has shaped human psychology and how this can sometimes lead to seemingly irrational behaviour through the question of why religions may have emerged and persist from a scientific standpoint. It explores the application of a variety of theoretical frameworks including evolutionary, developmental and cognitive psychology to this question through a variety of interrelated topics. Teaching will be based on lectures introducing each subtopic and critical student-led seminars emphasizing both conceptual and empirical aspects of this newly emerging field of study.

Assessment: 30% single 2500 word essay (title given 2 weeks in advance of deadline, most likely week 5); 70% 2 final 1500 word essays from a choice of 4 at the end of the course (essay titles given at 1 week in advance).
Aims and Objectives

1) To demonstrate an ability to apply various psychological approaches (including evolutionary, developmental and cognitive) to an understanding of religion as an evolved phenomenon from a naturalistic, scientific perspective.
2) To successfully communicate acquired knowledge through ‘one-way’ presentations, ‘two-way’ discussions and academic writing.
3) To demonstrate a critical appreciation of the topic.

Students are encouraged to explore the available literature beyond the set readings. The ability to successfully track down useful and relevant information on your own initiative is a valuable skill and one that can contribute a great deal to presentations/discussions and is pretty much essential to attaining top marks in written essays. Getting into this habit will make learning more enjoyable and stimulating for you and will better prepare you for success in future careers, whether scientific or not.

Seminar format

A brief introduction to topic covered in the following week will be provided by the lecturer at the end of each seminar session. Seminars will be based on student presentations and discussions. Presentations will be given by a small subset of students, each concentrating on a different aspect of the topic based on prescribed reading material (and additional, related and independently sourced material).

Students giving presentations should:

- summarise the key points of the paper/s using PowerPoint slides (which can also include figures/tables reproduced from papers, or your own, for clarity), keeping in mind that the group should have also read most of the papers and so the presentation will primarily be a reminder.
- formulate clear arguments that may consider more than one viewpoint.
- spend 4-5 minutes after the individual presentations raising points for class discussion (1-2 further slides), e.g., what where the most important points made by the papers, what criticisms do you have, what do you still find puzzling, what would be the next step(s) to take?
- take no more than 15 mins overall.

Students not presenting should:

- read the weekly readings before the sessions (essential!).
• bring a copy of the papers with questions, comments, highlights and any other thoughts that you have to guide your contributions to the discussion. I may put you on the spot and ask what you think.

Readings

Core books


Additional books


Papers

Week 1 - The study of religion as an evolved phenomenon.


(And for Week 2-

**Week 2 – Genetic and environmental influences**


**Week 3 - The cognitive foundations of religious beliefs: purposeful design and the afterlife**


**Additional readings**


**Week 4 - The cognitive foundations of religious beliefs: agency detection and theory of mind**


*Additional readings*


**Week 5 - Religion and sociality: cooperation and cohesion**


*Additional readings*


**Week 6 – Religion and sociality: social control**


**Additional readings**


**Week 7 – Religion and sociality: religious practices as costly signals**


**Additional reading**


**Week 8 - Rituals**


Additional readings


**Week 9 - Psychological and physical well-being**


Additional readings


**Week 11 – Adaptation, by-product or exaptation?**


