The Origin of Religions

Sometime ago, I was listening to a radio program about people celebrating the winter's solstice. One of the people interviewed on the program talked about the celebrations of Druids in ancient England. Druids attached religious significance to many things, among them the shortest day of the year, evergreen trees, and mistletoe. As part of the solstice celebrations, Druids were believed to have taken evergreens indoors. Part of the annual ritual involved decorating the trees. After the indoor rituals, the evergreens were taken outdoors and burned. It was pointed out that the solstice ritual still survives in a similar form today. These days the evergreens are called Christmas trees and are part of the rituals of a religion that displaced that of the Druids long ago.

The notion of one religion incorporating bits of another fascinated me. I spent many hours walking and hiking and would think about the Druids and Christmas trees. I pondered the similar link between ancient rituals of the harvest and All Saints Day. I also thought about how Islam and Christianity are based on the religion of the Jews. After much thought, I started to see parallels between the development of organized religion and the evolution of life. The more I examined the parallels the clearer they became until I was convinced of more than a coincidental resemblance.

This paper will boldly explore the possibility that theories popularized by Charles Darwin may explain not only the origin of life and its various species, but also the origin and evolution of the various religions. The exploration will begin with a review of the latest incarnations of evolutionary theory. Following the review will be a comparison of biological life with religion. Parallels will be drawn; followed by a definition that describes life or religions equally well. Next, the concept of directed evolution will be advanced. The exploration will continue with a comparison of behavioral adaptation of life and the equivalent in religions. This paper is not meant to be an attack on personal spirituality, but a thoughtful analysis of the development of the religious organization and bureaucracy.

Many people, when asked to describe Darwin's theory, will define it simply as survival of the fittest. The theory has grown more complicated than that. In books like *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, the genetic code takes over the central role. In modern incarnations of Darwin's theory it is not the fittest creatures that survive, but the genes that code for the fittest creatures. Thus the rule becomes survival of the fittest genes. This is an important distinction. While Charles Darwin was observing finches in the Galapagos Islands, he came to believe that variations that benefited the birds were

passed to future generations. The modern interpretation is that the code for beneficial variations is passed on to future generations.

In life these codes are called genes, and are made up of chemical strands called DNA. These strands of DNA contain the instructions for replicating themselves as well as the creatures that carry the DNA. The instructions contained in the chemical bonds of DNA are the language of life. Religion has its own version of genes. In the case of religions, genes are formed from the languages of mankind. In much the same way as DNA carries the code for replicating itself, human language carries the code for replication and reproduction of religions. Sentences and paragraphs become the equivalent to strands of DNA while books and speeches become the counterparts of entire sets of genes.

In the beginning there was primordial soup. For life, this soup consisted of amino acids in a watery environment. These amino acids combined and recombined in the primordial soup until by chance a stable pattern occurred that served as a template for copies of itself. These stable patterns quickly dominated resources, leaving little trace of the original soup of random amino acids. Eventually single-celled creatures arose from these self-copying amino acids patterns. From there the familiar story of evolution unfolds.

For religions the primordial soup was made of superstitions dispersed in human minds. Evidence of religion's primordial soup still abound: Friday the 13th, salt over the shoulder, black cats or broken mirrors bringing bad luck, and four leaf clover bringing good luck. All these beliefs are repeated over and over with no basis in science or common sense. Imagine for a moment what would happen if a superstition arose that included a motivation to repeat it. Perhaps something like Friday the 13th is bad luck, unless you tell 13 people that Friday the 13th is bad luck for them unless they also tell 13 people. Suddenly one superstition has a tremendous reproductive and evolutionary advantage. This superstition is no longer repeated at random, but is replicated endlessly. This step was, for religion, what the first self-copying patterns of amino acids were for life–the beginning.

Life and religion may each be defined as a language or code that describes how to replicate itself, with the fittest code being the code that is most successful at reproduction, as well as control and utilization of resources. Using this definition as a starting point, we are almost ready to explore more parallels between the evolution of life and the evolution of religion.

Before continuing that exploration, we should examine an interesting and relevant question: Why, among all earth's species, does religion appear to

exist only in *homo sapiens*? The answer is probably related to two factors that distinguish man from all other species. One factor is language. Other animals communicate using sound and body motions. Songbirds communicate about territories, bees direct other workers to distant flowers, and cetaceans appear to communicate about dangers and food. The difference between animal languages and the language of man is not only the complexity of the language but the ability to describe and communicate the abstract. Another factor which surely figures in man's unique role as host to religious code is his knowledge of his own mortality. Mankind may not be unique in his awareness of mortality. However, animals such as elephants, which may be aware of their mortality in some way, do not have the language to convey the idea.

As religions evolved, their appeal was a surely a factor affecting which religions survived and which ones became evolutionary dead-ends. Early religions might have offered fertility or promised methods to avoid the wrath of nature, which was attributed to capricious gods. Later religions offered believers reincarnation as religious leaders, kingdoms in Heaven, and everlasting life. The later religions also carried big sticks in the form of reincarnation as insects and the threat of eternity spent in lakes of fire.

In biology there are many examples of defensive adaptations. These include defensive behaviors as well as physical adaptations. Physical adaptations for defense include everything from hard shells, claws, and fangs to camouflage and porcupine quills. A cat's instinctive hissing and baring of teeth are examples of a defensive behavioral adaptations. The baring of teeth is designed to discourage an attack by showing the physical defenses that the cat will use if attacked. Religions and cults react in a manner amazingly similar to the cat. The defensive structures that religions have range from the concept of blasphemy through excommunication and jihad. Like the cat, a threatened religion reacts by first baring it teeth in the form of threatened excommunication, threat of hell, or threat of reincarnation as a worm. When pressed, the religion will resort to hangings, witch-hunts, and whatever violence is required to squash the threat.

Let us examine for a moment the lowly penicillin mold. The mold contains in its DNA a chemical sequence that describes a chemical compound that is lethal to invading bacteria. The mold protects the resources it needs for survival and reproduction by releasing the chemical into its environment. Is there an analogue to this in one or more of the organized religions? One example might be the language that describes proselytes. Several religions contain such language-based code, with Greek Orthodoxy coming to mind as one of the most reactive. The religion contains in its language-based “DNA” the code for identifying and either neutralizing or destroying the proselyte. The

religion has in effect protected the resources that it needs for survival and successful reproduction. More importantly, in each case the code is there, passed from generation to generation, because it enhances the “fitness” of the creature or religion which it describes. In the case of the penicillin mold, invading bacteria are repelled, while the religion has repelled an encroaching religion.

It might be appropriate to examine the things that represent “danger” to the typical religion. Any code that would tend to displace the religion from a mind is a threat. In this case the code might be a series of thoughts or concepts from any number of sources. Sources of this code are likely to originate from one of two major areas. One likely source is the code of a competing religion. If a mind is exposed to another more appealing religion, the first religion might lose control over that mind. This is bad for the first religion's reproductive success. So, as you might predict, religions have evolved defenses against encroachment by other religions. The previously discussed term “proselyte” is an example. Many religions include defenses against proselytes, while at the same time sending them out. Note that one religion's missionary may be another's proselyte.

Ideas from the realm of logic and science represent another danger to religions. As a result evolution has favored religions that attempt to control or limit the education process. Religious language-based code for “Creationism” and “Sudden Appearance Theory” are examples.

The concept of directed evolution is key in this exploration. By directed evolution I mean evolution that does not occur by chance, but rather evolution by design. In biology organisms must generally wait until a random change in the genetic code results in a better and more successful plant or animal. Religions have improved on that situation by harnessing the power of the host mind to create new code. The harnessing is affected by tying the fortunes of the host to that of the religions. Televangelism serves as a good example. Before TV and radio there was no such thing as televangelism. However, soon after radio and television began to reach a large audience, minds went to work creating new religious code to take advantage of this new resource. Televangelists directed the evolution of this new species of religion, and their fortunes were proportional to the success of the new breed. In the case of televangelism the motivation for genetic engineering is clear. A television audience persuaded to tithe 10% represents a considerable profit for the televangelist.

Directed evolution may be best examined in a different universe - the universe of computer viruses. I am not aware of any computer virus that has

been generated purely through chance. The pool of primordial soup is simply too small. Most randomly generated computer code either self-destructs or halts the computer. This results in very few opportunities for a self- replicating program to develop. The number of possibilities tested in nature's primordial soup was many orders of magnitude higher than the numbers of potential computer virus programs. If we think of the human mind as host to religious code and computers as hosts to viral code, we can see that religion has a much more forgiving environment. A mistake in replication or execution of a computer virus is normally fatal. In contrast, the human mind keeps operating unless the religion develops code for suicide or otherwise causes the host to be killed. Consequently, computer viruses depend entirely upon another entity--normally a human being--to produce successful viral code and to make improvements to that code. The human being may be motivated by the thrill of mischief or the notoriety that comes with the production of successful viral code. A valid comparison may be made between the relationship of the viral code to its designer and relationships between religions and the people who design and improve them. In each case the designer stands to gain something from the production of successful code.

Until recently, life depended entirely upon chance mutations. Then things were speeded up with selective breeding. Now we see attempts by mankind to directly engineer the genetic code of life. Religions and computer viruses never had to make it on their own. Mankind was there selectively breeding and manipulating the code from the very beginning. What was the motivation to engineer and improve religious code? One obvious example is the code that says Christians should give the tenth part of their income to the church. Religions are also engineered to confer great power upon the leaders of the religion. This seems to be a common feature of all religions, from the Shaman of the Americas to the Pope in Rome and the Dali Lama of the far East.

Does this selective breeding work both ways? Would the enforced monogamy and child-bearing of common religions be an example of a symbiotic relationship? People controlled by a religion that limited sex to one lifetime partner would suffer less from sexually transmitted disease. The religion in turn benefits from a large number of healthy hosts. A religion able to enforce monogamy in the host population obviously has a better chance of survival due to enhanced survival rates of the hosts.

A religion that encouraged maximum reproduction of the host might be expected to have improved reproductive success. Large families would ensure that a new crop of hosts is always available. Interestingly, we do not have to look very far to find examples of religious code calling for maximum reproduction of the hosts. “Be fruitful and multiply” as well as teachings

against recreational sex and contraceptives are examples of this type of religious code.

Do religions change their environment to suit their purposes? The answer is yes, much as mankind changes his environment. The environment of religion is the population of human minds. One way that religion changes this environment is by encouraging the constant expansion of this environment. Religion may also encourage large families for this purpose. Rare indeed is the religion that encourages killing of anyone whose mind is host to that religion.

Another interesting possibility is that some religions have in effect bred host populations that are easily controlled by the particular religion. This would be caused if "susceptibility" to religion was matched by increased reproductive success in the host. This might be illustrated by examining some of the Old Testament teachings and rituals. If those teachings are examined from a health perspective, kosher takes on a new and different meaning. A host population that did not consume "unclean" animals which carried disease would be expected to have improved reproductive success. That success in turn would improve the reproductive success of the controlling religion.

Will religions show any more wisdom about changing their environment than their hosts? Or will competition for minds and resources become so intense that the world is destroyed? Judging from the wars waged in the interests of various religions, the outlook is not good. On the other hand, mankind might become wise enough to engineer more benign religions before it is too late. We breed friendly dogs and fluffy sheep to improve our lives. Why not friendly and more helpful religions?

Works Cited:

Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.