

# 'Evolution and Religion Part II'

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[[William Robertson Smith]](<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/63/WilliamRobertsonSmith.jpg> "William Robertson Smith")([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Robertson\\_Smith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Robertson_Smith))William Robertson Smith (source: Wikipedia)

This is a reply to [Martin](#) Michael Blume's [comment](#) to my previous [post](#), which was itself was a comment on his blog on [www.scilogs.com](http://www.scilogs.com).

[Martin](#) Michael — Thanks for the links (reproduced below) and for engaging with my comment!

I've read those two papers now—they are thought provoking and contain some great lines ("evolutionary theorists brought up far more scientific arguments — but committed believers in supernatural agents brought up far more children"—love it!), but I don't think they really answer my initial objection.

On page 118 of the Reproductive Benefits paper, you write (I've added emphasis and labels in square brackets):

" [1] Religiosity, understood as "believing" in supernatural guidance and surveillance of all parties involved, evolved (and evolves) as a biological and highly successful solution. [2] Humans who are "members" of religious communities show statistically higher motivations towards marriage, children and family values, more cooperative orientation and finally higher reproductive success than their secular contemporaries"

What I am questioning is the relation between religiosity as defined in [1] and the membership of religious communities referred to in [2]. You draw conclusions about 'religiosity' (i.e., belief, on your definition — I'll use this word with that force from now on) on the basis of data about religious affiliation, taking the latter to be indicative of the former. It is clear from the social scientific literature on religion that the link between these things is uncertain to say the least.

None of this in any way invalidates your observations about religious *communities* and reproduction. But if I am right the following objections follow:

## 1. Over-interpretation of the data

You may be over-interpreting the census data in making the leap from affiliation to traditional communities with religious associations to religiosity, on your terms. (I am dubious about the methodology of the World Values Survey for many of the same reasons by the way, but it's a long time since I've looked at it so I can't comment in detail.)

I gave Day's study as an example in my post because her work directly addresses the difference between people's 'superempirical' behaviour and thought and their response to questions about religious affiliation in a national census.

However, the question of the discrepancy between belief and affiliation has been a constant theme in social scientific studies of religion since at least the end of the 19C and the work of William Robertson Smith (ref below).

The reason this question is of enduring interest is that it confounds the expectations of modern models of religion that are basically Protestant or post-reformation in nature, especially the expectation that religion is above all about a personal, interior relationship to God and the holy, that a particular tradition of worship is associated with particular institutions and so on. Even in countries (such as the UK) where this model might be expected to apply most strongly (because for centuries it has been a model of what religion *should* be like), ethnographic work (such as Day's) shows consistently that the boundaries between beliefs and boundaries between religious affiliation are frequently do not line up in the way the model would predict.

## 2. Anachronism

Even if it were shown that the association between religious affiliation and religious belief were sound for modern populations, your conclusions project this combination back throughout history and prehistory. If we didn't know anything about changing configurations of religious behaviour, then that might be a reasonable move. However, there's plenty of evidence that the idea of a discrete religion that comprises a combination of ((i) an exclusive, systematic religious doctrine + (ii) exclusive use of certain religious practices + (iii) a specific and exclusive religious affiliation) is a relatively recent invention that is even now by no means the norm, and which requires a great deal of policing to make sure that people defined by any one of these characteristics are also defined by the other two.

Unless you have evidence that contradicts the consensus in the literature, then explaining the evolutionary origins and persistence of religiosity throughout human existence in terms of the reproductive advantage it bestows on religious communities may be like seeking the explanation for the origins and persistence of language over 100s of thousands of years in terms of its essential role in hip hop. Doing this would not only misrepresent the nature of language over the long term, it would also make hip-hop seem like a universal and transhistorical phenomenon.

By eliding the difference between religious affiliation and religious belief, and drawing the conclusion that the combination is an evolutionary adaptation, you give the impression that religion in this sense is universal and transhistorical.

I don't, by the way, have any axe to grind (some social scientists do) whatsoever on the question of human universals — I think it's obvious that there is such a thing as human nature and that we ought to try to understand it, but it's important that in doing that we do take into account everything we know about human variation.

More to come!...UPDATE: [here](#)

UPDATE 5 Dec 2012: Don't know anything about the quality/provenance of this research, but if it's right it's grist to my mill: ['Nones' ≠ Nonreligious](#)

### References

*This was the first major work to question the link between belief and communal affiliation:*

- Smith, William Robertson. 1889. *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*. Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black.

*These articles by Talal Asad criticise the tendency of other scholars of religion to assume that personal, internal psychological experience, such as belief, is central to religion, thus universalizing certain aspects of contemporary Christian experience:*

- Asad, Talal. 1983. "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz." *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* NS 18: 237–259.
- Asad, T. 2001. "Reading a modern classic: W. C. Smith's The Meaning and End of Religion." *History of Religions* 40 (3): 205–222.

*This book describes the process through which leaders of the newly named 'World Religions' remade their traditions in the image of post-Reformation Christianity in the 19C:*

- Masuzawa, Tomoko. 2005. *The Invention of World Religions : or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago, Ill.: London : University of Chicago Press.

*This article describes a similar process in the Russian Reupblic of Altai, where Protestant missionaries failed to garner many converts to Christianity, but succeeded in spreading the idea of exclusive religiosity, in a situation in which people had previously been religiously promiscuous:*

- Broz, Ludek. 2009. ["Conversion to Religion?"](#) In *Conversion After Socialism: Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Mathijs Pelkmans. Berghahn Books.

*This article has a good review of the ethnographic literature on belief, much of which is concerned with explaining the common discrepancy between religious affiliation, religious practice and religious belief:*

- Lindquist, Galina, and Simon Coleman. 2008. "Introduction: Against Belief?" *Social Analysis* 52 (1).

*On the dangers of drawing universal conclusions about human nature that inadvertently incorporate specific characteristics of those populations for which data is easy to come by:*

- Heine, Stephen, [The weirdest people in the world: The inductive challenge for psychology](#) (conference abstract)