

# 'Evolution and Religion Part III'

**Date:** 2012-11-18 20:09:45+01:00

Dear Michael,

Thanks again for taking the time to engage with me earlier. Sorry that this is a bit of a long reply...

In your comment you note:

the fundamental questions remains: Why are only "religious" communities able to augment this in-group cooperation not, say, political parties or sport clubs?

This is certainly an interesting question, and one that is not affected by the objections in my previous post, but I do have some reservations on this count too.

## 1. Comparing like with like

Before we can address the question, we need to make sure we're comparing like with like. From your [original post](#):

We found many religious traditions that were able to attain high levels of fertility throughout the generations. But in sharp empirical contrast, we didn't find a single non-religious community, movement or population that was able to retain at least replacement level (two births per woman) for a century!

The way you put this explicitly rules out any kind of organization that is not involved in baby making ("two births per woman"). That's fair enough, as you're interested in evolution, which ultimately depends on differential reproductive advantage. But doing this also means that you cannot legitimately take such organizations as sports clubs as secular equivalents of religious groups in your comparisons. Of course tennis clubs can't achieve two births per woman — they don't (as far as I know) admit members by birth! This has no necessary or causal relation to religiosity.

[[[Mongolian Medal: 'Aldart Ekh' -- Renowned Mother, First Class](https://i0.wp.com/www.medals.org.uk/mongolia/images/mongolia028.jpg?resize=205%2C250 "Mongolian Medal: 'Aldart Ekh' -- Renowned Mother, First Class")]](http://www.medals.org.uk/mongolia/mongolia020.htm)Mongolian Medal: 'Aldart Ekh' — Renowned Mother, First Class

To make a comparison in terms of replacement by birth — the comparison that would allow us to reach the conclusion that religious communities have an advantage over non-religious ones in terms of reproduction — **we'd have to find non-religious organizations that "did" base membership at least in part on reproduction and birth.**

In contrast to non-reproduction related groups such as sports clubs and political parties, it is hard to think of many examples. Why that should be the case is an interesting question in itself — I'll consider that below.

Perhaps some modernist nationalisms (especially those allied to eugenic policies?), or ethnic groups without strong religious affiliation (some national minorities in China?) would fit the bill.

There are good examples of the former — I'm thinking especially of the Hero Mother campaigns in the Soviet Union and other Communist countries, and these did achieve very high birth rates. Some people have argued that Stalinism had religious characteristics — maybe so, but it was certainly not interested in non-empirical agents (i.e. 'religiosity', in your terms). When I first went to Ulanbaatar in 2002, many people still proudly declared themselves 'materialist' when I asked them about religion! These national movements really did achieve huge population growth. Admittedly, it was not sustained over much more than two generations....

## 2. The historical question

...Which brings us to my second reservation: the historical depth, or lack of it, of non-religious organizations.

If we were going to make a generalization about the relative reproductive success of religious and non-religious communities, one that is to hold good across evolutionary time, we would need to have a decent number of examples of both kinds of community.

There are good reasons to think it is impossible to find a sufficient sample of non-religious, membership-by-reproduction communities.

One reason is the historical novelty of secularism. The idea of having communities or institutions that exclude religiosity (on your definition) simply does not have a long history. It is an idea that had its origins in the Enlightenment or the development of the nation state (see Talal Asad, Charles Taylor — refs below).

A more general account might give a role to the modern phenomenon of 'purification'. Early anthropologists were fascinated by the fact that the institutions they studied among 'natives' in colonial contexts around the world could not be pigeonholed into one of the major categories that we use to understand modern society, such as politics, economics, kinship, religion and so on. For example, an annual meeting between villages might involve arrangements for marriages (kinship), exchanges of goods (economics), offerings to ancestors (religion), and alliances (politics). Marcel Mauss called this a total institution.

By contrast, modern societies are characterized by an attempt to purify institutions so that they only perform one kind of role...if your economic institution also performs kinship functions, that's called nepotism! If your political institution performs commercial functions, corruption! Bruno Latour has argued that this work of purification is more rhetorical than actual.

**All the evidence seems to suggest that secular communities in general were either very rare or non-existent (on a broad or narrow definition of secularism, respectively) until the modern period.** This explanation accounts parsimoniously for your being unable to find any long-lived communities defined by their exclusion of religion throughout history — there simply weren't any such communities until relatively recently.

If the lack of longstanding communities of this kind were instead down to relative reproductive disadvantage, am I wrong in thinking that we should see a long history of ephemeral secular birth-related communities that die out quickly? Can you name any one such community dating to before 1600? The examples you give of communities that did not prosper are defined by their *religious* characteristics — they don't appear to be secular in any sense (Shakers, ancient Pagans).

So it may be too soon to say whether secular birth-related communities will prove to be successful. It may continue to be difficult to say: the reason such communities are *still* likely to be rare may be that the modern practice of purification that I outlined above tends to militate against birth/kinship functions being mixed up with other functions. Such a mixture would be a necessary condition of recognizing a community as anything other than a kinship group.

## 3. Conclusion

If my reservations about comparisons before the modern period and comparisons are justified, then what remains to be explained is the apparent reproductive advantage of religiously defined groups over other groups *in the modern period* — accepting your example of Switzerland as representative and unproblematic. The relation of this phenomenon to religiosity, on your definition, was the subject of my previous two posts.

### References

- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular*. Stanford University Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Harvard University Press.

- Mauss, Marcel. 1970. *The Gift*. Taylor & Francis.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press.